The idea that you'll die if he doesn't love you back isn't very romantic in reality. Naruto's forced to realise that truly unconditional love is a scary, ugly thing - then again, Sasuke might be too damaged to handle any other kind.
I Wouldn't Like Me if I Met Me

Tomorrow, Kakashi knows, he is going to sell Sasuke.

He lowers his book when the key turns in the lock, and reminds himself that it’s for the best. Obviously that’s a rationalisation, but the worst part is how he also believes it.

When the door closes again, when Sasuke’s dispensing with his shoes and jacket in the hallway, Kakashi’s gaze has returned to the page. It wouldn’t do to let Sasuke know he looked up.

At least, it wouldn’t do to let Sasuke know any other night. Tonight…

Tonight he stares idly at the page and believes his own lies about the greater good and not having any real choice. That belief is the worst part because it makes it so implacably clear that there is no excuse, can be no excuse, for doing what he’s going to do, to this boy who’s arguably – Itachi likes to argue – the only person Kakashi’s ever loved.

“Hey.”

He lets the book fall into his lap then, meets Sasuke’s eyes and matches his smirk. “Hey.”

Itachi’s wrong about that, wrong for once – for twice, because Itachi, unspeaking and unshakeable, still believes Sasuke will one day forgive them – since Kakashi hates himself far too much to love anyone so much his own smudged reflection as Sasuke.

The idea that Sasuke might love him is ludicrous, and too terrible to contemplate.

All the same his shoulders roll back as Sasuke steps into the room, relax into the posture of a man at home. It’s all the welcome Sasuke needs to pass Kakashi by and help himself to Kakashi’s liquor.

The scarecrow prince, they call him, after Kakashi bequeathed the old moniker on him. Hand-me-down insult to go with his hand-me-down clothes and hand-me-down abusers. The point is that unlike Kakashi, he still moves like a real prince – like Itachi, though they’d both deny it – like he’s taking effortless possession of the room by entering it.

“I saved some rice,” Kakashi offers, carefully blank.

Sasuke smiles at him knowingly, trying to be subtle about it and failing badly. It’s the bright smile, the one that burns, sits like a brand on his lips. It was a long time before he knew Sasuke’s face could still look so soft, around the intensity.

“So it was all right,” Kakashi says. Normally he’d stop there, remain the hunter in the eternal cat-and-mouse game they’re playing out, but what does it matter tonight… This is the last night in a long time, likely forever, that he’ll be able to reach out for Sasuke and catch him, close his fingers around flesh instead of memory and air.

“Mmh,” Sasuke mumbles. Maybe in reply, maybe in response to Kakashi’s hands slipping underneath his shirt to find his hips. Sasuke’s all angle and edge, with bones like knives sheathed just underneath his skin. Kakashi rests his face against the back of Sasuke’s head, nudges Sasuke’s hair away with his nose so he can lick up the nape of his neck.

The skin is a faded blue under his tongue. Kakashi never leaves marks, but Orochimaru likes to.
Sasuke says *mmh* again, more strained now, when Kakashi moves his hands, encircles Sasuke’s waist with his arms. Leans his face forward, until his chin is resting against the mark where Sasuke’s neck meets shoulder, the – let us be honest, this once – the slave brand.

He wants to say – he almost says –

Sasuke turns in his arms, hands light on Kakashi’s arms and his mouth hard on Kakashi’s.

It is all right, then. His hands fold around Sasuke’s thighs, lifting him up onto the counter. It’s easy because Sasuke’s cooperating, and also because Sasuke’s tiny for his age in addition to being acutely too young for him.

“Come to bed,” he says, having kissed Sasuke’s mouth and Sasuke’s throat, his hands hot against Sasuke’s stomach.

“It’s late,” Sasuke agrees.

“Yes,” Kakashi says, though it’s barely half past nine. “You should have come sooner.”

“I had to look in on Sakura. You know that.”

“You have such a devoted little sweetheart,” Kakashi mutters, dragging his lips along Sasuke’s jaw. The mockery is automatic, comforting. “I’m surprised her parents let her associate with a delinquent like you.”

Sasuke’s toes curl across his spine, kneading, needy. “They’ve liked me since they realised I’m – of the lavender persuasion.”

It’s both funny and entirely predictable that he doesn’t say: *since they realised I’m the exorcist who saved their daughter from a demon*. Sakura won’t have told them that, and they’re not the kind of parents who know anything without being told.

Kakashi hasn’t spoken more than fifty words to Sakura, but she’s so clearly the sort of girl to have been raised by parents who’d express themselves that way, ‘someone of the lavender persuasion’, ‘a follower of Oscar Wilde’. She’s as useless to Sasuke as Kakashi himself, just another human manacle. He snorts, “That’s not usually how I hear it.”

Sasuke snorts too. “Well I’m not going to try anything with her, am I.”

“I do hope not.”

Sasuke’s mouth quirks at the corner, a half-breed smile. His fingers go to Kakashi’s buttons.

“Hey,” Kakashi says, in place of everything he can’t say, and pulls him off the counter and towards the bedroom.

Sasuke’s a quiet lover, undemonstrative and difficult to please for a teenager. It wasn’t always like this, but that’s not a thought Kakashi can permit himself to have. So Sasuke is a quiet lover, undemonstrative and difficult to please for a teenager. It’s about the breathing and the sighs, about the strength with which his fingers clutch. Kakashi knows.

From the very beginning, when Sasuke climbs into Kakashi’s lap and then pulls Kakashi down over him, he looks straight into Kakashi’s eyes. His pupils are blown wide open, eyes like black holes.

Kakashi has never wanted so deep inside someone.
And that too is inexcusable, because Kakashi is, he knows he is, a form a self harm. He’s what Sasuke does when Sasuke hates himself too much to stand it

And Sasuke is so very broken, bones sticking out in all directions, all edge and angle and break, and if Kakashi could have loved him, if Kakashi could have – well, if Kakashi had managed to become a person who was able to look himself in the mirror, maybe things would be different.

Afterwards Sasuke untangles their hands to go fetch the rice, which he eats cold in bed. For a stupid second Kakashi wishes Sasuke wasn’t the tidiest eater he’s ever seen, so that it would be indulgent to let him.

It’s very quiet now, for a long time. They speak so much through their shared silences.

Then when the bowl and chop sticks have been put away, there’s the most remarkable sign of trust: Sasuke fishes under the bed for his school bag. Mundane education isn’t of great import in the exorcist community, and so it’s just easier to outsource, to send their children to any regular school. And Sasuke’s never cared about mundanes – except for the damn girl – but he’s certainly always cared about being the best at anything he does.

Kakashi toys with the idea of simply resuming his four hundred and seventy fourth reread of Come Come Paradise, but in the end looks at Sasuke’s fingers, curled around the library book in the way that means he enjoys it.

“Ah,” Kakashi mutters, catching sight of the faded title. “And in the end we were all just human, drunk on the idea that love, only love, could heal our brokenness.”

He read the book four times through, senior year, for that one line.

It’s not a challenge when Sasuke says, “I don’t know that I believe in love.” They’re beyond challenges with each other.

Kakashi stretches out on his side. “I used to say the same thing all the time.”

“But not anymore.” Sasuke doesn’t allow the question mark in his inflection, but it’s there all the same, in the slope of his shoulder.

“Wasn’t any point. People just set about trying to prove you wrong.”

“Hmm,” Sasuke says, eyes on the book again even though it’s closed, and it dawns on Kakashi that he hadn’t wanted that but maybe Sasuke does.

He starts pushing the school bag off the bed, slowly so Sasuke could easily interfere. Slowly, because an unwary movement might shatter his universe. “Do you have a test?”

“Not in a while.”

“And yet you’re studying.” Kakashi snorts, shakes his head. “Well, I suppose I already knew you were an – arse licker.”

Sasuke’s responding snort turns into a smirk. “Lucky for you.” These cheap, practiced rejoinders have the solidity of things that don’t matter very much, of the grim and greasy, the grounding.

“Mmh,” Kakashi says, the sound muffled against Sasuke’s hip.

Sasuke doesn’t usually allow himself vulnerability, not verbally, but he asks now, “Did you want to
go to university?"

“I did,” Kakashi says, words thoughtful and slow, spaced out around the subtext. “Go to university, that is. You know that.” He graduated summa cum laude from a famous seat of learning, which Sasuke knows perfectly well. He’s never lied to Sasuke, though he’s never told him the whole truth either. “It wasn’t important to me.”

“You’re such an arsehole.” Sasuke was never able to keep it secret, that university is everything to him now, was so completely incapable of it that it didn’t even occur to Kakashi until much later that he might have tried.

That’s what his dreams have been shorn down to, leads in the margins of library tombs. Exorcist royalty, dreaming of a dorm room with a lock, of books that might hint how to unravel Orochimaru’s slave brand. It’s so absurd that Kakashi could laugh, Kakashi who hasn’t laughed in years and isn’t sure his mouth would accommodate the sound.

“Yes,” he says, helplessly honest faced with the slope of Sasuke’s stomach.

Sasuke sighs, rolling onto his side. His fingers skim over Kakashi’s face, catch in his hair. He touches Kakashi with thoughtless and proprietary ease, like Kakashi might touch his dog. There was a time when his touch would have been reverent, trembling with more meaning than it could readily sustain, but Kakashi ruined that like he ruined everything else. “And you? All day…”

“I got a phone call.”

He has got several phone calls, because Minato Namikaze has never been a subtle or patient man, and Kakashi has owed him too much for too long to simply ignore him now.

Sasuke never asks about Kakashi’s work, any more than Kakashi asks about his, but he has the right to by now and must be beginning at least to understand that.

This time, Kakashi wishes he would ask, so he could just answer, so he didn’t have to say –

“I should,” he starts, finds himself gratefully distracted by Sasuke leaning over to kiss below his ear. “I need to ask something.”

“Okay.”

“But not now.”

“Okay,” Sasuke says again, a greater measure of trust than Kakashi had first expected he was capable of giving, much less to Kakashi.

When Kakashi first saw him again, after – well, after Sasuke’s world had gone to pieces – offered him a ride away from the pouring rain, Sasuke told him in no uncertain terms to go to hell.

When they ran into each other in Orochimaru’s building, he seemed particularly, viciously pleased about that decision.

It was much later, after weeks and weeks of stolen glances and odd sentences and Kakashi taking to sometimes smoking in the patches of sun between Sasuke’s school and Orochimaru’s compound, that Sasuke got in his car.

There had been another demon attack that day, and maybe that mattered, but all in all Kakashi thinks not.
“Your mum,” he says now, with a hesitant softness which is false but necessary in order to keep the word from being an incision, sliding his arms around Sasuke’s back. Sasuke has good skin, smooth and pale, very little scarring apart from the mark on his shoulder. Kakashi mouths it, the dark lines of Orochimaru’s ownership and the shadows beneath of Itachi’s betrayal, and Kakashi’s, and yes, even Mikoto’s. He waits until Sasuke’s stopped gasping before he continues, “How is she?”

Sasuke won’t say.

“You know,” Kakashi continues, “I could…”

Sasuke stills over him, mouth partially open. Stills like an animal discovering the hunter. “It’s not like that.” Then he laughs, a short filthy bark of actually unhinged laughter. “You won’t do shit.”

“I didn’t mean like that,” Kakashi agrees, ignoring the outburst like he ignores every glimpse of unfiltered Sasuke slipping through the convenient lies that they’re all right and might one day be fine, dragging his hands up Sasuke’s naked back, spreading them across his shoulder blades.

Sasuke’s face is gone from view, pressed against his chest. “It doesn’t matter. Anyway it’s all right. It’s not so bad. He just really wants to put that fucking snake in and – it’s not so bad.”

Kakashi, who started out thinking he’d have to build up to it, has stopped thinking even that he should ask.

Really, who was he pretending for? He was never going to ask.

_There are things that you have to do_, he remembers reading to Naruto, from Naruto’s favourite book, back in the days when people still pretended Kakashi had any childhood left, and sometimes stuck him with the younger kids, _even though you don’t dare to. Because otherwise you’re not a person at all, just a piece of filth._

Well, Kakashi’s filth. He’s made his peace with that.

“I suppose Manda does tint a little lavender, in the right light,” he says. Then he spends a long time in silence, stroking Sasuke’s shoulders while Sasuke breathes.

After it’s evened out, his breathing, Kakashi holds him and lets him sleep for six or seven hours before rolling him over, because he always thinks too much at night. He kisses down from the base of Sasuke’s throat, is at his sternum when Sasuke’s eyes blink open. Sasuke sighs, too sleepy for speech, spreads his legs.

In the morning, by the time Kakashi’s avoided four calls, Sasuke wakes up with his nose in Kakashi’s armpit and makes a face but still straddles him, because he always gets horny in the mornings.

The fifth call comes in the kitchen, where Kakashi’s drinking coffee – only a little Irish – and Sasuke eats that funny old-man breakfast he likes, oatmeal and green tea and some disgusting cereal with nuts.

“Yes,” Kakashi says, because he has to.

There must be something about his tone, because Sasuke looks up at him with his eyes entirely unreadable.

Minato Namikaze’s voice has gone past strained and returned to implacability, the voice of orders. The time for asking is almost over.
“Today,” Kakashi says. The word has lain on his tongue for three weeks and it’s better to say it now, when it can still sound like his decision.

He turns to Sasuke, who’s still looking at him but also still eating, wary but quite calm. The phone feels like a weapon in his hand, like a weapon used to feel before it began to feel like part of his hand.

“Let’s go for a drive.”

“Okay,” Sasuke says. He’s young enough, in Kakashi’s kitchen, to lick his mouth clean of milk, and another time it wouldn’t have made Kakashi feel so gross, or so hopelessly in love.

“Let’s go.”

“Okay,” Sasuke says again, catching on to the hurry.

It’s unfair, probably, Kakashi should let him come prepared, but this is no longer a safe place.

Without protest Sasuke tugs on his hoodie and follows him, remains apparently unalarmed by the glimpsed Kevlar and garrotte wire as Kakashi puts on his work clothes. He might assume that should they be used, they’d be used for his protection. It’s not necessarily untrue. “Should I?”

“No,” Kakashi says. This too is betrayal, but it’ll be simpler if Sasuke’s not armed beyond what he always carries.

Seven miles away, in the underheated confines of Kakashi’s car, Sasuke says, “This is what you needed to ask.”

“Yes,” Kakashi says, and then has to correct himself. “To say.”

This is when alarm comes, tension creeping up Sasuke’s spine and freezing his face, so that looking at him is like looking at someone deep under water, on the far side of thick ice.

“You know Minato Namikaze?”

“Yes,” Sasuke says, rather impatiently. Fair enough: everyone knows the shifter spokesperson, and Sasuke hasn’t just read the papers or seen him on television. Sasuke has eaten breakfast at his table, too, once upon a time.

Kakashi, who’s talked and talked, built walls and labyrinths of words until he could finally get himself lost, finds himself mute again. He was mute, for a time, a year almost, back when the world had changed: when his parents had just died. But that was ten years ago, more.

“Are you in trouble with him?” Sasuke asks carefully, searchingly. Like he’s up on the ice now, but it’s thin and could break underfoot.

“That’s just what I’m avoiding,” he says lightly. And then there’s nothing light left, for all the words are light, a cliché with all the meaning worn away, “I owe him.”

“What does he want?”

Kakashi slants a look at him then, has been keeping an eye on him in the rear view mirror but owes him something more direct now. “He’s been looking for you.”

Sasuke blinks, a slow deliberate movement. “What does the hell does he want with me? Orochimaru doesn’t –”
“It’s not about Orochimaru.” Outside the window there are houses, finer now, ten miles worth of finer than their starting point. “It’s about a mate bond.”

Sasuke blinks again, quicker now. “I don’t understand.” Doesn’t want to understand, more like.

Kakashi shrugs, starts reciting Wikipedia in his bright news anchor voice: “Shifters form mate bonds. If their mate dies, or they don’t get to consummate the bond, they die. Usually it’s with another shifter, but they can bond with humans too. Or, as it happens, with exorcists.”

“Minato Namikaze is going to die if he doesn’t fuck me?” His eyebrow is up, his mouth arch. This is how he speaks to Orochimaru, trying and entirely failing to cover actually insane hatred with sarcasm, with words. It takes a lot of love, Orochimaru once said, to hate someone this much.

“He has a son who will.”

“That’s bullshit. Konohamaru’s not even twelve yet, there’s no fucking way he’s matesick, what the hell are you –”

“Naruto,” Kakashi cuts him off. “And in retrospect it’s so bloody obvious, so don’t pretend.”

He remembers being a teenager, and having no excuse, for anything. Letting Sasuke down again and again, until he’d soiled them both so badly there was no way to make amends, to even try – and then seeing that shifter kid, Minato’s older kid – the lovechild, the bastard – with his entire heart in his eyes, and knowing he was going to choose Sasuke over the entire world. That’s when Kakashi stopped thinking about inexcusable and started thinking about unforgiveable.

For a moment, in the present, Sasuke stills again, but it’s an entirely different stillness. If there’s violence, this is when it will come, and for a long, long second Kakashi thinks it will. Sasuke’s a very good fighter, was a very good fighter even before Kakashi taught him anything.

Or tried to, at any rate. Kakashi never did manage to teach him anything worthwhile: could never push Sasuke as hard as he should, around the guilt. So he winds up telling him too much instead, after the useless training sessions, and then Sasuke pushes himself. Kakashi has no excuse for that either, because Sasuke pushes harder than is safe, by far, and Kakashi’s too ashamed, too useless, to stop him.

But in the end they’ve never been physical with each other, not in that way, and they aren’t now: Sasuke doesn’t attack.

Sasuke does kick open the car door and throw himself out.

Kakashi’s hand shoots out, grabs him around the throat. The sudden real danger activates the self-defence release built into Sasuke’s seal, the one that Sasuke’s been known to jump off highrises to trigger, but it’s not enough, not for this. Kakashi pumps hostile magic into him, electrocuting him into limpness before dumping him back in the car seat.

“You’ll do what you’re told,” he says to Sasuke, which is a completely absurd thing to say. “I did something to Minato Namikaze once. Took something from him. I owe him this.”

“You owe him me?”

“I owe him his son’s life.”

“I understand,” Sasuke says.
“Anyway,” Kakashi goes on, like he’s some Chekov character stuck in a painfully parallel dialogue, “it’s no worse than being Orochimaru’s prize hostage. You like Naruto.”

“I understand perfectly.”

“He’s matesick now, he’ll be dying soon. I guess you know he’s been up north, in the thick of it. Apparently the whole mess started before he went, but he was sure he could ride it out – well, you know what he’s like, the little fool.”

“What I understand,” Sasuke says in a rather terrible voice that Kakashi’s never heard from him before, hadn’t fully realised he was capable of, “is that you’re planning to pay your debts by handing me over to be shared by your animal friends.”

“That –”

But they’re at the gates, security tapping at their window. For a stupid second, for an actually insane moment that burns something inside him, he thinks how he could no longer take Sasuke away from here.

He didn’t know he’d considered it.

In any case with the gates locking behind them and six guards around the car it’s a moot point. There is nothing to be done except step out into the light.

Apparently Sasuke has reached the same conclusion, because nobody has to reach for him. Kakashi and the guards exchange greetings, and Sasuke stands stiff and silent, started at but not directly addressed. The scarecrow prince, the Uchiha boy bartered away in exchange for peace and progress, distractingly beautiful even in his dirty sleep clothes.

“This way,” Genma says, and with Sasuke a hands-breadth away and utterly unreachable, Kakashi follows him into the building.
It’s been years since Minato last saw Fugaku’s youngest up close. Already, in those half-forgotten childhood days when he sometimes played with Naruto, he was a serious, sullen little boy. Not much has changed: it’s the same overly pretty face, distorted by the same frown. The same dark rage and the same ill-fitting clothes over the same bruises.

It was easier to feel sorry for him, when he was a tiny tot.

When Minato wasn’t the one who – wasn’t the reason to feel sorry for him.

“She,” he says. “Do you understand why you’re here?”

The boy glares at him. He has a way of glaring with his entire face, putting his full weight into the glare like into a punch. Minato finds himself thinking it’s no wonder Orochimaru beats him. It shames him, that thought, because obviously it’s unacceptable to place blame on a child who’s been sold by his own family to an abuser. Still, for all Sasuke’s stubborn and unpleasant, he’s never been stupid, and he has to realise that his behaviour will set Orochimaru off.

Maybe it’s easier that way.

He’d have liked to think of this in terms of rescuing Sasuke, but he tries not to make excuses for himself, and he didn’t do this for Sasuke, who keeps glaring and doesn’t answer.

Naruto could make him smile, once upon a time, but Minato has to question whether that would be possible now. His impression is that Sasuke sees the world through a blur of pain and rage like anaesthesia, through eyes that would run red with lethal magic, were it not for the seal.

The seal… it’s an abomination, a cattle brand he wishes gone from the boy, and yet, and yet… Frankly he doubts he could have forced Sasuke to do what he needs him to, had it not been there.

Minato sighs. “I’m assuming that Kakashi has explained about Naruto’s – condition.” He decides not to notice that the oversize college jumper Sasuke’s wearing must be Kakashi’s. That Sasuke hasn’t showered, and smells, to Minato’s shifter senses if not to his own, of sweat and sperm and Kakashi’s detergent.

Finally Sasuke shrugs, one-shouldered to spare his bad side. He’s a forest after a forest fire, when everything is ash and stumps and embers. Ready to flame up again, only there’s nothing left to burn.

He looks at Naruto’s father – but there’s no point thinking about Naruto – at the man Kakashi feels he owes something, owes Sasuke – but there can be no thinking about Kakashi.

So he looks at the man who leads the shifter community. Minato Namikaze is a big man, and the kind of man who’d look big even if he wasn’t. He always tried to act kind, when Sasuke was small enough to still think of him mostly as Naruto’s dad, but Sasuke knew better, even then. It makes Sasuke want to rip open his throat and peel his vocal chords from their fastenings with his nails.

Kindness is just deceptiveness, a weak person’s excuse for not getting their way. Slave morality, Orochimaru calls it, and Sasuke hates Orochimaru but a lot of the time he hates him for being right.

Minato Namikaze can have no use for kindness.

“She,” he says. “Do you understand that this is a trying situation, but I need you to respond.”
Sasuke wouldn’t let Orochimaru speak to him like this, like an adult taking kindly charge of a child – except those unspeakable nights, too worn down and desperate to fight it anymore, when he’s so tired and it hurts so much – but it hardly matters now. Kakashi’s not saying a word.

“Sasuke,” Minato says again, with less patience now.

The horrible child collects himself, his blank face coming over spiteful and intent. Of all the people Minato never wanted for Naruto… and it’s not Sasuke’s fault that he’s miserable and berserker furious at the whole world, but it not being his fault doesn’t make it any less awful or any less suicidally dangerous.

“Am I to take it you negotiated a transfer of my lease?”

He still has a little bit of an accent, all these years later, consonants smudged around cut-glass sharp vowels: it’s possible he actually says, my leash.

In the end, Minato does try not to lie more than he has to. “Some attempts were made,” he says, which is true. “But it quickly became clear that Orochimaru would never give you up.”

The obvious, awful jokes stay stillborn on Kakashi’s lips. Sasuke himself shows no indication of understanding that this is funny, or wretched: the only one who wouldn’t give him up, trade him away for the greater good, so the only one who values him as more than a means to an end, is Orochimaru.

“It’ll mean war, then,” Sasuke says.

It’s not exactly spoken like a challenge, but what else could it be? They’ve had seven years of tenuous peace, exorcist factions and shifter factions and all the human factions, almost a decade of conflicts simmering but not boiling over, bought and paid for with dreams compromised into nothing, goals worn down into tired standstills. Sasuke, taken from his family home and given over to – Minato can no longer allow himself to shy away from the thought – to a sadist and paedophile. To a man Minato would have fought another long bloody war before he handed over his baby boy to. If it were Konohamaru…

Now here they are. Seven years too late, he’s rescued the boy. When he’s already been soiled and crippled, a sour and bitter little thing.

Minato shrugs. It’s not the sort of gesture he normally allows himself, but Sasuke’s family now, God help them all. “If I’m going to fight a war, I can think of no better reason for it than my son’s life. Can you say your father would feel the same?”

“My father,” Sasuke says, mouth twisting into a misshapen shape that’s possibly supposed to be a smile, “will be delighted.”

If Fugaku really doesn’t care for the boy, then he has every reason to be delighted. But it’s hard to imagine, certainly Minato has never doubted that he loves Itachi, and so surely…

Behind Sasuke Kakashi shrugs too. “I’m sure he will.”

Sasuke looks at him flatly, the only way he can look at him now. “Leave. Just go. Why would I want you here?”

Apparently for no reason at all, because Kakashi does step away. He’s always known that he’s a failure, and now Sasuke knows it too.
Minato Namikaze sighs again. He sighs the way Orochimaru sighs, a stage production. “This is not an ideal situation for any of us. If you believe for a moment that I wouldn’t have infinitely preferred someone willing, someone –”

“Someone enthusiastic,” Sasuke cuts him off. “Some shifter girl, with the right pedigree and a great deal of magic to contribute to the bond. Someone by name of Temari Sabaku, perhaps.”

He’s wanted that for a long time, Minato, not that Sasuke exactly blames him. He’s pretended not to want it, he’s the kind of politician who keeps pretending to be decent long after it stops being in any way plausible, and the kind of father who pretends to just want Naruto’s happiness, as if Naruto could be happy in a world where steps were not being taken to ensure a fragile peace. Kushina’s certainly always been open about wanting the match.

Only Naruto was completely disinterested. Sasuke’s gone to school with him and Temari for years, and while she might have been persuadable – might, let’s be honest, have been persuaded the same way Sasuke’s been persuaded to agree to things, with threats and brute force – the idea of being with her was obviously so implausible to Naruto, he never even took it seriously enough to object.

Naruto had convinced himself at the time that he wanted to marry Sakura, and that she’d get around to wanting it too.

The only time he’d been into political marriage was when they’d done *Romeo and Juliet* in school, and Naruto decided that marrying Sasuke would be the obvious – and also romantic, Sasuke, think of the romance! All the free press, we would be so famous – solution to bringing about a lasting shifter/exorcist peace.

Sasuke had neglected to immediately point out that such a wedding would have to involve Itachi and Konohamaru, because Sasuke’s just the spare and Naruto’s just a wild oat, just a weed, which Naruto had of course interpreted as agreement to the whole mad scheme.

All of that was a long time ago.

In the present Kakashi says, quite lightly, “He’s irreplaceable. It doesn’t matter who any of us wanted, he’s the one.”

And it’s not news, Sasuke knows it’s not news, to be talked about as the solution to someone else’s problem. Someone’s need, someone’s weakness, someone’s greed.

It’s just been a while since he was talked about that way by someone who treated him like a person first.

Minato sighs again. Sasuke hadn’t remembered him as someone who sighs: remembered someone brighter, warmer, who made loud baby sounds that Naruto was by then far too old for, so they must have been for Konohamaru.

He takes a moment to wonder if Minato is as disappointed in his younger son as Sasuke’s own parents are in him – and surely, after Naruto, Konohamaru must have seemed an unspeakable failure, but there’s never been a hint, never any of that public unpleasantness that froze Sasuke out long before he was given away.

*They didn’t want me. It’s not that they stopped loving me after handing me over to Orochimaru – they never loved me to begin with.*

Not even Naruto, idealist that he was, burning with it so that Sasuke sometimes thought his fingertips, touching, would catch fire – not even Naruto contradicted him. *Yeah. That was my*
And maybe Sasuke had seemed surprised – though why should he have been? Naruto understands some things – because Naruto went on, *How could they have done it, if they – you know.*

*Mmh,* Sasuke said. Couldn’t look directly at Naruto, right then, like Naruto had had to look away, too, when he said about how could they have if they’d loved you.

*I would never.*

*I know,* Sasuke said, which was strange because he’d wanted to fight, but he did know.

*I thought… I thought Itachi did love you, before.*

*I know,* Sasuke said again, in an entirely sharper voice.

Naruto sort of hit his shoulder, awkwardly so it was obvious he didn’t know how to touch the way he wanted to, and Sasuke angled quickly so he could take it on the chin, and then they did fight.

Sasuke won.

Not because Naruto went easy on him – he would have been dead if he had, Sasuke goes crazy on anger and pain, berserker vicious in his own cold way – but because he hesitated when he saw the marks, Sasuke was beaten hollow at that point, hesitated more from rage probably than anything, but breathless with it and frozen, and Sasuke could not bear it, and punched at him until he had to move or there’d be real damage, permanent damage.

“I really do regret this, Sasuke,” Minato says. “I wish all of this could have happened in better circumstances. But here we are. He’ll be home in a few hours. I’ll have the guards escort you to a room. They’ll find some clothes for you, some food.”

Sasuke surprises him by demanding, suddenly defiant, “And how is he?”

“And end stage heart failure. The situation’s becoming a bit desperate, as you might have gathered. He’ll be – intense. Possibly confused.”

Sasuke’s face puckers in displeasure. “I take it that’s code for carpet burn.”

They call it that: intense, amorous. It means carpet burn and dry fucking, letting Sakura try to paint over the worst of the bruising and sitting gingerly in class.

Minato’s tones go dry and sharp. “No offence, Sasuke, but I didn’t imagine you were a blushing virgin.”

It occurs to Minato that Naruto might be, might very well be. It further occurs to him that, especially in light of this, it might not be entirely regrettable that Sasuke’s…experienced. Sasuke after all is not a shifter: and so will not reciprocate the insane hunger, the berserker need evoked by the bond. If he’d been human, with no magic of his own, or if he’d been sexually innocent – well, that’s one disaster avoided.

Sasuke says nothing, which is par of the course from what Minato remembers of him. Minato tries a smile, to no visible avail. He knows, better than Sasuke reasonably can, that Naruto will be desperate. Minato feels desperate too, the familiar desperation of someone who can’t be sure of protecting his family, who can only try and try – and he’s managed, now, Sasuke’s finally here, but at the stage Naruto’s reached, his heart could give out any second. Even now, even in this moment
when Minato’s starting a civil war and extorting sexual services from a child to save him.

It was Temari’s voice on the phone, *Minato, he’s dying. Naruto’s really dying.*

He encourages them to call him by his first name, “no need for this mister business, we’re all family”, but only on the understanding that they don’t actually take such liberties. Temari’s always been quick to pick up on these understandings. Has always had a steady, rusty, daytime voice, a voice for giving commands, a world of terror and trauma away from that needle-thin, needle-sharp whisper in the small hours of the night.

*It’s Uchiha, of course it’s bloody Uchiha. He’s really going to die.*

Minato had hoped for another shifter, like every parent hopes for another shifter for their child. There’s such safety in that, in mutual bond compulsion and mutual magic, the very opposite of getting a human: someone who does not need you, and usually does not want you. Someone who can contribute no magic to the bond, and might die from yours, and then kill you too, just by dying.

Well, Sasuke won’t die. Sasuke, beyond that crippling seal, is so full of magic he could burst.

Sasuke says, “Your wife must be furious.”

Minato’s instinct is to interpret this as a political challenge, as Sasuke testing the waters. But Sasuke’s face is distant, distracted, for the first time less furious than tired. There’s something pinched about his mouth, despite that unsettling beauty. Very much his mother’s son, they all used to say, until it became so painfully clear that neither Mikoto nor Fugaku was at all pleased by that observation.

“Furious isn’t an uncommon mood for her, I’m afraid,” Minato observers. He keeps his voice mild, his face too. Sasuke’s entirely correct, and doesn’t need to have this confirmed. “You needn’t concern yourself with that.”

Kushina’s a proud woman, and passionately involved in governing their tribe, steering it safely through all the factions. If she’d just met Naruto, met him as another young man with no ties to them beyond being shifter, Minato believes she would have liked him.

But she entered their marriage and their bond in good faith, prepared to learn to love him, pleased to rule with him and bear his heirs – and so who can blame her, for not loving Minato’s lovechild, the son of a human woman that Minato had, at the time, been trying to marry? Who can fault her for finding it unforgiveable that he’s now risking so much, so very much, in order to bring Sasuke here for Naruto?

Certainly not Minato.

Sasuke shrugs, that jerky one-shouldered movement, so clearly a bitter concession to the cripple mark, the slave brand. Fifteen years old and already having to spare his bad side, adjust his movements around the kind of scarring that never goes away.

“Sasuke.” Kakashi’s voice now, and it’s odd and jarring, and acutely nauseating. Kakashi spent so many years trying to convince the world he was an adult – which, Minato maintains, he was very obviously not, though it was clear to anyone he wasn’t a child, that childhood was ripped out of him when his parents died, and there’s been nothing to fill the holes it left behind – and so schooled his voice to come low and grown up. Only today he suddenly sounds his age, and Minato remembers that Kakashi too is young, suddenly so acutely young.

“Fuck you forever,” Sasuke snaps without looking at him. “Where are the guards, then?”
Minato presses the intercom button, and very shortly Sasuke’s marched off between Genma and
Raidou.

This is the same building Naruto lived in, back in the distant days of childhood, but it’s been
destroyed and then renovated again and again, to the point Sasuke couldn’t be sure to find his way
around it unescorted.

“He’s a really good kid,” offers the guard Sasuke doesn’t recognise. Clearly a miss-hire.

Sasuke gives him the look he learnt from Itachi, before Itachi turned it on him: a look to remind him,
down to the marrow of his bones, that no matter what has been done to Sasuke, Sasuke is and
always will be the hand of God upon this earth, while this make inu is the beastly result of ancient
demonic interbreeding.

“What Raidou means,” Genma cuts in, “is that this is far from the worst that could happen.”

Sasuke’s prepared to grant that this is a more realistic proposition.

Genma continues, lightly, the same kind of lightness as Kakashi’s, “Just imagine if it had been your
brother.”

Of course it’s the same lightness as Kakashi’s. Kakashi grew up with this man, grew up owing
Minato Namikaze–

“Then Naruto would die,” Sasuke says, cutting off his own thoughts.

“I’d imagine so,” Genma agrees, shrugging philosophically. “And so – to be perfectly frank what’s
going to happen is he’s going to put his dick in your arse and move it around until he comes, but it
won’t take long and he’ll be nice about it. I’d think him being nice about it is the only part of this
that’ll be news to you.”

It’s a dumb thing he’s doing now, Genma knows that. He’s not generally given to dumbness, so it
stands out all the more, the colossal stupidity he’s indulging in.

It’s easy to forget yourself, when Kakashi teases the kid so easily, when you’ve seen him around
mostly as Naruto’s friend. When Naruto’s really dying, and this selfish little bitch who’s supposed to
be his friend, whom Naruto has always defended as his friend, is pouting about being asked to save
him. Being asked to do something for his friend that, let’s be honest, everyone knows he’s doing on
a regular basis for far less deserving people…

But these are excuses: it’s easy to forget yourself, when the seal keeps Sasuke’s magic locked up
inside him, safely inaccessible as if he were really human.

Which is of course not at all the case. Fugaku’s spare but Orochimaru’s heir, and the seal won’t last
forever. When it’s gone, Genma’s already certain, Sasuke will have neither forgotten nor forgiven.

He seems harmless now, just a sullen teenager, but Genma saw Mist Town after the massacre. Saw
Sasuke, after Mist Town Massacre, and couldn’t doubt for an instant the connection. Not ten years
old, and with more lives on his conscience than Genma’s collected during a decade as Namikaze’s
security.

He’d possibly saved the continent. And it’s a good continent, Genma likes living here, but Genma
knew people in Mist Town, too, people who don’t live anywhere in this world anymore.

It doesn’t behove people like Genma to forget these things, to forget that in this one matter Sasuke
Uchiha is like Naruto, like Minato: people who operate on a different scale than Genma and his ilk.

“I’m sorry,” he says, and he doesn’t mean it but he’s aware that he ought to. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“You have no business speaking to me at all.”

“Here we are,” Raidou interjects, pushing open a door. “Please.”

Genma takes a moment to be glad that Uchiha doesn’t object, that they’re all spared the nightmarish awkwardness of having to force him.

Sasuke enters what they’ve all referred to, laughingly and then not, as the princess tower. They lock the door behind him, and good riddance, Genma’s glad of it.

He’ll let slip a hint of this later, much later, to Kakashi, who will have joined him and drunk with him. And that too will be a mistake, because Kakashi will look at him as Genma looks at Sasuke, as someone who’s no better than they ought to be, and he will be reminded that Kakashi isn’t really his friend, could never be his friend, because Kakashi too operates on a different scale.

xxxxx

Naruto did not, in point of fact, know the moment he saw him. It just feels like he did, now in retrospect, when Sasuke is all he can see.

“Naruto! Naruto, for fuck’s sake, we gotta scram.” Kiba’s voice, and then Kiba’s arm, steady around his shoulders. Naruto couldn’t stay on his feet without it, probably, and it’s warm and friendly and he’s glad of it. It’s also a redhot yoke: the wrong arm, and Kyuubi, all berserker craving and already dying, bites and claws on the inside of him, trying to break out into the world and tear it off. “Gaara, shit, come get his other arm!”

They remove him from the car by main force, under a steady stream of curses. Naruto hears it like that: a steady stream of sounds, not words, not words that he can understand.

He stumbles into the house, Kiba still too close at his side but then Naruto might need someone to catch him, needs it bad enough that the admittance hardly galls anymore. The world is like this now, because that’s what happened: Sasuke changed the world.

Naruto’s life, even his past, looks different to him now, like it means something else because it has to be understood in relation to this new change that Sasuke’s wrought.

“Hey, Naruto. Naruto! Good to get back home, right? Remember when we left? Seems like forever, huh? Come on, now, slow and steady…”

When they left… then too he was sitting in a car with Kiba and Gaara, then too he was looking out the window at a rainy day. Everything was everyday, saturated with tension but ordinary: his friends, familiar basically since life began, and familiar now on the way north, to war.

And he’d looked out the window, waved to Konohamaru’s desolate figure, and tried and tried not to feel that the world had stopped. He knew it was just his heart, which stilled for long, long seconds until it started beating again but all different, trying to match someone else’s.

It’s all fucked-up now, beating triple time and then stopping for too long before juddering into motion again as though someone’s drop kicked his chest from the inside. End stage heart failure, Granny Tsunade says. He’s so dizzy and it keeps constricting, and he can’t stop visualising it as
Sasuke fisting it, right there inside his ribs.

Naruto was still telling himself then that it was just a phase, that it was something that could be got over and moved on from, but he looked out the car window and suddenly the world was black-and-white, muted, in slow-motion. Only Sasuke was in vibrant, blinding colour, his voice the only sound Naruto could hear. Even after, when the car turned a corner and Sasuke was brutally out of sight, he looked around and Kiba and Gaara were in fading pastels, almost already grey.

_Bloody ridiculous_, Kankurou told him, almost the last thing Kankurou told him. _Mate bonds can’t be got over._

Bloody ridiculous, Naruto knew, he always did know, because Sasuke has never been someone who can be got over.

And really, it wasn’t Sasuke he’d been trying to get past. Just this insane compulsion, like Naruto wasn’t a person at all but just a creature helpless before its instincts.

Sasuke deserves infinitely better than that.

He’d read up on shifter bonds, Sasuke, as part of reading up on shifters in general. He was raised to believe, Naruto knows all too well, that they’re filth: half-animal creatures, descended from the very demons that exorcists exist to repel. But then there was Naruto, and before that the knowledge that Kakashi, exorcist prodigy, makes occasional references to shifter friends, that Orochimaru in fact employs a few shifter guards. Aggressive, desperate men who stink of animality and power – not meaningfully different from Orochimaru’s other enforcers.

He remembers Sasuke’s tiny face, scrunched up in what looked like distaste, and probably was distaste too, but mainly confusion. _But it’s nonsensical. Evolutionary contra productive is an understatement, it’s completely insane… Well, so are you, so I guess that makes sense._

Naruto gave him the finger. _Swans are the same. They never remarry or anything._

Sasuke lifted an eyebrow. He’d just learnt to do it, and took every opportunity to showcase it. _While I’m sure the church approves your hardcore stance against divorce, orthodox Catholicism isn’t actually a great survival manual._ He talked like that sometimes, in the artificial phrases of a child raised among adults.

_Heh, guess you wouldn’t have so many saints if it was._ He’d got a bit of a smile out of Sasuke with that one, just a glimmer at the very edge of his mouth before Sasuke remembered he was supposed to be a good son of the church, or that he was born depressed or something.

_Be that as it may, how could it possibly –_

Naruto interrupted him to grind out, in hoarse tones that turned lighter and lighter with suppressed laughter, _You’re like my own personal brand of heroin._

_People quit heroin._

_Yeah_, Naruto had agreed, slowly, sobering.

There’s a famous description of refusing the bond craving being like refusing to breathe, where the author points out that the usual similes, food and water, are inadequate because it’s possible after all to starve yourself to death. Not so with breathing – you can hold your breath, but eventually you’ll fall unconscious from it. _Eventually, you will come to a place where will doesn’t matter. Eventually, you will breathe._
The only option, the only way to stop, is to die.

In his memory, standing at the edge of a spring schoolyard, Sasuke shrugs. *Well it sounds like a perfect nightmare.*

And Naruto had gone cold, out there in the May sun. His future sounded like a perfect nightmare, to someone whose own parents plainly didn’t want him.

His name is called again in the present, and Naruto looks up into Dad’s ice-grey face. It’s not just that Sasuke stole all the colour from the world, he thinks, the man actually blanches. Naruto must look about as shitty as he feels.

Even Kyuubi is still now, a dead thing inside him like a stillborn child.

Dad hugs him, and it’s good despite the badtouch burn of any touch but Sasuke’s. Feels like home, for a second, before it just feels like home used to feel like.

“I’m sorry. I should have got you home sooner.”

Naruto shrugs, his shoulder jostling and jolting against Dad’s ribs. “Things got out of hand. And with Kankurou…”

“Yes,” Dad agrees. “But that’s over with now. Come on in.”

“I – can’t,” he discovers. “This isn’t where I need to be. I just – no. I’m sorry. Of course I’ll come. God. Sorry. I just have to – I…”

He feels he’ll have to die in the gutter outside Orochimaru’s compound, worst case, if he can’t get to Sasuke. Which doesn’t seem real because he knows, he knows, that he’ll find Sasuke. He will because he has to.

Only Naruto dying in Orochimaru’s house would be an international incident, would be another war, and he can barely even stay on his feet so how could he possibly get through Orochimaru’s security? He’d find a way, he would, and…

He could maybe call Sasuke, he thinks. Sasuke would maybe answer. Naruto would like that, there’s so very little life left now, so very little that he can have, and that’s the only thing he wants.

He’s maybe mumbled some of this aloud, because Dad’s grip around his shoulder changes, and Dad finally smiles, strained but succeeding. “I think we can do a little better than that.”

Naruto’s heart picks up speed, but steadier now, like it might not crash. Kyuubi raises his head, claws kneading through Naruto’s intestines. “Sasuke,” he rasps out, and it doesn’t sound like his voice. If Minato had heard it over the phone, he would’ve never recognised it.

More arrestinglly, there’s no real recognition in Naruto’s eyes.

He has eyes only for Sasuke, Minato surmises. Everyone else is just a blur.

In all the years of his life, all the people lost to unfulfilled bonds, he’s never seen anyone as matesick as Naruto, and yet alive.

“This way. Let’s hurry.”

“If you ever loved me even a little bit,” Naruto says, in this strange voice at the edge of death, “you won’t give him back to Orochimaru. You’ll look out for him, when I’m gone.”
“Naruto,” and he hauls him by main force into the lift, as if Naruto was a child again, a little tyke who couldn’t walk on his own. It’s so hopeful, then, when it’s someone who can’t walk on their own yet, as opposed to this: someone who can’t walk on their own anymore. “Sasuke’s here. You’ll be fine.”

Naruto looks at him then, with perfect recognition and a coldness, unintentional and all the more chilling for it, that he could never aim at Sasuke. Naruto’s eyes tend to make you forget this, but Minato’s reminded now that blue is actually a cold colour, the colour of arctic seas.

Naruto who never has and never will forgive him for not saving Sasuke.

Minato wouldn’t really want him to.

“I abandoned him.”

Minato would however like for him to forgive himself. “I’m the one who sent you away. If memory serves, you tried to escape and return for him at least four times a day.”

“How would he know? I didn’t succeed, did I.” The words are old vomit in his mouth.

“Naruto…” They step out of the lift, he barely has to drag Naruto anymore. Naruto will feel it now, Sasuke’s presence beyond that locked door, will feel it like a hand around his heart, pulling him in. No, really, more like a hook through his heart. “Sasuke was the one who came to me and said I had to get you away.”

Minato has clung to that memory, during the cold nights of knowing his best case scenario hinges on coercing sexual services from a little boy.

Naruto stares at him, shocked beyond any relief and any horror.

It had been after Naruto inevitably tried to kill Orochimaru and inevitably failed; after Sasuke had somehow made sure he got out of that attempt alive.

Under the laws of war, Sasuke belongs to Orochimaru, but Naruto does not, Naruto lives in a circle of protection drawn by Minato’s love and shifter loyalty. In ordinary circumstances, Orochimaru cannot touch him.

If Naruto attacks him, things are different.

If Naruto, after attacking him and after being saved by whatever unspeakable measures Sasuke took, returns to see Sasuke, then… well, Minato has come to understand that Orochimaru thought it a wonderful game. You don’t like this, do you? Well, perhaps it can be prevented? I wouldn’t have to amuse myself with Sasuke, if someone else were to entertain me. Perhaps if you were to—

He hadn’t understood this from Naruto, who came home shell-shocked and bristling and destroyed, but who’d been shell-shocked and bristling and destroyed ever since Orochimaru first took possession of Sasuke.

He’d understood it from Sasuke, who stepped into his office one day, and said how he had to take Naruto away, before very shortly things would happen that there was no going back from.

It had been uncomfortable, the realisation that when Sasuke spoke of unbearable he referred only to Naruto: that it plainly never occurred to him that anyone would help him. It had also made things easier.
“Even aside from that,” Minato tells them both, “I’m sure he doesn’t want you dead. Go on. You’ll be fine in the morning.”

He will, Minato believes, be fine in the morning, because either Sasuke will agree or Sasuke will refuse long enough for Kyuubi to win his perennial tug-of-war with Naruto, and what Sasuke wants will no longer matter.
Sasuke’s spent hours going over the room, but it’s proven predictably useless. There’s no way to get out without magic, and he’s not getting any magic, not when this prison is, pathetically, the safest place he’s been for years.

So he’s sitting on the bed, and as a rule he doesn’t allow himself to touch the seal but he’s clawing at it now as though human fingers could tear it off.

That’s when the door opens.

That’s when Naruto opens the door.

And there, the sudden eye of the storm: Sasuke cross-legged on the bed, within reaching distance and still looking unreachable.

Naruto has to steady himself, try to breathe, because his hands are fisting around the need to take and hold, like they’re Kyuubi’s hands even though no claws have come out.

Sasuke is Naruto’s and necessary the same way as Naruto’s spine or Naruto’s lungs.

Except Sasuke won’t see it that way, won’t need Naruto.

Sasuke looks up then, straight into his eyes. Smiles a shark smile: half-smirk, half-sneer, wholly Sasuke. “Hey.” His fingers are little needles, drawing blood at his own shoulder.

“Hi.” He’s staring back helplessly, has never felt so powerless. Wants to just look at him, forever, drink him with his eyes. Wants to rip Sasuke’s chest open, and stroke softly over his heart. Nuzzle it as it pulses, right there in the cradle of Sasuke’s broken ribs.

Kyuubi’s salivating at the idea of burying his fangs in Sasuke’s flesh, eating him up until they’re inseparably one, and Naruto’s throat clogs with retches but his dick throbs.

He realises his hands are shaking only when they steady around the door handle, something to hold on to, anything. “You’re here.”

Sasuke shrugs. It’s a harsh, one-shouldered movement, typical of Sasuke, who only looks graceful when he’s still, always moving in sharp, economical stabs. “Your father was quite insistent.”

“He can be – sort of pushy,” Naruto agrees. Sasuke’s eyes stay cold and flat, but he won’t speak. His mouth is small, his closed lips straight and severe and rather thin, not made for smiling. “Okay, yeah, he means well but he can be sort of Hitler.” Sasuke snorts, and Naruto’s smiling at him, hopelessly obsessed. “I guess fathers are like that.”

Naruto remembers saying, years and years ago, I think parents are mostly good. So you have someone from the start to love you.

That was before he’d seen parents fail, far beyond the fixable. Before he’d heard Sasuke let slip a reference to Orochimaru as otousama, and think explaining it away as Orochimaru’s incest kink was the lesser evil.

It’s inconceivable now, that minutes ago life was over.

“I tried to come back for you,” Naruto says abruptly.
And it’s stupid but Sasuke believes him. It’s a sort of last gift, that belief, a sweetsour thing that will make Naruto’s inevitable betrayal hurt, salt the wound. But Sasuke’s used to pain; used, even, to the sort of pain that changes who you are.

He’s showered, exchanged Kakashi’s old jumper for a spare shirt from the wardrobe, which is far too large on him. Borrowed clothes tend to be: he only notices now because the neckline exposes his collar bones and Naruto’s looking. The nausea is a tangible weight in Sasuke’s throat.

He didn’t change because he’s trying to hide anything about Kakashi – it’s largely meaningless to try to hide things from Naruto – but he can’t think about it yet, isn’t ready to fight about it.

“What?” he snaps.

Naruto’s eyes snap back up to his, and they’re not blue anymore. His voice stays light, the lightness that comes of being very, very careful not to let it get heavy. “If it came down to it, could you stop me?”

“How could I possibly?” Sasuke’s still snapping, with that cold defensive fury that’s carried him through so much of his life, so much that would otherwise have been unbearable.

Naruto swallows. He’s so hard it hurts, so over-aroused there’s hardly any pleasure left in it, just pain, just raw need scraping under his skin. Eventually, you will breathe. “I thought – self-defence. That maybe.”

“You don’t want to kill me,” Sasuke says. “You just want to fuck me. I’d think you’d realise that it would be a little contra productive, from Orochimaru’s perspective, if that was grounds for self-defence.” He started out calmly enough, subdued even, but gets gradually louder, ending spitting furious.

Indeed Naruto can see quite plainly the brand on Sasuke’s shoulder, framed by the low neckline. Literally a brand: Sasuke does not advertise this fact, but it was made with an actual branding iron. He can also see Sasuke’s throat and collar bones, and that someone’s been biting at them.

“Those are not defensive wounds.”

Sasuke looks his version of stricken, which is to say rabid. The threat of violence between them is so overt it’s almost already violence.

“I couldn’t fight him every time!” The volume is all wrong for a scream, but there’s no other word to call it. “Fighting him at full power – that means he has to hurt me a lot, to get what he wants, and how can I ever get strong enough to stop him by lying around in a hospital bed!”

Sasuke can fight all he likes, Sasuke can lie there and close his eyes and think of England, Sasuke can enjoy himself: it makes very little difference to Orochimaru’s pleasure.

He’s done all of it, by now. Seduction is a skill like any other, and that’s an excuse but it’s also the truth. It can be useful, can be a way of getting people where you need them. Not one he’d anticipated having to lower himself to – an exorcist warrior prince, a child of heaven – but this is what his life is, and he’s hated it and hated it, and survived in an unsightly way.

“Yeah,” Naruto says, the bleakest word Sasuke’s ever heard from him. He finally leaves the doorway, stumbles forward until he sinks to the floor right beside the bed. Sasuke’s foot dangles close to his shoulder, and Naruto’s desire to touch it is so obvious, so intense, he might as well be touching it already.
Pulling back to look Sasuke in the face, find his eyes, Naruto catches sight of his own reflection. For a very long moment, as he struggles with himself, his fingers are claws and his teeth are fangs, his eyes tint red and the whisker scars are too large for his face. He hardly looks human at all.

He can’t help leaning closer.

Once, shortly after they’d first spoken, when Naruto was still trying to understand why it was unacceptable to tease about Sasuke’s accent even though it was fine to tease about everyone else’s dialects, he’d leaned very close. You have weird eyes. They’re large, a little slanted, so dark it’s hard to tell where iris becomes pupil. Um, is that racist too?

You’re weird, Sasuke huffed, as was his highhanded way. Baka gaijin...

It goes without saying that Naruto quickly became fluently rude in Japanese.

Anyway you’ll have more experience of racism than I do. Sasuke had seemed… maybe curious, maybe something Naruto could pretend was affectionate. He had also seemed rather to be offering his condolences for Naruto’s utterly unspeakable condition, which he’d apparently decided wasn’t something Naruto could be blamed for but which was disgusting all the same.

Today, years later and after Sasuke’s prioritised Naruto’s safety over that of humans, his eyes remain far colder and more distant. Naruto can still see his own face reflected in the window behind the bed, see how stricken he looks. Though he can’t bear to move away from Sasuke, it feels like he’s rearing back, shocked and oddly betrayed, as if Sasuke had really promised him anything.

As if Sasuke’s ever pretended to stop considering shifters subhuman filth.

“Am I your token shifter friend?”

That startles a snort out of Sasuke, the snort that’s generally the closest he gets to a laugh. “Why would I want a token shifter friend?”

“I would make sense!” Naruto insists. “I’m the token shifter, and Sakura’s the token human. It’s a diabolical masterplan!”

“Idiot,” Sasuke mutters. He kicks lightly at Naruto’s shoulder, and it takes everything Naruto has not to moan at the contact. Grab for more. “What am I, then? Your two for one, token Asian, token gay friend? How convenient.”

Naruto makes a bewildered face at him. “Why would I need a token gay friend? I’m – you know. Literally dying from how much I want you.” It’s in bad taste and his voice comes shaky, but if Sasuke can make rape jokes then surely Naruto can make light of his own imminent death.

It’s fitting, maybe, that his death wears Sasuke’s face.

Sasuke’s voice is crisp again. “Orientation is irrelevant in the face of bond compulsion.”

“Well, yeah, but… none of that matters anymore? There’s just you.”

Sasuke’s face is bleak and unhappy, and the only face Naruto wants to see. His voice comes dry and bitter, but not without warmth, which Naruto licks up like a pathetic dog, a stray puppy leaping at any sign of kindness. “Didn’t we once run away because of how much you don’t believe in mate bonds?”

It was after Naruto’s parents had split up, and Mum had moved to a different part of town. Minato,
she’s your family. You literally cannot live without her, and I – I’m not going to compete with that.

It’s not a competition.

No, it’s not.

Naruto had determined to bring them back together, reunite the family as practice fore reuniting the country and the warring races – Kushina could stay too, if she really wanted to. After all, Granny Tsunade and Grandpa Jiraiya stayed with them all the time, and all the guards and servants and associates.

This mission had turned out to be rather difficult to accomplish, as he now lived with Mum in a new part of town, and she didn’t pick up the phone when Dad called. Rather, she always picked up when it was about Naruto, if Dad wanted to talk to or about Naruto, but then when he started talking to her she’d hang up.

It had overall not been a great time.

Naruto, I still love you, I always will love you, and so does your mother–

I know! It’s you she’s–

We still love each other, too, Naruto. But sometimes adults need space from each other.

No they don’t. Families should be together.

I’m afraid the world isn’t structured around the notion of ‘should’, Cubbie.

So Dad wouldn’t listen to him. Though Dad probably still loved him, in so far as he’d loved him when they’d lived together. Which had barely been enough even then, without the distance.

It had so clearly been pretence, when he said it didn’t matter how people talked about halfbreeds or bastards, though Naruto hadn’t, at the time, understood what exactly he was pretending.

Fourteen months later, Mum had been kidnapped and then killed.

Naruto of course needed to save her, and Sasuke of course needed to be anywhere but at Orochimaru’s, but Dad wouldn’t take them, and none of the employees. A taxi ride would likely end with the police bringing them home, which would have been all right for Naruto but disaster for Sasuke.

So they hitchhiked.

Little Naruto stands before him in memory, in all his chubby, absurd glory, with his bright orange sneakers and the frog plushie Kakashi once gave him, on a birthday before the beginning of memory. Little Sasuke, who was even tinier then, drowning in a random jacket they’d snatched from the hallway.

He’d had to smuggle out, hide among a truckload of corpses being taken from Orochimaru’s residence. The most disturbing part was how little it had evidently disturbed him, how well he’d fitted among the silent, hollow bodies until he could move again.

The smell lingered on him for days afterwards, made Kyuubi’s maws itchy even though Sasuke, with his human nose, didn’t notice it anymore.

A lot of people picked then up, when Naruto stuck his baby thumb up.
At the time it felt great, felt like success, but in retrospect it makes him go cold. It’s terrible, of course Naruto would stop for them, would throw himself out of his car to save the little boy with the big grin and the big scars, standing in the rain with his thumb up, orange shoes so soaked with mud they looked like old leather. And Sasuke – big-eyed and beaten up, too proud to stick up his thumb.

Many were concerned. Kind women who made sure they didn’t have to steal lunches, family men they had to jump out of the car to avoid being taken to the authorities by. Maybe people wouldn’t have let them in their cars if they’d known they weren’t human – nobody seemed prepared that they could throw themselves out the door when they were driving, that they could run from them on whole healthy legs after they had. It hurt but it was worth it, it was necessary, they were getting there.

Some were kind in the dirty way, the dangerous way.

The first time Kyuubi hurt someone was when a lorry driver had picked them up, and then made them get out of the car on a deserted stretch of road.

Naruto had done what, if Sasuke had done it, would have been leading the man on. Smiling a lot, not shying away too much from his hands. Letting him think Naruto knew what he wanted, that he’d get it.

Sasuke had kicked at him and looked away.

And Naruto wasn’t Sasuke, and had never had to be helpless in quite that way. Had never had to learn to understand what handsy strangers might want with him.

The man reached for him with tenderness that was worse than violence, and turned to violence when Naruto objected.

Then there was Kyuubi.

Little Naruto’s hands were inefficient, wobbly little things. Kyuubi’s fingers were red claws, and cut through the man’s body so easily, it felt like no more resistance than the air.

And Naruto stood there dumb with shock, his mouth full of blood that tasted like dirty things, stomach things, and one of his hands huge and red, with energy, with someone’s life.

Someone’s death.

He was on his knees then, retching a little, sideway so as not to hit the man or the big hole in him, the hole Naruto tried to cover, only his human hand was too little and Kyuubi’s hand just savaged him more, cut through his ribs too.

“Get up,” Sasuke told him. Got the matches from inside the lorry, and burned the man’s face off, his fingertips. “Let’s break his teeth, too. Then we’re going to burn the car.”

And Sasuke was steady, so steady that Naruto’s legs steadied too, and he could get up.

“We have to – tell someone.” Do the right thing, or as close to it as was possible: explain that he’d killed someone, he hadn’t meant to but when he tried to help it just got worse, and so a man is dead now.

“Do you want to get to your mum or not?” Sasuke spoke with his back turned, setting fire to the lorry. “Anyway people like that don’t stop.”
“They need stopping, that doesn’t mean–”

“If you hadn’t.” Sasuke straightened, flames licking at the car. “If you hadn’t been here. I don’t have any magic now.”

Naruto figured they should put the corpse back in the car, so it might look more like a traffic accident.

They walked a few miles before they tried for another lift.

It was after they had been discovered, in the darkness in the back of a police car bringing them home, that Sasuke said, “You do know it was someone on your side, right?”

Naruto’s guts clenched, like Kyuubi had got loose and started biting at them. “Dad would have found out.”

“I think he couldn’t bear to. It would have to be – someone he trusted. Someone he still needs.”

Naruto had understood, mainly from Kushina, that Mum had been taken to make Dad do things. That it had worked. *If you’re susceptible to this sort of extortion, then for god’s sake bring her here, arrange to have her looked after so she can’t be used against us!*

*I’m not going to keep a woman I love locked up against her will! She left me, she–*

*Keep her or let her go, but do one or the other and do it right. If you can’t…Minato, this can’t happen again.*

“Yeah,” Naruto breathes, in the present. “Yeah, we did.”

He’s dazed, his blood singing, screaming, and – yes, beginning to boil. It bubbles and burns under his skin, a faint blood mist seeping through his pores.

Against this desperation he catches Sasuke’s idly kicking foot after all. Curls his fingers around Sasuke’s ankle, drags his thumb under the sole.

Sasuke’s barefoot, and the touch makes Naruto want to beg. Want to growl, and drag Sasuke down on the floor with him.

He swallows, trying to make himself let go as Sasuke stiffens and then kicks harder. Like this, with the seal closed tight, Naruto’s so enormously stronger, so enormously faster, there’s no way on this earth that Sasuke can get free if Naruto doesn’t choose to release him.

This is the old horror story of having a human mate, the stinging helplessness of someone who’ll never have the means to assert themselves.

On the other hand, someone who will live regardless of Naruto, while Naruto—

“I’m sorry,” he says miserably, pressing his forehead to Sasuke’s leg, hardly able to hear his own words over Kyuubi’s howls. “It’s so bloody obvious now it was bullshit, how he kept saying he couldn’t get you out. Easy enough when it was for – for me.”

And Naruto must be really dying, visibly dying, because Sasuke’s foot stills in his grasp. “Naruto, I couldn’t even get my own father to help me. Anyway getting me out was never the problem. It’s keeping me away.”

Naruto looks up then, his eyes smarting and hot as though with imminent tears, but they’re red now,
they’re Kyuubi’s eyes, and Kyuubi isn’t capable of crying. He thinks outside of himself, outside of himself and Sasuke, for really the first time. “This’ll be… this’ll be war.”

And he poses a question with his eyes, one he can’t speak: because Sasuke’s been tortured for almost a decade, to ensure this peace, and now it’s shattering, and–

“Peace hasn’t been great for me,” Sasuke says. “Maybe war’ll be better.”

And this – war – Naruto was finally tired of trying and trying to move on, of pretending it could ever be anyone but Sasuke, he was so tired and it hurt so much, he didn’t want to pretend anymore, but this is something he should have considered too.

The world is breaking apart, like Naruto’s body is breaking apart.

“He’s been – he’s been all anxious and over-protective, lately,” Naruto mumbles. He has to have something, some connection, and words are the least intrusive one. So they spill out, though he’s not sure if he’s defending or condemning Dad. “He – Kankurou died, you know.”

Sasuke hums in agreement, toes twitching a bit but his foot otherwise still in Naruto’s hand. It’s too tense even to shake. Naruto can feel the pulse inside it, and his own fucked-over heart calms momentarily, echoing it. “I heard he got a BEASTer for a mate.”

“Nothing that organised,” Naruto mumbles into his skin. “She just thought shifters are monsters.” A small girl, brown braid, whom Naruto had barely noticed but who made Kankurou stare and not be able to stop staring.

“Was she wrong?” But Sasuke’s voice is soft, the way it gets sometimes at night. “I heard Kankurou killed himself by accident, fucking her to death.”

“No! No, of course he didn’t, god. Shit, no, and also how the hell did you even hear about this?”

Sasuke shrugs. “Orochimaru finds mate bonds hilarious.”

Naruto breathes. Sasuke’s trouser leg has been pushed up a little, by Naruto’s hand, so Sasuke’s skin is right there. The smell of him, and Naruto wants to taste so bad he can’t stand it, his mouth is watering to the point it’s a question of time before drool starts leaking, his jaws aching around Kyuubi’s fangs. His open lips brush, just lightly, against the side of Sasuke’s ankle.

Sasuke kicks him viciously in the mouth and tears his foot away while Naruto’s spitting teeth.

Kyuubi’s regrown them before the taste of blood has even thinned in his mouth. At that point Sasuke’s heel is still bleeding, and Sasuke has fallen back on the bed. Lies on his back, and Naruto surges up next to him, can’t stop himself, sits on the foot end of the bed, curved forward over Sasuke’s legs.

Sasuke’s gaze slips from the ceiling, straight into Naruto’s eyes in that remorseless head-on collision way of his. Eyes you can fall so far into, it becomes indistinguishable from flying.

“Right! Right, let’s get out of here.”

He’s up on his feet then, because if he doesn’t move away, he’ll – move closer. Much, much closer.

The door is locked.

Of course the door is locked, because they’re in a fucking prison cell.
“Let us out. Let us the hell out!” It’s an animal roar dwindling into a wounded animal’s whine. There’s barely enough time to kick at the door before his heart seizes, bringing him brutally to his knees. His blood boils again. There are cracks in his lips now, where the skin is thin.

“I’d say the fatherly devotion on display here is touching,” Sasuke drawls, and it’s all wrong, Sasuke doesn’t drawl, drawling’s what Orochimaru does, “except he just shipped you off to a war.”

That’s gut-punch true. He owes Sasuke truth, and more than that, wants him to have it. To take all of his truth, all of him, and hand it over, close Sasuke’s fingers around it. “I had to go,” he says. “Nobody forced me. I just – my people are being killed and I could never just stand by, and – it was horrible but not going would have been horrible too, would have been – impossible.” He swallows, burns his tongue on his own blood. “I did what I had to do.”

“I understand,” Sasuke says. He sounds like he does, like it’s clear and obvious. It’s a long time, a minute probably, before he says, “Che. Can you stand?”

Naruto doesn’t have time to find out before Sasuke moves. He’s off the bed and coming towards Naruto, and Naruto’s body goes on lock-down. Because…because he’s still so tired and stunned by how much the world can hurt him, and he knows what would make him feel better.

Sasuke beside him on the floor, so close, so good. Naruto locks his hands around his own knees, cuts through them with Kyuubi’s claws and still can’t let go, because if he did – if he did he couldn’t stop himself. Just moans, weakly, in unbelievable relief at Sasuke’s shoulder jostling against his. It burns, but a good kind of burn…

“Phoenix burn? You’re making less sense than usual,” Sasuke grumbles. “And don’t you hate killing people.”

“I do,” Naruto says, letting his face fall forward, into the curve of Sasuke’s neck becoming Sasuke’s shoulder. It’s been an enormously long day, which began half a continent away in a room full of other people’s blood. “I used to hesitate.” His eyelashes flutter against Sasuke’s skin. “I hesitated, because I do hate when people die. But when I hesitated people died too, only they were my people.” He swallows and swallows, the scent of Sasuke so thick it becomes a taste. “I don’t hesitate anymore.”

“Ii yo,” mumbles Sasuke, who only slips between languages when extremely comfortable or extremely upset.

“I didn’t want to be this selfish,” Naruto chokes out, around the desperation spilling through him like internal bleeding. “But I’m so glad you’re here.”

“Of course I’m here, you unbelievable idiot.” He makes an impatient sound, a sound that would be a sigh only there’s too much edge to it, right by Naruto’s ear. “The only surprising part is he didn’t – tie me up or blackmail me or something.”

“I guess he thought – you saved my life once.”

“Hn,” says Sasuke, closing his fingers around Naruto’s wrist, neatly and with no fuss. It’s how he’s always held on to people, in this clinical over-careful way, the way of a child who’s been taught he can be made to let go at any moment. “I think he’s rather misunderstood that.”

This is a much kinder thing to say than: I guess he thought – you wouldn’t need him to force me, you’ve got Kyuubi for that.

“Yeah,” Naruto groans. “I could have totally handled that demon.”
“Like Shiva handled Kali, possibly. But that wasn’t – I was just doing my duty.” And of course he’s holding on to that, the only thing left to hold on to: that no matter what’s been done to him, what he’s been made to do, Sasuke has a destiny, has been chosen by the Lord God for the highest calling.

It’s a good memory, all the same, the memory Dad thinks of as the time Sasuke saved Naruto’s life.

This was in the days when Naruto knew full well Sasuke wasn’t human, but hadn’t understood in any meaningful sense what being an exorcist meant. They were in the school gym, the three of them: Naruto, Sasuke, Sakura. Naruto had dragged Sasuke along to show off what he fondly imagined to be an epic new combat move, and Sakura had taken a quick look at the gathering rain clouds and decided to accompany them rather than to walk home. It was easy enough to sneak into the building, and Naruto was dragging at mat from storage when the air abruptly grew dusky. Under the fluorescent lights, they were standing in a sudden sunset.

“Sasuke, what – what’s happening?”

Sakura’s voice behind him, and Sasuke behind him too, which was good. Because the demon was coming now, materialising out of the shadows at the far end of the hall.

Kyuubi’s hackles rose, and red energy spilled over his hands where they fisted in front of him.

Sasuke was smart: he’d make sure they ran, called for help. He’d have to, because Naruto couldn’t look away from the demon.

He’d never seen one before, and couldn’t get a hold of how it really looked now. It was darkness, and it was evil, and monstrously huge, but he couldn’t… he blinked, kept blinking, but it was true what he’d been told, mortal eyes can’t see a demon’s true shape.

“Come on, then, you bastard! Eyes over here!”

Because he’d need to hold it back, need to keep it at any cost from Sakura and Sasuke.

Only then Sasuke was walking past him, and it could be like this: everyday and ordinary. Safe.

Naruto was directing a cocksure grin at the hulking beast, and brandishing his fists, a human shield; Naruto’s shirt was wet with sweat under his arms, and his hands ached from being clenched so tightly.

For the first time in months and months, there was no trace of fear in Sasuke. Even the grinding misery had lifted.

“Sasuke, you bastard, what are you doing? This is my kill!” It had to be, because of the seal, the reason for all that misery: because the power spreading from the demon like rings on water around a thrown stone was like a blast, like something that could bring people to their knees, and Sasuke hadn’t even had the magic to stop a random lorry driver molesting them…

And it should have been ridiculous when Sasuke started singing, in his too-deep tone-deaf voice, but after the first syllable there was a resonance that, it gradually and mercilessly dawned on Naruto, was the actual host of actual Heaven echoing his words.

Confiteor Deo omnipotenti and light spread around Sasuke, his very own rings on the water, light like altar candles, like the star over Bethlehem. And Naruto was always the child who reached insolently and irresistibly for the altar candle, slack-jawed with wonder: who wanted to touch more than he wanted it to last.
Beate Marie semper virgini and Sasuke too good for the ground, standing on air in that circle of Heaven made manifest. Swords materialising, blades of light in his hands. So much strangeness, and holiness, that the lightsaber jokes would come to Naruto only afterwards.

Beato Michaeli archangelo and there were wings now, angel wings flickering in and out of existence every time Naruto blinked: wings like the demon, wings that mortal eyes couldn’t see properly, that it later emerged Sakura hadn’t noticed at all.

Sanctis apostidos omnibus sanctis and the light, which was the light of divine grace, flowed through Sasuke, unsealed and unstoppable.

The demon never stood a chance.

On the bus home, Naruto had swallowed and said, “Right, so you can still…”

“Exorcising demons is why I exist in this world,” Sasuke said, with the flat inflection that let on he was quoting an axiom he’d been made to learn along with his prayers. “Sealing that off would be heresy. Besides, Orochimaru wouldn’t want a horde of demons running around either.”

“That weird lullaby,” Naruto said, and Sasuke went icy and huffy with humiliated fury. Naruto understood that it was a child’s way of accessing the power, power that Sasuke could summon perfectly well by will alone before he could ride a bike, but necessary under the terms of the seal.

It had given Naruto chills entirely unlike those provoked by the demon. “But you were – yeah. You know. It was – I guess I get it more now, thinking shifters are dirt, if we’re descended from that. I mean they’re wrong, obviously, I’m nothing like – but yeah.”

“People are wrong all the time,” Sasuke said. “People are shit.”

“You’re shit!”

Naruto kicked at him, and ended up banging his knee and also his forehead into the seat in front when the bus stopped for a red light.

Sasuke snorted. “Sic transit gloria mundi.”

“That’s right, bastard! I am glorious indeed!” And Naruto stuck his tongue out, and almost bit it off when the bus started again.

That’ll be what Dad thinks of, thinking of Sasuke saving Naruto’s life.

The time Sasuke actually saved Naruto’s life occurred much later, after Naruto had finally had enough and went for Orochimaru for real. It wasn’t the first time he’d wanted to, or even the first time he tried, but it was, for a very long time, the last.

He’d been little and impatient and incompetent, and had failed miserably, to the surprise of no one but himself. He’d spent the night in a cage into which he couldn’t quite fit, beaten almost to death.

And then in the morning, stumbling down the stone steps of Orochimaru’s building in sunshine running like egg yolk over the world. Sasuke’s face, icy and acid, eyes impossibly darker against the sudden arsenic pallor of his skin. “What I had to do, to make him not kill you.”

Things, very clearly, that Sasuke cannot be made to do again. Things done right at breaking point.

That too was years ago now. People keep telling Naruto this, as if it means he should have got over
“You were a very cool child crusader,” he mumbles in the present. Sasuke’s pulse, hidden behind the thinnest layer of skin, beats against his face, and the urge to bite stabs through him. Kyuubi throws himself against the bars of his cage in wild abandon: escape or die. He could live, Naruto could live, they could feel better than they ever have… His panting rattles his chest against Sasuke’s, his tendons standing out like ropes stretched to breaking point under his skin. The disgusting smell, marring Sasuke’s scent, is the smell of Naruto sweating blood.

Sasuke snorts. “Even when I went on strike?”

“Heh, yeah. Always.”

The strike, as it were, took place on a rainy Wednesday, a few days after it had become known that Sasuke was involved in Mist Town Massacre. Naruto couldn’t deny it, and more troublingly couldn’t deny that Sasuke had no doubt enjoyed what he’d done.

“You could have fucking evacuated!”

It was Kiba barking at him, Kiba pushing at his shoulders.

“Yes,” Sasuke said tonelessly. “That’s right.”

“So why the fuck didn’t you! There were thousands of shifters died there! You knew there were! You fucking well took the time to evacuate the humans!”

Not all of them, Sasuke didn’t bother saying. Sasuke would have walked away, except he didn’t expect Kiba would let him. And he’d never liked Kiba, even aside from Kiba being subhuman, but perhaps he owed him this. Naruto at least would think so. “They should have informed us about the infestation much sooner. If they hadn’t tried to deal with it on their own, it need never have escalated this far.”

“They didn’t call you in because they knew you’d fuck them over, you don’t care about shifter lives!”

Sasuke shrugged. “Those were the orders.”

Kiba had never liked him either, and at this point didn’t even like Naruto. He’d been ambitious once, in his own small way, had aimed for a spot as one of Konohamaru’s future guards. A group leader, maybe, and this was in the days when Kushina had made it clear that being Konohamaru’s precluded being in any way Naruto’s.

“Oh, you’re gonna hide behind that? You cowardly little shit!”

“No,” Sasuke told him, bland the way you’re bland when speaking obvious truths of little importance. “I agreed with them.”

Then he was being thrown up against the wall, and things went pained and distant for a little while. They still were when Gaara spoke up, from where he was sitting like a murderous Buddha under a tree, “You know, if you go much further I’d imagine self-defence will kick in.”

Kiba’s hands, fist in Sasuke’s shirt, were shaking. Of course they were, Kiba’s an indecisive and shaking sort of person.

Then there was Naruto, who’s neither and never has been, and Kiba was thrown off of Sasuke. In a
different life, the life that was lost to him, it would have been humiliating.

“What the hell, you arsehole!” Naruto yelling and fist-shaking, in that way of his, standing over Kiba, who pushed himself up off the ground and yelled back, spluttering.

Finally Kiba was backing down, inevitable as the tiresome yelling. “Hiding behind orders, behind other people – fucking weakling!”

“Were you not just crying about how I didn’t need orders to put down your entire halfbreed litter?”

Then he was pushed up against the wall again, only this time it was Naruto doing the pushing, so this time it mattered.

“What is wrong with you?” Naruto demanded.

“What isn’t?” A long look, the only meaningful challenge left, which built and built like he still had magic after all.

That was when dusk came.

“You’ll want to let me go now.”

And Naruto did let go, though he plainly didn’t want to. By the time he turned around, Kiba and his ilk were wary, crouching away from the descending darkness. Gaara was standing up, walking towards it.

Sasuke leaned back against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Well then, angel son, isn’t this your chance to prove your superiority?”

It was a genuine question when Sasuke asked, “Why should I?”

Naruto directed an incredibly weird face at him, cheeks scrunched up so the whisker scars looked like trenches. “Eh, because it is your beloved sacred destiny?”

“My duty is to repel demons. Saving half-demon bastards is not.”

Naruto’s face changed, but not in anger. To be fair, Sasuke hadn’t been referring to him. “They’re not on your level. They never will be. You can’t expect them to.” Naruto’s always clung to his ridiculous ideas of equal worth, but he’s never been blind enough to claim equal capacity.

“It’s a weak demon. More of a challenge if I let it eat them first.”

Their new stare, different in quality but no less intense than the previous one, was broken by Neji. “Sasuke! There are more of them over in the human residential quarters. More powerful, too. That’s priority.”

“Okay,” Naruto said. “Go. I’ll take care of it.”

Naruto would try. Maybe he’d even succeed. Gaara was there, and would help him, even if Kiba and the rest were useless.

“Trust me,” Naruto said, over his shoulder, when Sasuke still stood there. “What, you don’t believe I can sort out a little bitch demon on my own?”

“Of course I believe,” Sasuke snapped, because it really was a little bitch demon and Naruto would
be useless if he couldn’t deal with it, and Sasuke had no time for useless people. But believing, as he’d had to tell Naruto more than once, isn’t knowing. It’s not good enough.

The grace of God burned past the seal, and the demon was gone before it had even fully materialised.

“Naruto. Naruto! Keep yourself the fuck together.” Naruto’s mouth is open now, open against Sasuke’s neck, and Sasuke kicks at him. With his left foot, the one that’s made of metal.

Naruto winces, and sort of rolls his head, it’s still lying on Sasuke’s shoulder but at the edge of it now, so he can tilt his face back and catch Sasuke’s eyes. His breath catches, locked rasping and shaky in his throat, as Sasuke’s fingers press flat against his cheek, dragging heavy across the whisker scars. Sasuke’s other hand closes around his knee, hot and steady. “Bite me now.”

Naruto’s heart stops again, and this time his lungs stop too. “You don’t want this.”

“I don’t want you to die,” Sasuke says, and in volume it’s a whisper but really it’s a scream. His voice grows viciously, violently controlled, “I sometimes want to kill you but I don’t want you to be dead.” The minutes and then the hours and the years afterwards of Naruto being dead…

“I don’t want to die, either,” Naruto says, and feels his eyes burn again. “I want to live, god I want to live. And I don’t think I should have to die to avoid making someone slightly uncomfortable or something, but you hate this, and it’s – it’s not right to live at the expense of someone else. I could never ask–”

“I know that! Dakara…!” He breathes in harshly, until his voice comes sharp and supercilious. “It’s not like I came here a blushing virgin.”

“I know that!” Naruto protests. “If you had, then I could have asked.” At Sasuke’s incredulous stare – and he tries to reach up, to catch the expression in his hand, but his arm won’t move – he laughs a little, only it comes out mostly blood, blood that burns his mouth. “You wouldn’t have known if you liked it, maybe you would, so it would have been all right to ask.”

“If you don’t bite you’ll die,” Sasuke says briskly, ignoring Naruto’s input. “The rest – how much do you actually need? Can I just handjob you?” And it’s so agonizingly obvious that Sasuke lacks any real conception of how tenuous Naruto’s control is right now.

“I’m not – I can’t stop. If I start, I –” The words taste sour in his mouth, taste like death.

“Right,” Sasuke says, in that controlled cutting voice Naruto hates, the one he uses about Orochimaru. Then Naruto has an armful of his heart’s desire, and his heart is rushing, running for its life. Sasuke straddles his thighs, leaning close so his hair is in Naruto’s face.

“Sasuke,” he says, and his own voice sounds bewildered and strange, sounds like Kyuubi’s learnt to talk, “you have to move.” Because Naruto’s arms are coming up, animated by sheer survival where Naruto’s will couldn’t move them, and Sasuke’s skin is soft and sweet, the shirt rips, it’s just luck Sasuke’s skin doesn’t rip too. Sasuke must be able to feel his erection, feel it acutely.

If Sasuke did try to move, he’d – he’d have to force his way free, now, because Naruto can no more let go of him than he can stop his heart beating.

Sasuke pulls at the neckline of his shirt, revealing the seal fully. “Bite here.”

The seal spills from Sasuke’s neck and onto his shoulder, looks to Naruto’s fevered eyes to be moving, writhing and alive just under Sasuke’s skin. “That’ll fuck with it so badly.”
“That’s the point.”

Sasuke’s never been one to play it safe. Sasuke’s jumped off more buildings, walked out in front of more cars than Naruto can count, to get at the magic.

“I can’t,” he says, and it comes out a growl. “I’ll lose you.”

“You’ll lose me if you don’t. Because you’ll die.”

He forces his head up, away from that expanse of skin, and Sasuke’s right there, right where he belongs and where he’s never getting away from again, and his lips open for Naruto, let Naruto lick into his mouth. Kyuubi’s canines are out, there’s no stopping them, and he bites at Sasuke’s lip, mostly by mistake. Sasuke’s mouth stays open for him though, Sasuke bites right back despite the fangs and the scabs from the bloodburn, which has stopped now, Sasuke’s stopped it, Naruto still feels like he’s burning but it’s stopped, the breaking apart of his body – Sasuke bites right back and licks at a fang.

He kisses Sasuke as hard as he can, so hard it feels like Sasuke’s teeth are cutting into the bone of his jaw. Sasuke’s shirt is gone, he dimly realises. He’s torn it off.

And Sasuke is suddenly so naked, and Naruto’s so hungry for skin, he’s hollow with it, cramping with it. He drags his knuckles up Sasuke’s side, over his ribs, fits his fingers in the furrows between them.


“If there was no bond,” Naruto says, desperate. It takes everything he has, not to roll them over, have Sasuke spread out under him on the floor. “If it was just that I love you…”

“Then I wouldn’t have trusted it,” Sasuke snaps. “Now fucking bite me.”

He has a rough hand clenched in Naruto’s hair, forces Naruto’s head down, towards the seal. After a second, not even a second, it doesn’t take any forcing.

He bites across the seal, fangs meeting in Sasuke’s body.
The seal gives under the bite: creaks and cracks, speared by the bond. Kyuubi bites into Sasuke’s soul, forcing his way so deep inside Sasuke that Sasuke will never get him out, and for a moment Sasuke’s just this torn howling thing, and Naruto bet everything, everything he had, everything he hoped to have, and lost.

“Bite,” Sasuke hisses, and Sasuke’s always been as relentless with himself as with other people, has pulled himself ruthlessly together.

Naruto gags as Kyuubi bites and bites, wanting to bury himself like a tick inside Sasuke’s body. He still feels he’s burning, but it’s a different kind of burn, he’s happy about it and he wants to burn…

The seal keeps bending and breaking under Kyuubi’s assault, whitehot cutting edges and magic spilling through, the light of Heaven seeping into him through the cracks. He thinks: I’ve been living in dusk for the past seven years and finally dawn has come.

Only that’s not true. That’s how Naruto might think of this, if he were Sasuke, but he’s not and he has to remember that, he has to remember that for Sasuke’s sake.

Also for his own, because while God’s grace is at home in Sasuke, while Sasuke can speak the name of the Lord without his tongue curling into a cinder, it is not at home in Naruto. If Sasuke speaks the holy name Naruto cannot hear it, just hears the rustling of wings large enough to enfold the galaxy, but starts bleeding from the ears anyway.

Meanwhile Sasuke claws at him, blunt panicked human fingers tipped with heavenly fire, scorching through Naruto’s skin, burning Sasuke’s fingerprints into his bones. It’s the panic of overload, of every system crashing under the onslaught: Naruto’s always been full to bursting with all his feelings, convictions, ideas, so full of them he can only see the world through them, and they’re overflowing now into Sasuke through the bond.

And Naruto tries to swallow, tries to stop, fangs locked immovable in Sasuke’s flesh. Because Sasuke’s mind is straining around him, torn open by a cracked seal and a bond it was never made to accommodate. Drenched in desperation, in Sasuke’s panic and Kyuubi’s alien need, which is beyond any humanity, any sanity. Which makes it feel necessary to have Kyuubi push his thighs further apart.

It’s not, though. Sasuke doesn’t need this, and somewhere deep inside, so deep inside it feels far away from what’s happening, Naruto’s glad that Sasuke has remembered this.

“Get off.”

Kyuubi growls at him and licks up his throat, rubbing between his thighs.

Sasuke hits him in the face.

Before Kyuubi bit him, this would have been a non-event. A fly swatting its wing at a fox. But Kyuubi did bite.

The hand of God upon this earth forces Kyuubi off, sends him tumbling across the floor.

Kyuubi rolls to his feet seething and feral, Naruto a small curled thing inside him. For a wild moment he thinks he’s like an embryo, nestled safe and helpless as Kyuubi breaks the world to keep him.
Sasuke too snaps to his feet, faster than any human could possibly have moved.

Then he stops.

Naruto’s reaching out, trying to find purchase in the burning red world of Kyuubi’s berserker desire. And it’s… he’d want Sasuke to be there, when he goes. When it ends. This Sasuke, bristling and harrowed and free, isn’t the worst Sasuke to see at the end.

Kyuubi rushes him.

Sasuke doesn’t back down, which is no surprise because he’s never had it in him to back down. He also doesn’t call down heavenly fire on Kyuubi, and so he’s slammed up against the wall. Not twitching away from Kyuubi’s hot mouth on his neck, or from Kyuubi’s massive hands holding him up by the thighs, he’s just *there*, limp as a hanged man.

Here in front of him is Naruto, Sasuke looks at him and there’s so very little left of Naruto. A shade in Kyuubi’s eyes, an awkward tenderness in his touch before his claw closes around Sasuke’s leg, so hard the muscle tears.

And Naruto tries to speak, but the words that came so smoothly once have turned square, stick on his tongue and trip chokingly back down his throat.

Sasuke locks his legs around Kyuubi’s hips to keep his balance and elbows Kyuubi in the head. Kyuubi growls at him, pleased with the contact, which leaves his skin inhumanly hot, pulsating with his heartbeat and slick with blood-sweat. The tails are out now, and the ears.

Sasuke’s arm brushes against one of them, and the vermillion energy spills across his skin, spills aggressively through it.

He’d seen them before, Kyuubi’s ears, but he touched them for the first time on a roof top, in November during one of the long years when the only magic he could have was Naruto’s.

Naruto was sitting down, out of breath and still red-faced, from the wind or from indignation probably, it could hardly be from exertion.

It had after all not been difficult for him to pull Sasuke down off the ledge.

The ears were out, a manifestation of shifter magic and of Naruto’s poor control. It was filthy, unclean, but it was magic. It sang to him, and it was a bawdy street song when he was listening for hymns, but he found himself reaching out for it all the same.

Naruto grew still, a stillness you’d have never suspected he had in him. Slowly, inexorably, his head tilted forward, towards Sasuke. “I was told – they always told me not to let people touch them. Humans. That it would sting them, burn them.”

“Che. Humans.”

Humans were irrelevant, because the ear was struggling towards his fingers, shifting its shape towards him, power rippling through it. And he did touch then, and his fingers sank through it and it enveloped them, and it was filth and it was sin and it was everything he wanted.

“Aren’t they supposed to be better than shifters?” Naruto asked, a little cheeky but mostly distracted, pressing his head into Sasuke’s hand.

“They can’t do anything,” said Sasuke, and allowed himself a long slow turn of his hand inside the
ear before he stepped sharply back. “What good is that?”

“Heh.” Naruto was grinning, but in a strange way. There was the sharp, brilliant, shit-eating grin, and another one underneath it, not quite obscured, a softer grin, eyes closed on a wet sheen.

Afterwards he took to sometimes slipping a tail around Sasuke’s leg. It was no more solid than the ears, just will and magic, Kyuubi wanting to manifest, and so spilled under Sasuke’s skin, played against the dormant magic inside him.

“Anyway,” Sasuke said, climbing back up on the ledge. “Don’t get in my way.”

“You’ve got to cut this shit out.”

“I told you, I’m not trying to die.”

His shoelace had come undone and got caught in the wind. Sasuke stared at it, rather than down at the people and cars moving about several kilometres down.

His feet looked funny, uneven, the left one visibly thinner, visibly not really shaped like a human foot, in tight-laced shoes. An upgrade, Orochimaru kept calling it. It didn’t look like an upgrade.

It looked like a crippling.

This was a silly and childish impression, because it was ruthlessly practical: kicking through concrete, walking on burning coals, was suddenly possible and everyday.

His original foot hadn’t been able to carry him as far as it needed to. It was just another thing left behind and now inaccessible, the foot that Kabuto preserved and kept as a some sort of pathetic trophy, as if amputating a restrained child was a triumph, as if Sasuke would really be unnerved by its presence. It’s a little boy’s foot. It wouldn’t fit him anymore.

“If you keep this up, he’s seriously going to cut down on the self-defence release.”

Sasuke shrugged. It was still fairly new, that it was a jerky, one-shouldered movement. New enough he still thought of it as a one-shouldered shrug, rather than just a shrug. “Then I’d die. He’d hate that.”

“But you wouldn’t.”

He turned then, at Naruto’s voice, looked over his shoulder. Naruto’s eyes were a searing blue and completely honest about their staring.

“I’m not afraid of dying.”

The fact that that was true, Kakashi would tell him, was one of the reasons Orochimaru was really so obsessed with him.

“That’s a really good way to get killed.”

Sasuke smirked at him. Naruto was being serious, the wind was turning his shoe lace into a whip; it felt like an ending. “It’s the only way to live.”

He stepped off the ledge, quicker than Naruto could stop him, Naruto who could move faster than a human eye could track.

Only later, two stories down, did he realise that Naruto had jumped after him, and was shouting with
the adrenaline rush of freefall.

Itachi would have dismissed it as a cheap display, falling glowing and eye-catching as a shooting star in the middle of the city. But what Itachi thought no longer mattered, because the light had come, light that burnt the weak parts of him – the human parts of him – a searing, unstoppable, inhuman light: a reminder that if man looks directly upon the grace of God, his eyes will burn, and it will be worth it. The holiest words, the purest, are such that they would scorch a human tongue, that they leave even an exorcist’s mouth sooty and tingling. And Sasuke had come to understand, after being given to Orochimaru, about the martyrs. Pain, after a certain point, isn’t really pain anymore.

That too was inconsequential now. Sasuke unfurled his magic like unfurling wings, insubstantial and gleaming and the realest thing in his life.

On his left Naruto let Kyuubi extend his claws, enormous claws, several times larger than Naruto’s arms yet protruding from his fingers, and caught himself on a wall, sinking those claws through stone and metal.

Eventually, when they were on the roof again, the seal went on lockdown, its deadness spreading through his body, making it numb and dumb, something he lived in rather than something he was.

He could tell from Naruto’s expression when it was done: when his eyes were dull and his shoulder ached, when Naruto’s flushed, elated face softened into something almost solemn. He touched a single now-human fingertip to the inside of Sasuke’s elbow. It was an alien, awkward touch, something done on instinct alone and no knowledge on how to do it. It was obvious he’d wanted to grab, lock his fingers bruising around Sasuke’s arm.

Naruto swallowed but didn’t hesitate. “I know you don’t – that you wouldn’t mind dying. And you’d like to die from him. But you can’t.” And his eyes were blue now, just blue, but they were searing as Kyuubi’s. “Don’t die from me!”

Five years later Sasuke grows still against the wall, and Kyuubi slams him into it a few times, until he hits his head. It’s a coward’s trick, Naruto remembers Orochimaru saying while stroking Sasuke’s bruised forehead, getting someone to hit your head so you won’t have to experience the rest of what they do to you. A smart move for a boy like you, Sasuke-kun. My shinigami-chan.

Only Sasuke has never been very good at cowardice.

Fights now after all, on instinct and not very well, not very hard. Elbows Kyuubi in the eye, battering his back with the metal foot. A human spine would have been beyond broken and well into pulverised, but of course Kyuubi isn’t human.

Kyuubi grabs him by the hips and throws him on the bed.

Sasuke rolls sideways but is mostly still on it when Kyuubi jumps him, forcing him fully back up on the mattress.

Sasuke could use real magic, exorcist magic. Naruto, breathless, thinks for a moment that he will. Then Naruto will burn out.

If Sasuke doesn’t do that… if he’s not prepared to kill Kyuubi, who is unlikely to survive serious injury in this state – then – then…!

Then there’s not much else Sasuke can do, not much else that matters.

Kyuubi mouths the place where Sasuke’s neck becomes Sasuke’s back, bites there too. Tears off the
remains of the shirt, which almost strangles Sasuke before the necklines gives, and is back between his legs, which he forces apart with his knees, forces as far apart as they can go. Sasuke kicks him in the face, breaks his jaw, but the injury’s healed by the time Kyuubi rolls him around, onto his back.

The tails spill over him, seeping through his skin to interlock with his magic, and the sight of it, the idea of it, is too good. Naruto can’t stand it, it’s the undearable moment before a crashing orgasm.

Sasuke stares at him, flat remorseless eyes. But that’s all right, is something like all right, because Sasuke’s still with him, greedy mental fingers grabbing for Naruto’s magic, starting to get traction when Kyuubi looks up from his preoccupation with getting Sasuke’s trousers off.

Rather than growling, he purrs. One of the tails abruptly pushes into Sasuke, a phantom burn, and Naruto whines and screams inside Kyuubi’s head. Kyuubi’s mouth falls open at the sight, and he clearly decides he’s undressed enough to do what he wants. His shirt’s clinging around his neck, his trousers open, pushed down just enough to release his erection.

He surges forward between Sasuke’s legs, sudden and simple as rain, fumbling, grunting, and then—“Sasuke.” It’s the only word left to say.

Sasuke stares past Naruto’s face, up at the ceiling. He knows all the cracks in all of Orochimaru’s ceilings. This one is strange to him, off-white with a few smudges.

Body jolting against the bed in time with Kyuubi’s thrusts, he thinks how Genma was wrong. Naruto isn’t nice about it, though it’s true that it doesn’t take long. Twenty-seven seconds after he pushed in, he shudders and ejaculates.

And then stillness, a wasteland nirvana.

Because it’s obviously terrible, unforgiveable in the face of Sasuke’s horror, but this is the best Naruto has ever felt.

Only below him, so close his lashes scrape against Naruto’s skin, Sasuke’s eyes blink open red and horrified, blind with the panic crashing through the bond. It’s the whiteout panic of someone finally cornered, all killer instinct and kamikaze rage.

The bond is fully formed now, a red thread between them like a sudden extra limb, a bridge between minds. Realer than that, because unlike a limb it can never be lost, never be moved on from.

And to Naruto it means completion: finding the piece of himself lost so long ago he’d forgotten he was looking for it. The world is whole again, and right. Sasuke’s given colour to everything else, given it life, given it relevance.

But to Sasuke it means the inner sanctuary flooded. There’s nothing left now, no part of him that hasn’t been violated.

And Sasuke, Naruto remembers, has always been the kind of person who’d burn his own fields, salt the earth, before he let the enemy have them.

“Sasuke,” he demands. It turns to begging halfway through, and he scrambles up, off of Sasuke. Out of Sasuke, jesus fuck.

The instant he does, Sasuke too scrambles up. His movements are wild with this arid desperation, the movements of a child who hasn’t learnt to control its body yet, like Sasuke never moved even when he was a child. He winds up in a defensive position, back against the headboard, legs pressed
uselessly up against his chest.

It looks blisteringly vulnerable, because Sasuke has always, always maintained that the best and only
defence is an unbeatable offence.

His head hangs forward, like his neck’s a snapped thread. He dry heaves, nails scratching viciously
at his own ankles, the ones on his left hand breaking against metal, the ones on his right leaving red
tiles.

Naruto never knew it was so easy to cross that final line. Fifteen years on this earth, not doing
anything unforgivable. Now he has.

Sasuke pukes for real then, retches so hard he’s spasming with it. Forehead on his knees, mouth open
and hyperventilating; vomit on his lips, on his legs, pooling around his feet on the mattress.

Magic builds between them, and then shatters as Sasuke’s mind is shattering around this final
violation.

“Sasuke,” and he’s reaching for him on unstoppable instinct, reaching for the one thing he has to
have, that he absolutely cannot do without. “Sasuke, I’m here. Get it the fuck together. Stay with
me.” His hand, closing around Sasuke’s, stills the vicious scratching.

And Sasuke’s mind screams and roars rejection, Naruto snatches his touch away because it burns,
Sasuke feels it like a branding iron burn.

Kyuubi’s screaming and trashing, because flowing through the bond is natural and right but Naruto
has to stop hurtling into Sasuke, and his thoughts are crashing to sudden stops around Sasuke’s panic
and Sasuke’s hunger for revenge, restitution, a hunger that could eat the world and not be sated. The
seal keeps shifting, searing through Sasuke’s mind, and the edges of Naruto’s are singed with holy
light made to eradicate him, and –

“Enough,” he tells them both, and forces a block into place.

And then immediately he’s recoiling, gagging on a sudden nosebleed and his ears ringing so loud it
almost drowns out Kyuubi’s howling.

Sasuke’s slammed his mind shut so tight, the bond is numb.

When Naruto can see again, Sasuke’s still sitting with his back to the headboard and his legs against
his chest, but his head’s up. The world tilts, so sharply that Naruto thinks for a long second that he’s
fallen off it and is hurtling alone through black space. Sasuke doesn’t consider being raped or
maimed a fate worse than death, but this – this is his absolute nightmare, and Sasuke is not afraid to
die. It’s not love that’s kept him alive, or faith or hope. It’s sheer stubborn vengeance, the need to
finally win and grind the world into dust under his heel, burn the whole universe in the purgatory
flames of his hatred.

Naruto’s known this is how Sasuke sees the world almost as long as he’s known Sasuke, but it’s a
shock to feel Sasuke feel it, to have the certainty of it brutal in his bones.

“More tails,” Sasuke finally says, fingers twitching in a minimal and ultimately aborted gesture.

Following his gaze, Naruto discovers that he has six tails now, which is the most he’s ever had and
entirely irrelevant.

“Sasuke.” It’s all that makes it out. It’s a ragged sound, the kind of sound Kyuubi makes when trying
to speak. It means *don’t do this to me* and it means *what have I done*.

He can see Sasuke perfectly well, can smell him and hear his breathing, feel the warmth from his legs, but none of that is real enough anymore. Not when he’s been connected to Sasuke’s mind, pressed soul to soul. Just looking at him, after that, is like looking at a photo when you want to see the real person.

He swallows. Sasuke’s closed his eyes, his hand back at the bloody seal.

“Don’t leave me,” Naruto says in this new shaky voice that’s somehow still a demand.

Sasuke’s voice is even more wrong, regressed to the dull and childish tones of, *Itachi-niisan gave me away. Orochimaru says I belong to him now.* He says, “How can it be undone?”

Sasuke has known these things since before he knew how to walk. Naruto swallows again. “If I die.”

“And if I die.”

“Then I would too.” The words are so simple, and really the reality of it is simple too. Just hard.

“So you’ll always,” Sasuke’s whisper comes tentative, softened with shellshock. His eyes are open again, with nothing soft about them. “You’ll always have to choose me first.”

There can be no hesitation: “Yes.”

Sasuke too swallows, wiping at his mouth. “And the magic.”

“Yeah.” He trickles a bit of power into the bond, in offering, and feels it ease cautiously open, until he’s glowing with awareness of Sasuke’s presence. With Sasuke’s impatience, which is different from his own, more about crossing your arms than about drumming your feet.

Kyuubi’s energy glows under Sasuke’s skin, a duller orange trapped by Sasuke’s exorcist lineage. Naruto stares, feels ridiculous about it and decides he doesn’t care: Sasuke is *so much.* Ferocious and lovely, familiar and tired, cold and raw and unmistakable. And, after a few seconds of appropriating Kyuubi’s power, entirely unhurt.

Naruto feels himself flush and then pale, amazed and ashamed that he hardly noticed how much it was, how bad it was, until Kyuubi undid the bruises Naruto left on him, and Orochimaru before that. Sasuke makes a dull fastidious face at the vomit and blood coating his feet, and then looks up at Naruto’s face, which feels numb and strained but must communicate something entirely different, because Sasuke bites out, “What?” with his eyes still full of that full-frontal collision stare.

“I –” And words are no good, they went too deep for words bloody years ago, and now everything’s gone wrong, a brave new world in ruins around them. Sasuke giving colour back to the world has turned it into an impressionist nightmare in Technicolor, screaming reds and yellows blurring and bleeding into each other.

Red which means Sasuke’s blood, which he bled because Naruto tore him up. Yellow which means Sasuke’s vomit, because – because Naruto tore him up.

“Che.” Sasuke sneers at him, standing up in one of those movements Naruto has missed, that Sasuke must have gone crazy missing, the movements of someone no longer needing to pretend to be human. It’s not the first time by far that he’s looked at Naruto as though looking at something absolutely subhuman and filthy, but it is the first time he’s done it naked, and the first time he’s done
it and got a different response than anger.

“Where are you going?” Naruto sounds like a child, reaches out a hand with a child’s irrepresible helplessness.

“To wash off.”

“Can I – I should – I want to–” Face burning, he adjusts what remains of his clothes. Feels more naked now, shrouded in them, than he did when they were… fucking, or whatever he’s supposed to call it.

“Leave me alone.”

For a long time, Naruto does. It’s difficult to breathe, his body so heavy he can barely hold it up. His heart has become a loadstone.

In a minute, he knows, Kyuubi will want out again, want more. Want Sasuke, the only person who’s ever been real to Kyuubi. Right now Kyuubi’s rolling around inside him, so full of magic and satisfaction Naruto can’t stand it, has to erupt away from it.

He’s across the floor and at the bathroom door, fingers clawed but careful against it – and he wasn’t going to force his way in, he wasn’t – when Sasuke opens it. Water drips down the stiff line of his neck, past the damp hair clinging to it, and this isn’t Kyuubi’s desire.

And Sasuke, who met Kyuubi’s desire head on, cringes away from Naruto’s. “Move.”

Naruto has to obey that clipped order, because ten minutes ago he banged Sasuke’s head into the wall until Sasuke stopped ignoring him and started struggling, and then he threw him on the bed and ripped off his clothes, kicked his legs as far apart as they would go and – it seems impossible, that he’s been inside of Sasuke’s body. His mouth waters and aches with the memory of it, his cock already stirring again.

Sasuke walks past him to the door. “I’m leaving.” His spine is the straightest Naruto’s ever seen it, pulled up so sharply it seems about to cut its way out of Sasuke’s skin.

“No.”

Sasuke doesn’t turn around, even as Naruto approaches. Naruto would like to think it’s a sign of trust, and not a sign of Sasuke not being able to bear looking at him.

“Yes,” Sasuke says, his hand pressed to the door and full of magic. “We’re done.”

“We’ll never be done.”

Sasuke slumps a little, tension cut abruptly like a string. Turns around, looks up at Naruto with his back pressed to the door. There’s the beginning of that half-smirk, half-sneer expression, it’s what his mouth will settle into when his lips close; at the moment they’re parted around the beginning of a snort.

His face blanks as he sees Naruto, sees the way Naruto’s looking at him.

“You need to get over this,” Naruto says. This too is something Sasuke taught him a long time ago, something he was reminded of up north: that he can be relentless, that he can be the beast that screams at the heart of the world.
“I need to go home.”

Hearing Sasuke say home and mean Orochimaru – it guts him, the simplicity of it cutting him open and the conviction of it a poison in his exposed innards.

“Stay with me,” Naruto says. Kyuubi’s intensely awake now, boiling through his bloodstream, red denial at the idea of Sasuke leaving. He takes Sasuke’s wrist in his hand; Sasuke kicks his knee out. Naruto hisses, leg giving out, he ends up on the floor, still clutching Sasuke’s hand, the sleeve of the shirt he must have found in the bathroom.

“Let me put this in a way so you’ll understand.” Sasuke rips his hand free, looking blazing and absolutely ready to kick again. “If I go back now, there will be no trouble. Orochimaru will forgive this little kidnapping, he’ll be so delighted. To have you tied to me, that’ll make you his too, that’s how he’ll think of it. That I’m his voodoo doll, every time he touches me he touches Minato’s firstborn. If I don’t go back, now that I could, that’s running away. That’s my other leg. And it’s war.”

Naruto stares up at him, with those arresting eyes he’s always had, vainly demanding to be seen. It makes no difference that he’s on the floor, curled half-naked around a shred of cotton torn from Sasuke’s sleeve. “I wouldn’t let—” He sounds almost insulted at the idea that Sasuke should think otherwise.

Sasuke waves this away with a twitch of his fingers. “Right, right, nobody touches me without going through you first. Whatever. But then when he’s gone through you, then what?”

The whisker scars are growing deeper, erupting like fissures in Naruto’s humanity. Through the bond, through the locked gates at either end of it, Sasuke can feel Kyuubi stirring to murderous, possessive attention. “A leg is nothing.”

Sasuke angles his foot to kick off Naruto’s. It will have to be with his left foot, a clean blow through the knee, or it’ll heal before it’s severed.

“I mean, I meant – a leg is nothing to Kyuubi. And now, with the bond, it doesn’t matter what he cuts off. Kyuubi will regrow it.”

Sasuke doesn’t doubt Orochimaru’s ability to purify a wound beyond the reach of Kyuubi’s healing, but it’s a good point. Physical injury has to be understood in a different way now, with Kyuubi’s energy lingering hot and perpetually healing under his skin.

It’s reassuring, in its way. Perhaps Naruto would think this shallow – certainly Sasuke thought it was shallow, a few years ago – but it matters, having the aftermath of agony eased away. Sasuke can handle real suffering: faced with high tragedy trauma, you break or you don’t, and Sasuke does not. It’s the little grinding things afterwards that wear you down. Rolling out of a defiled bed and putting on the torn, stained clothes you wore before. Having to pick up STD meds for the fifth time. Walking slowly to the bathroom, which is a nightmare, you have to hold it in and hold it in, for days sometimes, because while rectal tearing heals fast, the risk of infection is painfully, disgustingly obvious. Imagine Kabuto’s delight, if Sasuke were to come begging for relief, for his arse torn up and infected by his own shit.

“You don’t care about the war?” Sasuke asks. He leans further into the door, arms crossed nonchalantly over his chest.

“I do,” Naruto says, with no hesitation at all. “But some things you have to fight for.”
“If you went to war over me,” Sasuke says, in the hateful voice he’s picked up from Orochimaru, soft as rotten silk, “and then people died. If your friends died, just because you wanted me with you. Wouldn’t you hate that? Wouldn’t you hate me?”

“I’d hate it. Hate myself, too. But I wouldn’t regret it. I couldn’t. You’re more important.” His throat moves visibly as he swallows, big gulping swallows. “Anyway I already hate you. You’ve already cost me people.”

Sasuke grins like a skull. “Ah. Was this payback, then?”

“No!” He snaps forward abruptly, and collapses as abruptly. Hands clutched in Sasuke’s trouser legs, claws needling through the fabric, his forehead pressed to Sasuke’s knee, which is tensed to kick but doesn’t actually kick.

It was after they had run away and been discovered, in the darkness in the back of a police car bringing them home, that Sasuke said, you know it was someone on your side, right?

Naruto’s guts clenched, like Kyuubi had got loose and started biting at them. Dad would have found out.

I think he couldn’t bear to. It would have to be – someone he trusted. Someone he still needs.

You can’t trust someone like that!

Naruto, and Sasuke’s pupils were huge with the midnight darkness, black holes in his face. I was involved. I thought you knew.

Naruto had thrown up then, projectile vomited denial all over the car.

It was some time later that he’d forced the words from Sasuke: I didn’t ask. People die all the time, I didn’t care who it was. If I’d known – don’t lie to yourself, it’s not that I couldn’t have. I might have wanted to, even.

Sasuke had known exactly what he was doing when he massacred the shifter population of Mist Town. When, right after that, he obeyed Orochimaru’s order to cripple Jiraiya, weakened after a long draining fight with Orochimaru himself.

There’s no excuse! I know you’d – that he’d do horrible things to you if you didn’t, but there’s no excuse, there isn’t!

He’d been going to beat the shit out of Sasuke, but had to abandon that plan when he actually saw Sasuke, because one more hit and Sasuke might actually die. He had his face tilted oddly, to be able to see Naruto with the minimal slice of open eye he could achieve, face swollen almost beyond recognition.

I’m not making excuses, Sasuke said. His voice was raspier than usual, the sort of voice that let on he’d been screaming well beyond the point where he could no longer make sounds. Sure I would have been punished, but I’m punished anyway.

This was when Naruto realised he couldn’t hit Sasuke; because right now, Sasuke wanted to die.

He sighed instead, and leaned on the wall next to Sasuke, who probably couldn’t stand on his own. Then why?

Sasuke shrugged, and immediately, visibly regretted it. I never liked him.
If you went after everyone you don’t like, the world would be pretty empty.

Sasuke looked like he quite fancied this idea.

He’s not even dead, he said eventually. And he never liked me either, why should he expect to be spared?

That’s nothing personal, Naruto said, watching the little twitches of Sasuke’s left foot, which had started when he said ‘not even dead’ and then didn’t stop. You know he doesn’t like exorcists.

Sasuke snorted, rubbed at his mouth like rubbing this shameful human response away, and his fingers came away red. And you call me racist.

He doesn’t like exorcists because they treat him like a rabid animal!

Whatever, said Sasuke, and had to tilt his head so far back it looked like his neck would break to be able to gaze up at the sky. Anyway fuck him. He paid them to sell me.

Naruto blinked. What do you mean?

Orochimaru got me in exchange for reigning in the anti-shifter exorcist faction. My parents don’t care about that. They hate shifters too. It was your side that offered them incentives to agree.

Naruto had, after all, hit him in the mouth.

Sasuke had welcomed it, and had no longer really wanted to die.

Finally Naruto had to go home, to the howling quiet of Grandpa Jiraiya, strongest in the world, bent under the weight of his scars and unable ever again to stand straight.

They haven’t spoken properly in years now, because if you convince someone to sell their child into slavery, you don’t get to play the victim when that child turns on you. Naruto screamed this at Jiraiya once, and he meant it then and he means it now, so he can’t take it back.

Jiraiya meant it then and means it now that a single exorcist child is a cheap price to pay for shifter safety, so he’s not taking anything back either.

Naruto knows now that it was more a case of Jiraiya, as the main shifter negotiator, offering the humans incentives to offer the middle-ground exorcists incentives to hand over Sasuke. This just means that Ibiki and the rest of the human government are implicated too, the stench of it spreading.

“Never mind,” Sasuke says in the present.

Naruto slumps forward, until his face is resting hot and aching against Sasuke’s knee. “Just stay with me.”

Sasuke’s voice is breathy and stiff. “You hate me.”

“I’ve hated you for years. I need you more. Not just – even before the bond. Long before the bond.”

Sasuke says nothing. Someone is breathing harshly, wetly.

“I just,” Naruto hears himself say, the words unstoppable as bleeding. “It’s not right to need someone like this.”
Still Sasuke says nothing.

Naruto’s face is wet. The blood has dried, and the sweat, but apparently he’s crying now. He feels too empty for crying, but the tears are there.

He’s wet inside his pants too, so hard he’s wet from it.

He grabs around Sasuke’s ankle, the left one, the metal one that won’t break under his possession. His knuckles are white, they look like the innermost flame of the fire, shadowed by Kyuubi’s vermilion energy.

“I just,” he chokes out. “I wanted it to be real. With us.”

Sasuke lies to himself all the time, but he’s never actually been any good at lying to Naruto. He’s not lying now. “This is the realest we could ever be.”

Shock throws Naruto’s head back. Hope hurts. “So when we – when I – when you slept with me –”

“You masturbated inside my body,” Sasuke tells him. “I wasn’t really involved.” After a very long moment, a minute probably, he adds, “Well, I let you.” It might be meant as a kindness. It sounds like a condemnation.

Naruto pants for a little while, open-mouthed and pathetic. Sasuke can see all his innards, all the dark messy parts meant to be hidden, because Sasuke’s gutted him.

Through it all Kyuubi screams, a wail like sudden tinnitus, which is something of a relief because it gives Naruto someone to scream back at.

Through it, also, he keeps clinging to Sasuke’s prosthesis. Stone has shattered in his grip, but the metal doesn’t buckle, even though he’s clenching his fist so tight the little bones in his hand are breaking.

He’s never really touched it before. Sasuke doesn’t invite touch, and this would be – sticking his fingers into an incision, kneading a wound.

The surface is rough, so thickly inscribed with incantations that the metal is really just an anchor for them. Naruto drags his thumb softly over an inscription in a language so holy, it singes his finger.

Above him, Sasuke shifts. “Do you have a fetish or something?”

“No, I just…”

“You know I don’t have any feeling in it.”

“I know.” And it’s terrible, but then truth often is, and Sasuke’s been lied to too often. “I was – curious.”

Sasuke, who would probably have bolted at, I want to know everything about you, inside out, let me inside, scoffs at being treated as a curiosity.

“I don’t,” Naruto starts. This wasn’t something he could ask before, but Sasuke’s leg was taken years ago, and Naruto’s been gone for years, because – because Sasuke told Dad to arrange for that, apparently. “I don’t understand why he’d maim you. I mean, he wants… you know.”

“He told me not to run away. The symbolism is not subtle.” He snorts, this cynical sound he’s too young for, so it sounds affected, faintly ridiculous. “Perhaps he wanted to make sure I was more of
an acquired taste.”

Naruto shakes his head in bewilderment, befuddlement. “You’re beautiful.”

It’s an absolutely ridiculous thing to say. Sasuke knows what he looks like, has always made it clear that he assumes if someone were to take him from Orochimaru, it would be to use him, and with his magic sealed and his family having forsaken him, there’s really only one use to be had from him.

It’s never helped Sasuke, being beautiful.

He snorts again, like this is a normal conversation. “You’d think Orochimaru was beautiful if the bond compulsion pointed you his way.”

Naruto makes an exaggerated face, slipping into the beautiful lie that this is ordinary. “I’d kill myself first.”

“Thanks very much,” Sasuke hisses.

“I didn’t mean that,” Naruto says. “I wouldn’t. I would never.”

“You could at least have made it a murder/suicide.”

“Yeah,” Naruto says. The word is unimportant. Half the time Naruto sounds like he’s speaking a language he’s only barely conversant in, like the words can only be approximations of what he really wants to say. Naruto has never been the sort of person who can be tied down in language, whose convictions can be fitted into words. “But you’re free from him now.”

Sasuke’s face is implacable, like he might have got angry only he’s so used to Naruto’s stupidity. “I’ll be free when I’ve killed him.” His expression scrunches up into a headache frown. “Free from him, at least.”

For the first time he moves the leg Naruto’s been holding onto, signalling for Naruto to let go. Naruto’s fingers twitch and burn with the sudden horrifying emptiness. He’s never really been aware of them as empty before: they’ve just not been currently holding onto something.

Sasuke sinks to the floor, back against the door. So close his legs brush against Naruto’s, which any other day would just be normal but today it’s a gift. “I guess I never did find a cure for you.”

They’d embarked on that plan before running away. If Dad could be cured from the bond imperative, then Kushina could go back home, and Dad could be with Mum again, like he wanted, and Mum wanted, and Naruto too.

“I don’t want to be cured.”

Sasuke’s stare is a black demand, and Naruto tries to explain that sure he hates it, but it’s like hating aspects of your own personality. You can’t wish to be cured of them, because if you were, you’d no longer be you, so in effect you’d be wishing that you cease to exist.

“Didn’t you want this to be real?”

“You said it was!”

Sasuke makes an impatient gesture. “Not the kind of real that you believe in.”

Naruto swallows, starting to sweat again. Catches Sasuke’s metal foot again, because Kyuubi is a raging desire under ever particle of his skin, a weak moment away from breaking through it, and this
is—well, this is substitute Sasuke. He can touch, and Sasuke doesn’t have to feel it.

“I ask again,” Sasuke says, “do you have a fetish?”

“No. I—fuck. You know, Dad forced me to watch it until it stopped making me projectile vomit. When he cut it off.”

And that is of course another violation, Naruto’s selfish need making him thoughtless. Sasuke, nine years old and being amputated, Sasuke would’ve never wanted anyone to see that. But they’ve never been in the habit of sparing each other.

Naruto wouldn’t unwatch it, if he could, not when it was done because Sasuke ran away with him.

“That was your thing, wasn’t it,” Sasuke says, in a distant and rather thoughtful voice. “Projectile vomiting. When did you stop? You were still doing it when Orochimaru locked you in that cage.”

“I… I had to let Kyuubi out more, up north.” His mouth feels dry around the sentence, even though he has to keep swallowing, to keep Kyuubi’s drool from spilling over, spilling past Kyuubi’s canines and Naruto’s lips.

“He’s not so bad,” Sasuke says, and might mean it, because it’s seconds before he adds, “I need to go.”

Naruto’s fingers twitch so hard around the fake leg, Naruto feels it all the way up to his shoulder.

“Seriously,” Sasuke sneers. “I’m not losing my other leg because you can’t sleep without a human comfort blanket. Let me go.”

“No,” says Naruto, which is unforgivable but also inevitable. “I can’t do that.”

“You have no right,” Sasuke starts, anger delayed by what seems like surprise but coming now, flushing up under his chin, spreading red along his jaw.

“You had no right to have me sent away!”

And they’re both on their feet now, somehow.

“I didn’t pretend to,” Sasuke says, voice calm again though he’s still flushed with anger. “I did it because I had to do it, I never pretended I had any right!”

“And why, now—”

“Is that it?” Sasuke snaps, and his eyes have gone narrow and red. “You’re planning to keep me here by force? You can’t be this stupid.”

“You don’t even want to leave!”

Sasuke doesn’t say, you don’t know that or don’t tell me what I want. Sasuke lives clichés, he doesn’t usually speak them.

“Show me,” Naruto throws at him, words hitting Sasuke like the slap of a glove. “If you really want to leave, open up the bond. Let me feel it.”

“I don’t owe you shit.” His eyes are as red and more importantly as feral as Kyuubi’s, like Sasuke should have been the one with an inner beast.
Kyuubi responds to it, berserker desire to fight and mate. Naruto can’t give in to that, he can’t. “You can’t want to leave to go back to him.”

Sasuke smirks at him, a filthy, acid expression. He looks over Naruto’s shoulder, towards the bed, which has been banged into the wall and which is irredeemably stained with Sasuke’s blood, Sasuke’s vomit, with Naruto’s… Well, with Sasuke’s pain and Naruto’s pleasure. “How is this any different?”

Naruto stands absolutely still, the stillness of death. He’s gutted like a fish, hook through his heart, and breathes like a fish, in helpless pointless little gasps. Air comes in, but it leaks out through his eviscerated stomach. It takes a long moment to realise his innards aren’t sprayed in messy graffiti across the room.

For really the first time, Sasuke looks at him with actual scorn, actual betrayal. He turns from Naruto like he’s turned from all the people in his life who have proven useless to him, which is to say all the people in his life.

His hand glows with magic brighter than lightning. The door doesn’t last an instant.

Sasuke’s past it and brutally out of sight when the realisation comes, when Naruto understands that he can move, that his innards are still safely inside, the evisceration strictly emotional.

Then he’s after Sasuke, tripping through an adrenaline rush so intense his ears are ringing with it, he doesn’t even know where they are when he slams Sasuke up against the wall, growling. It’s a wild, incongruous, ridiculous sound to issue from a human mouth, but there’s no escaping it: it is Naruto growling. Kyuubi’s heavy and aflame inside him, but Kyuubi’s beside the point right now.

The wall breaks.

Then all of Naruto’s ribs break, and his heart, a little.

There are no incantations now, certainly no beate marie full of grace. Middling, minor exorcists channel saints in general, some minor angels if they’re lucky; the real crusaders channel archangels.

Who did you get? Naruto asked, in the far-away days of childhood. Michael? He’s the fighter, right?

It’s not quite that simple. Not Sasuke’s voice, that, but Itachi’s. Indulgent still, at least when he looked past Naruto at his little brother.

Naruto scrunched his nose up at the interruption. How so?

Well, Itachi said mildly. I carry the power of Lucifael.

Naruto had blinked for a while before stumbling over the connection, and then not making it.

It’s not really something you ask people, Kakashi said.

Sasuke shrugged. It was still a double-shouldered movement then, and one done quickly, rebelliously, because forbidden by his mother as uncouth. It’s not a secret. Uriel.

Naruto crossed his arms behind his head. Never heard of him.

No surprise, Sasuke sniffed. Mummy wouldn’t want to give you nightmares.

Hey!
It was weeks before he asked Kakashi, who lifted a brow. \textit{Uriel? Mmmh, yes. How to put it… To whom has been entrusted the vengeance of the Lord.}

The hand of an archangel dedicated to avenging the wrongs of the world burns against Naruto’s chest, burns through Naruto’s chest.

And Uriel never made much sense to Naruto, because wouldn’t it be better with an angel to right the wrongs of the world than to avenge them, and why did God make a faulty world anyway? He’s tried these questions out on Sasuke over the years, to rile him, to understand him, but Sasuke’s never been very interested in theology.

\textit{You’re thinking about the whys because to you this is a theory. I know it as fact.}

\textit{Facts are –}

\textit{You don’t think of the why of gravity, you think of the how.}

\textit{So, what – you’re fine living in a universe made by an evil god who, like, created a fucked up world for fun?}

Sasuke’s level face, as though he really couldn’t understand what Naruto was getting reluctantly upset about, there beyond the facetiousness. \textit{They say he created man in his image. How could you think he’s anything but evil after hearing that?}

Now Naruto is on the floor, with an ashen handprint reaching into the broken cage of his ribs, just touching his heart. “Don’t leave me,” he says. “I can’t let you.”

“You can’t think you can stop me.”

Naruto forces himself to sit up, around the breathless redness of his heart’s blood and Kyuubi’s healing trying to function around an angel wound. His voice comes unexpectedly level, unexpectedly light. “I think I and every other shifter in the building can.” His breathing, even the sound of his blood leaking out of him, is loud in the long silence. At length it gets easier to sit, his ribcage slowly closing. “It’s – you’re a liability now, if Orochimaru has you. To me. To everyone here – to the whole faction. I can’t have that.”

“You can’t think you can stop me.”

Sasuke says, in this low blunt voice, and seems to slump a little. Not a slump of defeat, but rather of lessening tension.

Naruto makes it almost all the way to his feet, and when he starts to fall there’s Sasuke’s hand to grab at, to keep him steady. “Dad wouldn’t let you be taken away,” Naruto says, when they’re nose to nose again. “He – I know he never intervened for you, but he’ll keep you safe for me. For his people.”

“Right,” Sasuke says again. It’s another moment before he steps away from Naruto and turns around. In the enormous black shirt some guard must have left in the bathroom, he looks tiny and misshapen, his bad shoulder jutting up sharply like the wing of an injured crow.

Then he starts to walk away.

Not towards the door, though, and because of that Naruto’s able to restrain himself, doesn’t grab. Just catches up, walking so close their clothes brush before Sasuke steps sharply away. He’s looking away, his voice monotone, as he says, “Your room’s this way, right?”
The house has been razed and rebuilt twice since Sasuke played here with Naruto as a child, but it’s the same general design. Also, Naruto thinks with a thrill twisting his insides like an upset stomach, Sasuke will know the way because Naruto knows the way.

“What?” Sasuke snaps, and Naruto realises he’s grinning.

He makes a gesture that gets lost in the air, and has never wanted to lie to Sasuke. “The bond. You’re using it.”

Sasuke doesn’t actually bristle, and doesn’t deny.

Sasuke’s life has not lent itself to the kind of pride that turns away from power on principle.

After they’d taken his foot, he’d had to crawl for a few days. Within the first hour of the metal foot being welded to the stump, he’d kicked someone in the face who’d taken the opportunity, during those crawling days, to mock him.

The new foot, stronger than the old, had gone straight through the man’s cranium. Sasuke had passed out from the pain, it was weeks before he could walk on the prosthesis without fainting from the bone-pain where it clung like a parasite to his stump, but had woken up pleased to see the brain-blood on his toes.

All these years later, Naruto’s room is still identifiably Naruto’s room. On the wall, in red sharpie and only slightly more evolved penmanship than Naruto had been able to manage when he first wrote it at age six, Sasuke recognise the legend that has led Naruto into his fictional world of politics: of idealism, of not realpolitik. Society is the work of man. If something is wrong, we can change it.

It’s a smaller and dirtier room than Sasuke’s. The bed in particular, unsurprisingly, is much, much smaller than any Orochimaru would deign to sleep in, and consequently much smaller than any Sasuke’s had to make do with since childhood ended, on the October afternoon when he was transferred from Itachi’s arms to Orochimaru’s.

Sasuke looks at the red words without really seeing them, looks at them until Naruto looks at him looking at them, and he has to say, “Why, were Ghandi and Martin Luther King already taken, so you had to settle for Palme?”

“Actually,” Naruto says slowly, and god, they’ve never really talked about this before. “I was never really into Gandhi after that stuff with the little girls.” He rubs at the back of his head, where his hair’s already a mess. “Eh, and Sakura kept saying it was cultural appropriation for me to quote Luther King, or whatever.”

“That’s stupid,” Sasuke says, distracted. Stepping deeper into the room, which in a way means stepping deeper into the past.

“Well, yeah, I think so,” Naruto says behind him. “But since I’m, you know, really white, well…”

Sasuke ignores him, walking past the desk piled high with Naruto’s accumulated rubbish, and drops a potted plant on the floor to give himself room to perch on the windowsill.

Naruto’s eyes are greedy on his long neck emerging like a stalk from the oversize neckline, stretched to let Sasuke lean the back of his head against the wall. On Sasuke’s thin chapped fingers curled on
his knees and glowing faintly with magic, turning his skin into a lamp shade.

He wets his lips. Lips that were on that long neck, stretched open across it… “You killed my plant. Fuck you.”

“I didn’t use to be a slab of meat to you.”

Naruto stops like a watch. Hadn’t been moving, but seems like he had because this sudden stillness is brutal. It’s thirteen seconds, half the time of their fuck, before he gasps out, “You’re not!”

“Oh please,” Sasuke spits, with a gesture like he’d claw out Naruto’s eyes if they’d been closer. “I’ve been looked at like that all my life. Just never by you.”

“I’m not – that’s not -!” And he’s red-faced and ready to cry.

“No? Come here.”

Naruto’s stumbling forward before the first syllable is out, that’s how Sasuke says it. And then Sasuke’s hand on his face, in a pointed grip around his chin. This is the only meaningful part of Naruto’s reality, and then entirely irrelevant: Sasuke’s mouth on his, hot parted lips and the wet swipe of tongue like a stabbing.

And Naruto would do anything, make any sacrifice –

Grabbing for Sasuke, moaning loud so his ears ring with it, almost humping the wall under the ledge Sasuke’s sitting on.

Crashing into the desk, which breaks under the impact, when Sasuke pushes him away.

“I don’t want you.” His mouth is still open, in the kind of panting that is the twin of hyperventilation. “I never – I don’t want you to want me.”

“I don’t fucking want to, either!” Naruto yells, sitting in the heap of broken desk.

“Don’t lie to me!” And Sasuke’s screaming now, really screaming, his deep gruff voice gone impossibly high and thin.

“It’s nothing to do with what I want! I need you.”

“Yes,” Sasuke says, and his voice is Orochimaru’s again, rusty and silken. He’s showing Naruto what Orochimaru calls his snake eyes, the eyes of a natural born killer. “Too bad about that. So sorry I’m not good enough for you to want.”

“That isn’t!”

“No, it’s not, is it,” Sasuke bites out. “You’re a liar and a coward, and don’t you fucking pretend it could have ever been anyone else!”

“No,” Naruto agrees. “It couldn’t.” It comes to him then with surprising certainty, “You would have killed them, if it was.”

Sasuke blinks. “I distinctly remember you being belligerently certain, every time I threatened to kill you, that I wouldn’t.”

Naruto shrugs, lightly so the situation won’t come crashing back down on them. “This is different. You’ve always – like, no offence but you’ve always been the sort of person who’d destroy
something before you let anyone take it from you.”

Sasuke blinks again. “Why would that offend me?”

Naruto laughs. It’s the kind of laughter that hurts, that cuts its way from his stomach and up through his throat trailing blood. “Forgot you’re proud to be a bastard.”

“Have you ever considered how it’s funny you should use that particular insult?”

“No,” Naruto says, and then quickly, before Sasuke can call him a liar again, “It’s not all that funny.”

“No,” Sasuke says, in a tired voice that sounds old, older than it’s possible to imagine a teenager ever being. Exorcists, Naruto remembers with an uncomfortable twinge, average a lifespan of about thirty.

“Don’t be like that,” Sasuke says, tired and insulted and Naruto’s breath catches and he very, very carefully doesn’t point out that Sasuke’s reading him through the bond. “I’m not some loser. I took out a devil.”

“Yeah,” Naruto says. “On your own. So you’re suicidal. So you don’t be like that.”

“It was just a single devil.”

“It was a noble of hell,” Naruto says, and for some reason he’s smiling but his voice is so tight it could strangle someone. “It’s against every fucking exorcist guideline ever written to go up against one of those solo.”

“Itachi does it all the time.”

“Itachi,” Naruto starts, and then can’t stop, “is an evil fucking freak, and if he died, it wouldn’t be such a loss.”

Sasuke blinks, twice, trice. It’s a long time before he says, “I notice you don’t talk about him being suicidal. Should I be insulted?”

“It’s more if you sell your kid brother to a monster, killing yourself is about the best thing you can do.”

Sasuke’s eyes are open now and hard. “Should Kakashi die too, then? He sold me to your father.”

“What?” Naruto says stupidly, a coward’s way of postponing the stinging realisation.

“He’s who brought me here for you,” Sasuke says. He leans further back against the wall, so his gaze slips away from Naruto’s. “I tried to jump out of the car. He said he owed Minato too much to let me.”

“You’d rather jump out of the car than come see me? What did you think was going to happen!”

“Exactly what did happen!”

Fighting with Sasuke, even when they were little, and they’ve fought again and again and again over the years, has always meant going one on one with death.

“Is this so bad?” Naruto has to ask, hoping against hope, risking everything.

Sasuke throws it at him, burning the last bridge.
Naruto is spread out on his back, twisted bedclothes against his naked skin, legs spread so wide his hips ache. All he can see is the ceiling, which is maybe a mercy though it’s one he doesn’t want. Over him a weight of heat and violence, magic and flesh locking him into place and then – it hurts more than he’d thought it would. He’s thought of rape as some sort of unimaginable violation of the self, disregarding any bodily discomfort. That’s what Sasuke gives him though, because whatever Sasuke’s feeling is locked tightly away: physical pain that tears and burns into him. Teeth in his neck, hands locked around his wrists, a cock showed up inside him where it’s not wanted, where there doesn’t seem to be room for it.

And the bond. Naruto knows it happens now, alongside the borrowed sensation of someone – of someone – he knows that’s not what it is, but he thinks of it as the sensation of someone pissing inside him – but he can’t experience that from Sasuke’s point of view, not in any meaningful way. A shifter mind is made to accommodate the bond, and can’t sustain the memory of its inception from a mind that isn’t.

“I’m sorry,” he says, miserably truthful, ill with the truth of it. “What would you have done!”

“I’m not an animal.”

“Oh, shut the fuck up. If you – with the bond craving, and if they didn’t want you, then – then…”

“You know what I would have done,” Sasuke tells him.

“Tell me anyway. Tell me, Sasuke.”

Sasuke speaks carelessly, as though it doesn’t matter. “I would have taken what I needed. They could like it or not.”

“But then you would have…”

“If I thought that was actually a fate worse than death, I wouldn’t be here.”

Naruto swallows. “You’ve never done that to anyone.”

“No. But I’ve done a lot worse.”

“I don’t – there’s no way to rank that shit.”

“Bullshit,” Sasuke says flatly. “I’ve done a lot of things to people that I’d much rather be raped than have done to me.” After a moment he adds, “Also you didn’t rape me. Just so we’re clear on that.”

“I,” Naruto chokes out. Crawls forward, a step or two, before he makes it up on his feet, stumbling towards Sasuke.

“That does not mean you can touch me.”

“Okay,” Naruto says. “Okay. I’m gonna…” He loses track of the sentence, like he’s losing track of everything else, which is becoming just background, just scenery. There’s Sasuke, how could anything else matter or even register? His pupils are wide with Sasuke, painfully attuned to every potential movement.

He breaks away from that, struggles the few steps to the bed and throws himself down on it, holding on to its edge. Looks up at the wall, If something is wrong we can change it.

“And it’s not that I had to settle for Palme. It’s a great slogan!”
Sasuke’s not even looking at him.

“What would you prefer, then?” Naruto challenges, thoughtless, burning with – with too many things he can’t think about. “She walks in beauty, like the night?”

It’s a snide thing to say. “No,” Sasuke says, and for a moment Naruto huddles in on himself, defensive. More than snide, it’s an unworthy thing to say, because that’s the line Kakashi used to tease him with.

“No,” Naruto says, more softly. “I guess it’d be more, let us go then, you and I.”

Though the stanzas that had drawn Sasuke to Eliot were grimmer, grimmer. What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow out of this stony rubbish? Son of Man, you cannot say, or guess, for you know only a heap of broken images, where the sun beats, and the dead trees give no shelter, the cricket no relief, and the dry stone no sound of water. The devotion of that, of knowing someone else’s poem by heart like a prayer…

Sasuke’s voice, incisive in the darkness. “Why are you using this against me?”

“I’m not!”

Sasuke speaks over him. “The bond’s – it’s shit but there’s nothing to be done, it’s a shit world. But this is – you’re taking things you know because we were – because we knew each other, because I didn’t know to keep them from you, I thought we were…”

“I thought we were a team,” Naruto says, and his jaws are locked so hard the words barely make it out between his teeth. “Then you had me sent away!” And that’s a roar, a battlefield roar like he’s given himself over to Kyuubi, only the acrid betrayal powering it is human.

“A team?” Sasuke repeats. “When I was locked in Orochimaru’s bedroom while you went home to Mummy and Daddy?”

“To Mummy? Mummy was murdered! You were part of murdering her!”

He’s standing up know, face red and pulsating, hands fisted.

“I was,” says Sasuke. “Does that make this easier for you?”

“No!” It’s an inerasable connection, though, to have something unforgivable between yourself and another person. “No,” he says again, not sure if it’s true but needing it to be. “Look, will you just… Come to bed?”

“I will not and you must be joking.”

“I don’t – would you prefer a guest room?”

“No.”

Naruto nods, picking up one of the pillows. There should be an extra blanket somewhere, in the wardrobe possibly. “I’ll sleep on the floor.”

“I’m fine where I am.”

“Mmh, yeah, that looks real comfortable.”

“You can’t think I’ll actually sleep with you in the room.”
“Whatever. You know where the bed is if you change your mind.” He throws the pillow on the floor, kicks at it until it’s on the carpet. Fuck the extra blanket, it’s only September.

Sasuke doesn’t reply.

It comes to Naruto, as he squirms on the under-vacuumed carpet, that he should have maybe changed his clothes. Showered, possibly, brushed his teeth.

No way he’s getting up now of course, not when he’s thrown down the gauntlet like this. Not when Sasuke could leave while he was in the bathroom.

Not when he wants the tang of Sasuke’s blood stuck between his teeth, couldn’t stand to wash it away.

And he dozes, can do that, can lie half-asleep through the night, because every time he wakes in a panic of arousal and abandonment issues, there’s Sasuke’s profile drawn sharply against the window.

xxxxx

“Narutooooooo!”

It’s Konohamaru yelling, Konohamaru throwing open Naruto’s door and Konohamaru’s bright red crocs trampling Naruto’s knees.

Naruto catches the squirming body, stands up so he can keep his grip without Konohamaru’s legs dragging on the floor. Touches his head, half swat and half caress.

Konohamaru clings to him, looking shyly at Sasuke over Naruto’s shoulder and pretending he’s not. “You’re fine! They said – well, they didn’t say, but – but you’re fine.”

“I’m fine,” Naruto agrees, swinging him a little. “Like I could afford to lie around being sick with you running amok, you little wildling.”

“Good morning,” Dad says, standing framed in the doorway with Kushina by his side like some family painting, and Naruto puts Konohamaru down. For once, the brat is silent.

“Naruto,” Kushina says. “Sasuke.”

“Kushina,” Sasuke replies rather curtly. For someone who was raised by such ostentatiously polite people, Mikoto and Orochimaru and all their careful politicking, he’s always been astonishingly rude.

Naruto’s burningly aware of him sliding down off the window ledge, of him pulling on Kyuubi to ease the sleep-ache in his shoulder. The vermilion energy simmers visibly under Sasuke’s skin, glowing through the shirt.

It’s at once painful and exhilarating, to realise he’s been away from Sasuke so long, he can’t be sure whether it’s a statement to Dad and Kushina, or a complete dismissal of them.

“We thought you might like to join us for breakfast,” says Dad, which is a surprisingly terrible suggestion given how Sasuke’s generalised hatred of humanity tends to peak in the morning.


When the door has closed behind them, Sasuke snorts. Standing against the intrusion, he’s standing startlingly close to Naruto. “She must hate this so much.”
“Heh, yeah. Shit, you know things are looking bad when she’s the one worrying about diplomacy.” Dad likes to point out how that’s something they have in common, Kushina and Naruto, as though being criticised in front of each other would somehow make them like each other more.

Sasuke wanders away from him, circling the broken desk. “I meant because as of thirteen hours ago, you’re the one shifter who could conceivably wield an angel blade. Yet another thing you have over the little tyke.”

“He’s not a – I could? I could. God, I totally have to.”

To not be so completely dependent on the exorcists, to be able to protect their own people from demons…

Sasuke lifts an eyebrow. “If you encounter a demon without me, I’ll let you try.”

Naruto barely listens, because obviously Sasuke realises, “But this is huge, this is everything, it…”

“You’re unclean,” Sasuke cuts him off, and his voice is dirty and merciless. “I’d have to filter it, shield you from just – you can’t use much or you’ll burn faster than you can heal.”

“I’m not unclean! You can’t think that.”

Sasuke sniffs impatiently. “It’s not a moral judgement. Jesus, Orochimaru channels Samael, he’s hardly an example of personal purity.”

And Sasuke’s used to exorcists, to living with exorcists and talking to exorcists, and casually says *Jesus* as he would to another exorcist, in a language meant for such words. Not as an incantation, Naruto can still hear the word, understand it as a word, but not in strictly human language. It sizzles through his ear, so pure it burns his skin open and raw, trickles blood down his cheek.

The way Sasuke doesn’t take this opportunity to gloat over his proven impurity is almost an apology. He goes to Naruto’s wardrobe and takes some clothes.

“Don’t lock the door,” Naruto says, asks, pleads as Sasuke continues to the bathroom. “I won’t go inside. Just don’t lock it.”

“Fuck you,” says Sasuke, and turns the lock.

Well, Naruto always knew he was an arsehole. Keeps his hand on the handle, Kyuubi’s red clawed hand, and doesn’t doesn’t break it open.

xxxxx

He can hear Sasuke’s footsteps outside the door. Naruto would have left it open, but Sasuke gave him a look of judgement and disgust and closed it in his face.

The silver lining to this is that Naruto isn’t at his most alluring when lunging for the toilet on the realisation that he hasn’t actually relived himself since yesterday afternoon, and it might be just as well that Sasuke doesn’t see.

He hasn’t showered either, not since before they returned from the battle front. Days and days of sweat and dust cover his skin, under the most recent stains, from yesterday evening with Sasuke. He blinks, turning the shower on. Tries, right now, not to think about yesterday evening, both because it makes him want to die and because it makes him want back inside Sasuke so bad he can’t stand it. He feels leaden inside, like his stomach’s filled with sharp gravel and every time he moves around it
rattles and cuts and weighs him down.

He distracts himself with the ridiculous, delirious discovery that Sasuke has used his toothbrush, in addition to his soap and his clothes. Far more meaningful, since that was the only toothbrush available, is the fact that he can still hear Sasuke’s footsteps, a grumbling echo that never quite stops.

Sasuke hasn’t walked away. Left on his own, he hasn’t tried the door.

And he could have stepped quietly, Kyuubi’s hearing is superhuman and acutely attuned to Sasuke but there’s no way for even Kyuubi to hear if Sasuke walks on air. Jesus walking, Naruto called it when he first saw it, which was when Kakashi taught Sasuke to walk on water. It was months until he understood that it didn’t have to be water, thin air is fine.

But when Naruto steps out of the bathroom, Sasuke’s feet are firmly on the ground. He’s also positively drowning in a huge jumper, which can’t be a good sign and has to be a deliberate choice because they’re roughly the same size, only Sasuke looks delicate while Naruto looks like a misshapen puppy, hands and feet too large for the rest of him. If it continues like this, Konohamaru will one day be taller than Naruto, which is unacceptable on many levels and also doesn’t make sense, because Dad’s tall, and – well, he supposes Mum wasn’t.

Sasuke grumbles something about how the walk of shame has never before been a walk to breakfast with the in-laws.

“But it’s not,” Naruto says, and at Sasuke’s blank and annoyed stare elaborates, “You haven’t done anything to be ashamed of.”

Sasuke is quiet for what seems a long time, clearly entertaining a number of possible replies. In the end he says, fairly lightly, “Leviticus 18:22, 20:13 say different.” He snorts. “Or perhaps that should be 18:23, 20:15.”

“Eh,” says Naruto. “18:22 is the antigay one, right? You never – that never bothered you.”

Sasuke gives him what seems to be intended as a darkly amused look, but which comes out mainly tired and rather bitter. “Believing in God as an energy source doesn’t mean believing in the bible.”

“We don’t have to go,” Naruto says. “We can just stay here. Or go somewhere else. Anywhere you want.” Which is hypocritical, because where Sasuke probably wants to go is away from Naruto, and Naruto wouldn’t know how to let him even if it were possible: even if Naruto hadn’t clawed his way into Sasuke’s soul and intertwined with it.

“No,” Sasuke says. “Better get this cleared up.”

“Okay.”

“Okay. So let’s go.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I just…”

“Naruto.” And Sasuke’s voice has gone testy again. “Let’s go hear what your father wants me to do.”

From the first moment – for years, Naruto understands now – Kyuubi has been singing of Sasuke, a low incessant hum like the beating of his own heart.

And he needs, he needs so badly for this to be in any way mutual. It could, it wouldn’t have to be so
very different, if Sasuke just felt it too, even if it wasn’t in a shifter way: Sasuke loves ferociously and possessively, loves with protectiveness but also resentment, with very little tenderness about it. Loves like Kyuubi, really.

Only Naruto knows this because Sasuke once loved Itachi, loved his mother, maybe his father, and then his parents told Itachi to give him to Orochimaru, and Itachi did, and so Sasuke maybe isn’t really capable of love anymore.

Naruto breathes out heavily, and out of the corner of his eye sees Sasuke minutely relax, and resent himself for it, and bristles.

“I don’t want to tell you what to do.” It’s true, or true enough to be considered truth.

Years ago, Sasuke said, *I don’t belong to you.*

Naruto said, *The hell you don’t!*

Sasuke surprisingly hadn’t hit him.

In the present Sasuke gives him a blank yet insulting look. “Good.”

“Sasuke,” and he has to halt them, fingers skimming over Sasuke’s arms, catching in the sleeves to stop them from grabbing too much, too hard. “I’m not going to let him hurt you.”

“Don’t lie to me,” Sasuke says, and manages to sound calm up until the last syllable. “Get your hands off me!”

Naruto will, as soon as every instinct he has stops screaming to hold tighter, he will, only – this is no excuse. He drops his hands. “I’m not fucking lying! You know I’m not!” He’s never wanted to lie to Sasuke, and as of yesterday evening he’s no longer capable of it.

Sasuke’s lips are tightly compressed around the words, which are nevertheless a sort of concession. The kind of concession Sasuke does best, the kind that stabs you, sharp ice between your vertebrae. “I believe you’d try.”

The rest is unspoken, but plain to be read in Sasuke’s face, and Naruto supposes in his own too. If Naruto could have stopped people hurting Sasuke, he would have. If Naruto could have stopped Dad buying Sasuke like a commodity, instead of rescuing him like a person – well, a lot of things would be different.

Again he feels himself sprayed across the corridor, nothing left but messy uncontainable splatter, and then grows very swiftly very old and very cold, shouldering the knowledge that Dad is the kind of man who’d do this kind of things to strangers – to someone Naruto cares for – to Naruto himself. It’s not news that people joke about Dad being some sort of Godfather character, not news that people fear him, and the knowledge crystallizes now that the jokes too are just a kind of fear.

Naruto’s failure is enormous and familiar: he tried to get Sasuke out and instead he got himself caught, so that Sasuke had to negotiate him out of a cage. Dad’s failure, which is a failure of will rather than a failure of ability, has loomed in the background but is dawning now merciless and blinding.

Dad’s very different from this perspective, and yet at the same time there’s nothing really new to discover. Sasuke doesn’t see the laugh lines or the hands that carried Naruto through his childhood; and shifter tyrant Minato wasn’t somebody Naruto ever wanted to see, but he understands now that maybe he needed to.
Dad, what have you done?

To me, he doesn’t add, even though if Dad thinks about this as being done to someone it will be to Naruto, he won’t have been thinking of Sasuke as a real person. You can’t think of someone as a real person and then act like they aren’t, nobody could. *Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachtani…*

“Let’s go then,” Sasuke says, and Naruto’s too busy keeping himself from grabbing to do anything but follow. Sasuke stops in the doorway, looks at him in that way he has, like Naruto’s the only thing he can see. Naruto’s caught by the messy fall of his fringe and by the sharpshooter suddenness of the question, “Are you on my side?”

“Yes,” he says, helplessly and instinctively yes, but of course that doesn’t matter. Sasuke’s not asking for the answering words but for the answering reaction: using the bond, not for closeness but for information. Already it presents itself to him as an option, and clearly not one he’s particularly reluctant to use.

He says, “Right”, and steps out into the corridor with the stride of someone who knows exactly where to go. Two metres into the corridor he has to stop, because of course he has no idea where to find Dad and the others. Naruto waits for a breathless moment to see if he’s going to use the bond, but Sasuke just looks at him, that look like an impatient demand.

And so they walk together through the familiar corridors, past people who exchange nods with Naruto but ignore Sasuke, because it can be so dangerous to offer the wrong reaction when someone’s standing is uncertain.

Naruto would have liked to think better of them.

Genma does nod at Sasuke, but perhaps it would have been better if he hadn’t. Sasuke gives no outward reaction but on the inside he boils over, a little bit: like someone reminded of a gnat and now wanting to squash it. Another reminder that to Sasuke these people aren’t friends or protectors, but rather kidnappers, subhuman monsters.

When they were little and Sakura was afraid of monsters under the bed, Naruto ducked down to talk to them and Sasuke plunged a knife through the mattress in a better safe than sorry sort of manoeuvre.

“It’s been remodelled a bit,” Naruto says. “Reinforced, and stuff. There’ve been a few attacks.”

Sasuke doesn’t say anything aloud but Naruto can feel him considering, and considers himself. Would the anti-shifters, BEAST and their ilk, deem Sasuke a victim to be rescued or a race traitor to be purged?

He hasn’t reached a conclusion when they arrive in the smaller dining room, where Dad and Kushina and Konohamaru are sitting at the table. Naruto slows down, but Sasuke has pulled himself together with perfectly ruthless efficiency, nothing broken or directionless left after last night’s wildness and panic.

He slips onto one of the chairs and reaches for the milk, quietly and without any fuss.

It’s abruptly impossible to imagine the kitchen without Sasuke in it, to envision a morning without Sasuke there.

Naruto knows then that he could do something terrible to keep him, if he had to.

Not Dad’s kind of terrible, but his very own kind. Sasuke reaching for a banana, peeling it and
cutting it into slices that splash into his cereal, Naruto wouldn’t really hesitate to kill for that.

He has to stop, before he horrifies himself so much he horrifies Sasuke too. Sits down too, and stares at the table because he can’t look anywhere else without exploding.

Konohamaru’s babbling away, voice going higher and higher with tension, until Kushina tells him in no uncertain terms to shut up. For the first time, looking at them as though from the outside, it comes to him that it’s always Kushina doing that. What sort of relationship does Konohamaru have with Dad?

Dad who’s looking tired over his coffee cup, but also rather pleased. With sudden bitterness Naruto thinks how that will have more to do with Sasuke’s magic, which glows golden and alive under both their skins, than with Sasuke’s sustained sanity.

And Dad will know the guilty pleasure thrill Naruto gets from having Sasuke still all over him, from seeing Sasuke in his clothes and his smells. Probably figures it might unbalance Sasuke, too, not being able to wear his own chosen armour.

He’s so clearly underestimating Sasuke, Naruto could almost laugh.

There’s a knock on the doorframe. Shikamaru, and Temari, and Hayate.

“Please,” Minato says, gesturing for them to enter. Kushina looks at him, long and steady, and doesn’t speak.

He could break him, Minato.

She isn’t usually wrong, and she wasn’t then.

Of course I want Naruto to live. She was removing her earrings, long chandelier earrings, one of the few pieces of jewellery he’s given her that she genuinely loves. I care for Naruto – oh, don’t you dare. No, I’m not thrilled that he’s your child with the woman you really wanted to marry, but that’s beside the point. Those are my issues, they’re not Naruto’s fault. She’d turned from the vanity, paced the room, before finally sitting down on the edge of the bed. That child has been part of my family since we were bonded, of course I care for him. Of course I want him to live. If nothing else then because I don’t want to experience your grief when he is lost. But Uchiha… this is a big risk, Minato, an enormous gamble with all of us, and for what? Uchiha hates shifters.

He could be – broken in. If need be.

Minato… If anything could break Naruto, a bond with Uchiha is it.

He’d made a weak gesture, like the sign of the cross performed by someone who no longer believes in its power.

It’s different, Kushina said, relentless and beloved. If you – if you’d been able to bond with Yui, she could have broken you. Don’t – I felt your feelings, when she’d died. If she rejected you…

I have to do this.

And she’d smiled, after all. I know. Don’t do it blindly.

He muffles a sigh against the edge of his coffee cup. He didn’t do it blindly, nor with any delusional expectations of gratitude from Sasuke.
He did it because everything was very stark and very simple, the way things are when there is something you have to do.

He looks at his sons, Konohamaru with his toothy grin temporarily dampened into a sulk, the grin of a child who’s never really lost anything; Naruto, with his shoulders hunched up around his ears and shaking faintly. Naruto who is so much Yui’s son, with Minato’s colouring certainly but that’s the slant of her jaw, the shape of her eyebrows, her way of angling his head – so much Yui’s, except that Naruto has never once before seemed breakable.

He does now, oh he does now, because of course there’s no way to handle this. The table breaks under his hand, which is suddenly Kyuubi’s hand, twice the size and all claw. And then.

Sasuke’s fingers closing around his wrist, cold and surprisingly human. Naruto can feel every bone in his hand, the flesh a too-thin glove around them. “Enough,” Sasuke says, wincing from Naruto’s turmoil, from the black loathing that must be coating the bond. “Get over it.” And Naruto’s looking up, stunned and dumb, at the impossible face of forgiveness, only Sasuke doesn’t believe in forgiveness. “It’s not the worst thing that’s happened to me.” It’s not a lie, and not entirely bitter.

And Naruto could say, *it’s not like you have to hate it*. He could say, *you could like me*. He could say, *believe me, trust me, forgive me*. He could say so many things.

He could say, *how dare you care more about anyone else hurting you than me hurting you!*

“Well,” Kushina says at length. “Not that this awkward silence isn’t enjoyable, but perhaps we should get to the point.”

Shaky laughter, until finally Minato pulls himself together. “We were thinking of sending you up north.”

Naruto pales. Sasuke says, “I’m not much good against humans.”

There’s another kind of silence then.

“You’d be willing to do that?” Kushina says. “Go against the humans?”

Sasuke frowns. “Why wouldn’t I?”

Yes, Minato reminds himself. This is what Sasuke is: someone who doesn’t need a reason to kill, but rather a reason not to.

Humans, some of the more benevolent exorcists say, are the children of God and the treasure that exorcists protect.

Humans, less benevolent exorcists say, what have they ever done for me?

“It’s not an uncontroversial request,” Kushina says mildly. “Asking someone to kill people.”

Sasuke looks nonplussed, speaks not a challenge but simple truth, like it’s obvious, like he can’t imagine it not being obvious to everyone. “People die all the time. I don’t care about strangers.” He shrugs. “But like I said, I’m not much good against humans in combat situations.”

Indeed, Minato thinks. Sasuke has the power to burn them, to wipe them from the fabric of the world, but Sasuke’s vulnerable. A shifter can be shot, mutilated, exploded: a shifter will heal. But Sasuke – a single bullet, to the head, to the chest, and there would be no saving grace. Not, at least, before the bond, before Kyuubi.
“That’s not,” Minato cuts in. “We are certainly not suggesting anything of the kind.” He straightens in his seat, slipping from family father into patriarch. “Naruto, you know we’ve been negotiating with a number of parties up north – I suspect so do you, Sasuke. Why don’t you expand on that, Hayate?”

Hayate coughs. “Well, we’ve reached a bit of an agreement with the Rock faction. They want help with their demon problem in exchange for being assimilated. We’re not calling it that, of course, but it’s what it amounts to.”

Kushina stirs an ungodly amount of sugar into her tea. “What kind of time frame are we looking at?”

Hayate makes a gesture like he’d shrug, in less august company. “It’s a question of how well and how quickly we can deal with the demons. Depending on how much manpower we can devote to the issue, we’re looking at one to ten years. Of course, that was before.” A short, careful silence. “With an exorcist involved, it could be a matter of hours.”

Minato doesn’t allow himself a relived sigh when it’s Naruto who asks, “Would you do that?”

“You want me up north exorcising demons for you?”

“Would you?” Naruto repeats, tenser.

“The question is,” Sasuke says, “can you shield that well?”

“I am shielding.”

Sasuke makes an oh please face. “You’re keeping yourself from exploding all over the bond, but you’re completely open to anything from my end.”

“Well, yeah, but…”

“You’re lower than a human,” Sasuke snaps, “you’re filth. If I channel Uriel and you can’t shield yourself, he’ll go Hiroshima on your mind.”

It comes to him that to Sasuke, it’s nothing personal.

Mist Town was nothing personal: humans are worthless, and shifters are dirt. His skull echoes with the girl’s shrill voice screaming you’re an animal you’re an animal during the last days of Kankurou’s life.

His hands still feel raw with ice and blood from a thousand miles away, fisted here around this kitchen table, where Sasuke looks at his little brother and thinks, animal. Where Sasuke said, or perhaps that should be 18:23, and here looking at Konohamaru it comes to Naruto that Leviticus 18:23 prohibits man from defiling himself by having intercourse with an animal.

When did you stop projectile vomiting? Sasuke asked.

I didn’t, Naruto thinks now. I’m going to do it right now, oh god.

Because he did, too. He forced himself on Sasuke like an animal.

His mouth is hot, bloody around Kyuubi’s emerging fangs, his throat burning with retches.

Sasuke’s hand closes around his wrist again, cuffing him to sanity, to a kind of control. “You’re not an animal,” he says, impatient and beloved. “You’re my – you’re a person.”
Naruto can’t speak yet. He’d puke if he opened his mouth, or possibly cry. Maybe just upend the table and break the world, break everything so they could build on a cleaner slate.

Sasuke continues, voice going strained and thin. “I have a lot of issues with – this. But that’s not one of them.”

No, Kyuubi was never really the problem, for Sasuke. Naruto’s not sure that makes it any better.

But he can breathe again, eventually, and straighten up. When he does, he discovers that Dad’s sent Konohamaru away, along with Shikamaru and Temari.

Dad and Kushina and Hayate appear to be talking about Rock, and the general chaos of the northern war. “I have no objection,” Sasuke cuts in, the spoon forgotten in his hand and abruptly incongruous, ludicrous. Things are snapping into new places inside his head, Naruto can feel it, like the pushback of a fired gun. “There is however the issue of the shielding, and the exorcists would be displeased. They enjoy their monopoly.”

“I will speak to Rock,” Hayate says, clearly feeling himself dismissed by some minute shift of Dad’s posture.

“I’m pleased to hear that,” Dad says mildly, to Sasuke. “Bad start notwithstanding, it’s my hope that we can – function together.”

“It’s not difficult to understand that someone wants to live,” Sasuke says, not really speaking to Dad at all. “Like it shouldn’t be difficult to understand that someone would resent being – involved – in this manner.”

“Be that as it may,” Dad says, “can I trust that you will not attempt to leave? May I have your word?”

“My word’s not worth anything to you.”

“Dad,” Naruto says, eyes closed against the blistering whiteout of an imminent panic attack, “just go. Leave us alone.”
He can feel the moment they’re finally gone, Dad and Kushina, and he can ease down a little. Slips a tail around Sasuke, lets it coil tight around his knee, and is shocked clean away from the lurking anxiety attack when Sasuke elbows him in the head.

“What? It was all right before!” Naruto yelps in bewilderment and growing anger.

“That was before,” Sasuke says.

Before Naruto violated him. “Sorry,” Naruto says, and he is sorry, he’s so sorry he doesn’t know how to exist around it, but he’s also sick and tired of having to be sorry. “It’s not fair,” he says, randomly and forlornly. “Shikamaru doesn’t feel it like this.”

“Shikamaru’s human.”

A shifter mind is made for the bond, completed by the bond. A human mind remains largely unaffected by it, unable to perceive it.

“Was it really,” Naruto says vaguely, “Kakashi really brought you here?”

And Sasuke’s mind goes on lockdown, so sudden and so hard, it’s like he’s locked himself out of it. Everything inside Sasuke’s skull is black noise and his voice comes brittle, sounds like truth for the first time, now that Naruto can no longer tell if it is. “Yes.”

“That’s –”

“Keep yourself the fuck out of my head.”

Naruto makes an I’m trying type gesture, around an incoherent impression of an arm around his middle that, going by the hair brushing his forehead, is probably Kakashi’s. “You’re kind of leaking.”

Of course he is. He’s repressing present emotion so hard, memories are bleeding through instead because something has to, that’s the nature of the bond.

“Why?” Naruto says.

“I don’t know. Shut the fuck up about it.”

“He’ll be in trouble with Orochimaru.”

“Yes,” Sasuke says, in that dead voice he has sometimes, the worst one. “That’s why your father really wants us north, isn’t it, to keep me away from Orochimaru.”

“I guess,” Naruto says stupidly, caught on the idea that he – well, he knows Orochimaru, of course he knows Orochimaru. But he doesn’t know him like this: the sound of his laughter, rough and dry like old papers, the complicated smell of his clothes that comes from trying very hard to wash out any incriminating smells. His touch, his trust, his threat. Battered wife syndrome, he thinks dizzily, can kids have battered wife syndrome?

This time Sasuke looks ready to vomit, and Naruto wants to touch him and if he does Sasuke will vomit, and Naruto has done this to them.
To this needed, suddenly-alien person that Naruto feels like he knows, the same way he knows his own body, but didn’t know this about.

He’s barely aware of muttering, “I’m going to kill him.”

He wouldn’t have expected that to be what makes Sasuke finally explode. He lashes out in one of those uncontrollable movements that usually only happen to Naruto, tableware crashing to the floor. “You will do nothing of the kind!” He’s so young suddenly and so breakable after all, with violence trembling just under his skin.

“What do you want, then?” Naruto yells back, wretched and young and violent too, and his voice breaks over Kyuubi’s fangs. “What do you want me to do, nothing?!” He feels like a child again, when you need everything so very intensely and everyone has the power to refuse you.

“I wanted you to do nothing from the start!” Sasuke’s breathing hard but he’s not screaming, his voice is so much edge it’d break if he screamed. “But it’s too late now and you’re not taking anything else!”

“You said,” Naruto says, “you said that I could.” The words are the tightrope on which he’s trying to walk across the abyss between them.

Bite me now. Sasuke climbed into his lap, Sasuke tugged down the neckline of his own shirt, Sasuke pulled Naruto mouth to his shoulder. Bite here.

“There’s no point talking about it now,” Sasuke says, looking straight ahead and not at Naruto at all. “What’s done is done.”

“I know,” Naruto says, almost can’t say because his throat is closing too tight for air. What’s done is done, but the talking about it, the picking at the scab – Naruto can’t stop. Which is a big part of what got them here, and maybe a big part of what’ll get them out. “So if, if you’d known what it meant. You wouldn’t have. You wouldn’t have agreed.”

Sasuke does look at them him, that look like an incision. His are the sort of eyes that stab and cut and pin people. He’s so very much someone who could never be ignored, but then again so is Naruto.

“I would still have had to.”

Naruto biting him, Naruto’s mind in his, is not what Sasuke would choose last in the world.

“You’d have done it anyway,” Sasuke says quietly, the anger fading, coming glacial instead of volcanic.

For a moment the world goes white around him, nuclear winter. “I wouldn’t have forced you.”

Sasuke has to know that’s true, has to feel it, but he’s clearly doubtful. Scornful, even. “You’d have died.”

“Yeah.”

“You’re such a fucking child, if you’re really suicidal then –”

“I’m not. I’m glad I didn’t die, I’m really glad, and yeah it’s selfish and I’m sorry about how it happened but I didn’t want to die!”

He’s breathing hard, so hard he’s a little lightheaded with it, and Sasuke looks set to explode only it
turns into an implosion instead, a lifetime of rage and betrayal turned in on himself.

It’s devastating, to push Sasuke too far. And all the same you have to push, or you’ll never get anywhere with him.

“Fuck,” Naruto says, dropping his head into his hands. Cold sweat is breaking painfully across the hot skin of his scalp. “I thought – I really trusted him. I thought I was all grown up but I… I trusted him.” He’s not even sure, really, if he’s talking about Dad or Kakashi.

“I know,” Sasuke says, again in that way like he understands perfectly, that way he’s always had.


“Yeah,” Sasuke breathes. “People are shit. I guess if you’re dumb enough to trust them it’s your own fault.”

“I want to trust people.”

When Naruto curls a tail around his calf, Sasuke doesn’t pull away. It seems they both feel shipwrecked.

“I did say you’re an idiot.”

Naruto sticks his tongue out, feels hopeless enough for that, stripped down to childish essentials, and amazingly feels better. “I prefer cynically challenged.”

Amazingly, too, the corner of Sasuke’s mouth quirks. Bitterly, in a tiny movement, but it quirks.

“It would be better to go north,” Sasuke says eventually.

“Mmh,” says Naruto. It would give them something to fight besides each other. More importantly, it will keep Sasuke safely away from Orochimaru. “Shit, when you’d rather be in a war zone…fuck.”

“I wasn’t lying,” Sasuke says. “I’ll slay your demons. I don’t mind.”

“I know.” He rests his head on his arms, which are sprawled all over the table. Through his fringe he sees Sasuke’s beautiful restless fingers, which have gone instinctively to the bread knife. And it would be so horrifyingly simple, to stand up. To tip Sasuke forward over the table, trap him between the table and Naruto’s body, caged in by Naruto’s arms. To rest his face against the back of Sasuke’s neck, to fill his mouth with it. To… He swallows, his mouth suddenly full of saliva and the throbbing of his cock echoed by every pulse point in his body.

He wants to lick the inside of Sasuke’s elbows, an irrational desire that eats away the rest of the world.

“Sasuke,” he whines, for distraction. “Say something.”

Sasuke looks him in the eye, contact like a flashburn, and Naruto’s hands are prickling with claws and with desire to touch.

“Please.”

“Naruto,” Sasuke says in an extremely measured voice. “Being a control freak is cute when it makes you colour code your notes. It’s not cute when it makes you rather like killing people. Don’t test me.” He sounds like he’s quoting someone, probably Orochimaru, as if finding his own words would just be too much effort, right now.
“You have to give me something.”

“I don’t owe you jack shit.”

But there is something, whether Sasuke intends it or not. The memory’s blurry with adrenaline, and of someone large reaching forward and Sasuke – little Sasuke, he can’t be more than six or seven – ducking closer instead of ducking away. Knifing the man so there’s splatter all over Sasuke’s face, in his eyes and nose and mouth, blood everywhere and thicker things too, pulsing out of the man’s stomach, which is wide open.

It really should make Naruto stop having painful sexual fantasies about him.

Sasuke stands up. “I’m going back to bed.” He does look tired, with the bond like a chain through his mind, dragging Naruto like a loadstone. With the seal cracked open but not gone, its broken edges a bleeding scar across his thoughts.

“I want to go with you.”

“I don’t care.”

He doesn’t try to stop Naruto following him back up to Naruto’s room, doesn’t react to Naruto standing just inside the doorway, staring at him taking off his shoes and the huge jumper. He lies down on the bed, curled tight under the cover, and is immediately lax and heavy with imminent sleep.

It’s an airless minute until his breathing evens out completely, and Naruto feels like a stone rolling downhill, taking a shaky step forward and then another and another. He’s not going to do anything. He’s not. He’s just going to see if Sasuke’s really asleep. He’s not going to – the mattress dips under his weight, but Sasuke doesn’t react. His skin is soft and sweet under Naruto’s hand, his hair thick and even softer, slick as kitten fur. Naruto’s breathing rasps past his open lips, so shallow he’s lightheaded again, and this is sick. The only reason Sasuke’s not waking up is he’s used to being molested in his sleep.

Naruto’s done sick things before. Up north, in the war, two days ago he was there doing horrible things.

He has killed people, and still this is the worst thing he’s ever done, because this is something he does to Sasuke, with no excuses left.

Slowly, carefully, he lies down on his side, slipping his arm around Sasuke. At first he can’t breathe at all, inching closer and closer, until Sasuke’s spine is cutting into his chest, like his body has become the sheath for a blade. He curls himself around Sasuke, nose in the short hairs at the back of Sasuke’s head, knees bent to fit inside the curve of Sasuke’s legs drawn up tight against his body.

His face is hot and tight, burnt by the knowledge that Sasuke wouldn’t permit this, if Naruto had given him any choice.

Even now he feels that he’ll die if he doesn’t slide his hand lower, where it can undo Sasuke’s trousers, has that numb slow-mo feeling that accompanies a death wound, but it is just a feeling. He knows it’s just a feeling, and tries to believe it.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers, intertwining his fingers with Sasuke’s, where they’re curled in almost a fist just under Sasuke’s chin.

This is how subhuman filth acts, this is how a selfish, brutal monster behaves.
Hatred has never made him act like this.

He’s so hard he hurts again – not again, not really: it stopped for a handful seconds after he’d come, but he was hard again almost the instant he was out of Sasuke – a dull pain that spreads over his skin until it envelopes his whole body like a corrosive burn. If Sasuke woke up now, there would be no hiding this from him.

But Sasuke sleeps.

His breath puffs warm over Naruto’s knuckles, his heart beats steadily against Naruto’s wrist.

Hatred, he thinks wildly, has never narrowed his world so much, erased everything else until only one person existed, one compulsion.

The tshirt Sasuke’s wearing is thin and rather worn, revealing visible ribs and the mark where Kyuubi’s fangs went in, just above the trench of Sasuke’s clavicle. Naruto’s jaws ache at the sight, he bites at the inside of his own cheeks until his mouth tastes of blood but it’s all wrong, what he needs is to lick Sasuke’s skin, thin and tearable with the blood so close to the surface he could almost taste it without even biting.

“Sasuke,” he whispers.

Sasuke, it emerges, still dreams in Japanese. Sasuke, who looked past Naruto at the broken bed and sneered, how is this any different? He mumbles, “Yamete.”

Jesus, Sasuke…!

It makes Naruto go red all over, not with blood this time but with Kyuubi’s energy. Sasuke’s hand, strong and calloused, suddenly feels small in his. Naruto remembers another instance of being a monster, when the bond compulsion was first starting to drag at him and Konohamaru had abruptly gone from bragging about his martial arts technique to demanding, do you love him more than me?

Naruto had said, it’s not a competition, because the alternative was saying, yes.

And Naruto spent last night on the floor, with his heart beating until he felt bruised on the inside of his ribs, and eventually he falls asleep too.

He wakes up with the smell of Sasuke thick in his nose, a smell of belonging and happiness, with Sasuke warm and safe and close and – elbowing him sleepily in the nose. Naruto rolls away with a grumble, clutching at the mess on his face. Still transfixed by Sasuke, who shuffles onto his back and almost takes out his own eye with a clumsy knuckle.

“Naruto,” says Dad.

“Cubbie,” Grandma Tsunade interrupts. “And Sasuke. I’d like to check up on the bond.”

“Mmh, sure,” Naruto mumbles, distracted.

Sasuke’s face is flushed with sleep, and just – just this.

His eyes are perfectly clear though. “No,” he says sharply.

Tsunade lifts an eyebrow. “In view of the circumstances, especially given the seal –”

“No,” Sasuke repeats. “You can try to force me or not. I consent to nothing.”

Naruto thinks of Kabuto, and shudders.
Dad puts a hand on Tsunade’s arm. “But you’re still willing to go north and deal with the demons?”

“Yes.” Sasuke’s clearly resentful at the admittance.

“Come here, then, Naruto,” Tsunade says.

“Actually,” Dad says, “maybe we should take this to my office. Why don’t you join us when you’re ready, Naruto?”

And if this was real, this thing between him and Sasuke, if things had gone right – Naruto could have sighed then, and fallen back on the bed close, close to Sasuke. Could have smiled at him, and kissed him, and –

“What the fuck were you doing, anyway?” Sasuke grumbles.

“I fell asleep,” Naruto says. “I was tired too.”

Sasuke, surprisingly, seems to accept this.

And so Naruto has to add, “I wanted to be close to you.”

Sasuke makes a dismissive gesture. “What else is new.”

Naruto manages a weak grin, and then hears himself asking, in a blithe stupid voice, “Have you ever slept with someone because you wanted to?”

“Sure,” Sasuke says at last, and Naruto stops breathing. “It wasn’t – it doesn’t have to be a big deal.”


“Yeah.”

“And you don’t want to.”

“No.”

“Yeah,” Naruto says, resting his chin on his knees, locking his arms around his legs. “Okay. I get that.” He swallows, and keeps swallowing for a bit. Sasuke looks at him, silent. Eventually Naruto says, “These other people. You didn’t trust them.”

“One of them,” Sasuke says eventually. It’s obviously a painful admittance, but one that pride doesn’t allow him to shy away from.

“This is – different.”

“Yes,” Sasuke says, quick and cutting. “Mainly because I’m not sleeping with you.”

“Eh,” Naruto says, hitting him on the arm and not letting his fingers linger, “that’s what you think. You’ll come around. I mean, all this, who could resist?” And then in a small voice, stumbling over the words, quickly like when you walk over broken glass, “Is it because of last night? Or wouldn’t you – if I hadn’t…”

“If that’s all you want, then go ahead.” Sasuke has gone listless and lax, half-lying against the headboard. He wouldn’t struggle now. His eyes are dead eyes, thinking of England eyes. Weltschmerz eyes.
And Naruto has to sit very, very carefully, keep himself still, or he will rupture. “I want you,” he says, helplessly honest. Meaning it so much it feels like he’s speaking a foreign language, one he can’t rely on, can’t really express himself in. “Not just – I mean, god. I want you.”

“I’m not – suddenly going to want to,” Sasuke says slowly, strangely tentatively.

“I know,” Naruto says, and the words stick in his throat but he scrapes them out because he owes Sasuke that. He owes himself that. “I mean that sucks. I mean, that sucks for me. But this is my problem. Not yours. I just need to deal with it. And I’m going to.”

“You’re going to stop wanting me, just like that?”

“No! I feel how I feel. That won’t change, I can’t change that. But I don’t have to let it – I mean, what I do with it, that’s something I decide.” Sasuke looks cruel and speculative, and also a bit lost. Then he puts his hand on Naruto’s thigh, steady heat and deliberate pressure as he strokes along the inseam of Naruto’s trousers, up to the edge of his groin, and Naruto’s ears start ringing, that’s how hard his pulse is beating. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Evaluating your trustworthiness.” His fingers twitch, and he turns it into kneading, knuckles brushing Naruto’s erection. Precome soaks through Naruto’s underwear. “Don’t do anything.”

“I – does coming in my pants count as doing something?” Sasuke snorts, the snort that’s his version of a laugh. Lifts his eyebrow and lifts his hand away. “Nah.”

“Good,” Naruto mutters, closing his eyes because the sight of Sasuke beside him, looking suddenly approachable, is doing nothing to calm him down. “Good.”

“Would you still want this,” Sasuke asks pensively, “if it wasn’t for the bond?” Naruto can’t read his face. “I don’t know,” he admits. “You – I’ve always wanted you. But the sex, I don’t know.”

“Yeah,” Sasuke says distantly, distractedly, “okay.”

“Hey,” Naruto mumbles, resting his forehead against the edge of Sasuke’s shoulder, which makes Sasuke stiffen, “I’m not – I always did this!”

“Che.” But he allows the touch for a few seconds.

“I guess I should go,” Naruto mumbles.

“Mmh,” Sasuke says, and Sasuke’s still a little sleepy, and at home now after all here in Naruto’s room, and he’s not going anywhere.

“Okay,” Naruto says, and at last tears himself away.

Dad and Tsunade fall quiet when he enters the study. Naruto’s sad to be surprised that Dad should stand up and embrace him.

And it should be fine now, a touch other than Sasuke’s, it shouldn’t burn him anymore.

It doesn’t, really. It just feels a little dead.

“Thank god,” Dad says, in his private voice, the one that shakes a little even though it’s not
rhetorically convenient. “Oh thank god.” Then when he steps back, hands still on Naruto’s shoulders, “You shouldn’t still be this desperate.”

Naruto shrugs. Tries to smile, and it hurts, sits like a lie on his mouth. “He doesn’t want me.”

Dad stills. He looks older now, older than Naruto remembers him. “He seemed – all right with you, during breakfast.”

What is your life, when you’re being seriously asked by your father if you raped someone? Naruto has never particularly wanted to be human, has never understood the recurrent shifter desire to be less, but he wants it now. God, he wants it now.

“He let me,” he says at last. “He just didn’t want to.”

“Tch,” Tsunade says. “Don’t give me that look.” She manhandles Naruto into sitting on the edge of Minato’s desk, placing hands coated in green energy on his head. “I’m not denying he’s had a hard life, but that doesn’t mean he’s not a racist sociopath.”

“He’s not,” Naruto argues. “He just – hates everyone.”

That’s one of the very few things Naruto’s ever said about Sasuke that Minato is unequivocally prepared to believe.

“I think,” Tsunade says rather shortly, noticeably not denying that Sasuke no doubt hates the exorcists too, “that I’m being as polite as can be expected to someone who crippled my husband.”

“Yeah,” Naruto says, more quietly but still clearly mutinous, squirming under her examination. “But…”

“I know,” Tsunade cuts him off. “I do know.”

“Yeah,” Naruto says again, but like they’re sharing a secret now. That too is Yui’s way of drawing people in, though she never smiled like Naruto, who grins so his cheeks are scrunched up until they resemble those of a hamster.

“Everything looks fine,” Tsunade decides at last, stepping back. “Reasonably fine. Considering the circumstances.”

“Stingy,” Naruto says. “I’m great.” But he stops in the doorway, looking back at Minato. “About going north. We should go soon.”

“Is there doubt?” Minato asks. And there is now, so much doubt. He doesn’t actually know Sasuke, who might be more fickle and more cruel than anticipated. It had been a pleasant surprise, never once hoped for, that he’d agree so quickly to exorcise for them.

“No,” Naruto says impatiently. “He doesn’t – he might not like me very much right now, but as I haven’t actually cut off pieces of him, I’m still kind of far and away the better alternative. We both want away from Orochimaru asap.”

“I’ll make the arrangements,” Minato says. “Tomorrow at the latest.”

Naruto nods absently, worrying his lip. “About Rock. They’ll obviously hate him because, you know. Mist Town. So I thought I should do it. I mean, he could take care of most of the demons, we could sell it to the humans as here, we brought you an exorcist, you’ve been trying to exterminate us for years and you venerate them, and they never did shit for you but now we’ve brought you a
fucking crusader – but yeah, anyway, that’s not going to go over so well with Rock, yeah? So I figured I’d better handle that. Get them in line too, so they’re not all chafing at the bit after being assimilated much sooner than they were counting on.”

“Learn to shield,” Minato says. “And then we’ll work from there.”

Then when Naruto’s gone – drawn, Minato thinks uncharitably, to Sasuke like a fish with a hook through the gills and not having the sense to mind – he turns to Tsunade. “Do you imagine he could really exorcise?”

“Possibly,” Tsunade says. “I wouldn’t have thought it before, but… Well, whatever his other failings, Sasuke certainly doesn’t lack for power. With what he contributes to the bond, Naruto might actually be able to heal himself faster than the exorcist energy can burn him. If Sasuke shields him, it’s not unfeasible.”

“He would,” Minato decides to believe. He let me, Naruto said, and Minato thinks again of Sasuke in his office, years ago, telling him to send Naruto away. Of Sasuke at breakfast, closing his fingers with no fuss and no hesitation around Kyuubi’s wrist.

“And,” Tsunade goes on, going through his papers, “you believe he’ll go north as some kind of demon slaying PR ambassador for us?”

The way Sasuke stared at Kakashi yesterday, with the dead eyes of someone murdered – Minato sympathises, of course, especially in view of how that’s the way Sasuke’s looked at his own family for years, but it also means Sasuke won’t be loyal to the exorcists. And he might not harbour any love for shifters, but… “I think Naruto put it best,” Minato says, remembering a tiny Naruto scrambling onto his lap and scrunching up his face, trying to sound scornful as he paraphrased, “‘He doesn’t have hobbies, he has a calling.’ Killing demons is, as far as I can tell, the only thing he’s interested in. I doubt it matters to him whom they’re currently targeting, as long as he can slay them.”

Tsunade makes a non-committal sound. She has never denied that Jiraiya was foolish to engage in that duel with Orochimaru. She has always agreed that he was stupid to disregard Sasuke’s presence, always maintained that he could have recovered better, if he’d been less bitter, less fond of drinking.

Minato too believes this. And all the same, Jiraiya is his father. Sasuke might technically be family, now, but Minato doesn’t love Sasuke and he doesn’t expect he ever will.

“A more interesting question,” Tsunade says, “is how Kushina will handle him.”

Minato pretends not to understand. It’s a tactic that serves you surprisingly well in public life, but has never worked in private, at all.

“Naruto,” Tsunade says, merciless and amused by his pretence, “might be sentimental, and very fond of Konohamaru. Sasuke’s not, and Sasuke’s a power-hungry little bitch.” She waves away an objection that doesn’t come. “He’s power-hungry the way that people who have been powerless are, the sort of hungry that can’t be sated. And we all know Konohamaru’s less suited to be Hokage than Naruto.”

“Konohamaru’s twelve,” Minato points out. “It’s hardly a fair comparison.”

“Compare him to Naruto at twelve. Or Naruto at six. Either case, the comparison’s not favourable to Konohamaru.”

“Kushina will do what’s in the best interest of our people,” Minato says. It might be true.
“Step back and let her son be disinherited in favour of your mistress’ love child?”

“You never liked her,” Minato remarks. There’s no real emotion left in the words, all these years too late.

“Yui? No, you know I didn’t.”

A weak-minded, foolish girl, that was always his mother’s take on Yui. Still Tsunade hadn’t interfered, making it insultingly plain that she assumed he’d grow out of his infatuation eventually. If Yui had lived, maybe he would have. But she died brutally and because of his failure to protect her, died at the height of his love for her, and so stepped onto a pedestal that time can never erode.

And so in a sense he’s been living in an afterwards, ever since. Like he’d been part of a fairy tale, and then they reached ever after, but he was stupid and didn’t realise his story was over so he just kept going, even though it was all done, there was nothing else left.

That’s untrue and inexcusable, a selfish and childish view of life. He has children he loves, a tribe to govern, a wonderful wife.

He returns to his desk. It’s in one of its drawers that he keeps the photo of Yui. It’s a picture of an elfin, smiling woman, small the way that makes her pregnancy look almost grotesque. She’s shy about it, in the picture, resting a hand just on the side of her hip, half obscuring, half framing the swell of her stomach. Across the back of the photo is scrawled in Kakashi’s adolescent handwriting, Alone, most strangely, I live on.

Minato’s first child, the child he took under his wing when he was still a child himself – a piercing-eyed, mute-mouthed exorcist who’d fallen through all the safety nets and was going to hit the ground alone.

He’s cuttingly aware that it was unfair to ask Kakashi to bring Sasuke here, though he hadn’t realised just how unfair until he saw them together, smelled them all over each other.

It’s fortunate in the extreme, then, that Sasuke’s amenable to being their pet exorcist, because Kakashi has repaid his debts now and will not help Minato again.

I never intended for you to be hurt, Minato could say, and it would be true, but it would also be a cheap excuse because he can’t regret it. The fact that he didn’t know – well, he should have known. He should have been better, should have found a way to save Naruto without making Kakashi choose between people and so lose them all.

His hand comes to rest automatically on the drawer that contains the picture, but he hasn’t opened it in years and he doesn’t now.

Kakashi never liked Yui either, though unlike Tsunade he certainly never said so.

He looks at me as though I’ve stolen something from him, Yui used to say, uneasy around the child she had never been able to regard as a child, a failure she was ashamed of.

It the end, when she had been taken, it was Kushina who called Kakashi. He came striding into Minato’s office on silent assassin feet, and sat down on the edge of the desk. He never usually touched anyone, but he was close enough, then, that his side brushed against Minato’s slumped shoulder. “I assumed,” he said, in that cold quiet voice of his, a night-time voice in the bright daylight, “that you hadn’t contacted me because you had this in hand.”

“I,” Minato said helplessly. It had been some time, at that point, since he’d spoken to Kakashi, who
had long since grown friendly with the Uchihas. Even now, Minato thinks, he’s probably still friends with Itachi. And Kakashi was no longer an unwanted little runt, a traitor’s child, but a crusader prodigy. The light of God sizzled and burned under his skin; in the air was the faint, white-on-white outline of wings.

Kakashi’s voice grew quieter then, came rusty and broken, and gradually Minato understood that this was Kakashi trying to speak softly, to show care, perhaps even tenderness: “I’ll take care of it.”

In the end there was never anything to be done, never time for Kakashi to take care of anything, because less than thirty hours later Yui was dead.

Kakashi had come back to see him, after. Then too Minato had been in his office, behind this very desk, and this was the moment when he broke.

People make such a big production of it, he’d always associated the idea of breaking with torture, with powerful cinematic scenes. In actuality it was a mundane occurrence, he was sitting in his chair behind his desk, in an office grown stuffy with his sweat and his anxiety, and quietly and without any fuss he had broken.

Kakashi had perceived this immediately, and has never forgiven him for it. He said, quietly, with an edge of something not quite sadness and not quite irony, “Yet each man kills the thing he loves.”

Minato supposes, coldly, he seems always to be cold lately, that Kakashi has lived by that motto now, handing over Sasuke.

This is not, he thinks. This is not who I wanted to be.

“Appointing Naruto as my successor would lead to massive strife, especially given Sasuke. Anyway – there’s little point to this discussion before Konohamaru’s been bonded.”

“Quite,” Tsunade agrees. Nobody expected her to love Naruto, the cause of so much regret and so much public embarrassment, but he charmed her from day one. With some difficulty, perhaps, because she’s always championed Kushina, but there can be no doubt which grandson she would have wished to be legitimate. “I suppose Naruto will finally understand, now.”

“Yes,” Minato agrees. Remembers Naruto defiantly confused, and convinced he would find a cure for the bond compulsion. He will know it now, the existential imperative that turns you into an animal, helpless in the yoke of instinct. Naruto too will have done things, now, that he never wanted to do, that he wouldn’t have thought he could live with.

The difference, of course, is that if asked who in all the world he would like for his mate, there can be no doubt whom Naruto would choose. No, that’s not quite right: it wouldn’t seem to Naruto like a choice at all.

If only, Minato thinks, it were a choice, or at the very least something you could predict. He hasn’t allowed himself this thought since before he married Kushina, because once he’d sworn the love oaths and put the ring on her finger, it would be too unfair, too hypocritical.

But Naruto has always made him hypocritical, and looking after him now he thinks: if only it didn’t hit you like cancer – sudden and deadly, and there might be indicators, predictors, you try and you hope for someone who won’t kill you, whom you could love, but in the end it just hits you, and maybe you’re lucky and maybe you’re not.

Usually, people do bond with someone they know. Someone they’re close to, even. Usually, but far, far from always.
“My concern at the moment,” Tsunade breaks in, “is the seal. It’s not gone, you know, and a broken seal in addition to the bond will mean considerable strain.”

“How bad?” The real question is who they can get to subdue the seal. Orochimaru certainly won’t be willing, but Kakashi’s burnt his bridges with Orochimaru now and wouldn’t want Sasuke hurt – perhaps even Itachi…?

Tsunade shrugs. She looks like she’d like to have a drink, and Minato has little doubt that she’ll indulge this desire very shortly. “Given the intense psychological trauma he’s sustained over the last few years, I wouldn’t be surprised by a psychotic break.”

“Jesus Christ,” Minato mutters. So what was this all for? Another useless rescue, another instance of risking everything for somebody already lost… “This was never fair to Kushina, to Konohamaru – to anyone really.”

“Minato,” she says, her voice softer suddenly. She’s speaking to him in a way she hasn’t in years and years, speaking to him as her child. “You’re still torn by this absurd notion that a parent must always love their children equally.”

“I love Konohamaru.”

“I know. And I know you love Kushina. But you don’t love her the way you loved Yui.”

He’s reminded of another one of Kakashi’s ubiquitous quotes. Minato himself was never a great reader, thinks of the words as belonging to Kakashi although Kakashi, always meticulous, had no doubt provided the correct citation. I do love Akari, I suppose. I love her because she’s beautiful, and kind, and because she loves me, and because I know she deserves my love. I guess I love her, if that’s what love is. But it’s not the same way I love Akane. Akane is beautiful, and she is kind, but I don’t love her because of all those things. I love Akane because I love her, I really cannot say anything other than that.

“You know Kushina’s always saying Naruto’s too soft to be Hokage,” he says, aimless words.

Tsunade catches them easily. “Well. That won’t be a problem anymore, not with his mind chained to Sasuke’s.”

People used to say the same thing about Minato. He supposes Yui’s kidnapping and subsequent death proved them right.

Nobody’s said it since.
“Did He who made the Lamb make Thee?”

“Well?”

“I don’t know,” Shikamaru says, adult speak for troublesome. “More reasonable than I’d expected?” Ino, he remembers, was infatuated with and idolised Sasuke for years. Tiresome years, truth be told, because Shikamaru never saw the charm and Ino’s incessant repetition of the same old Sasuke verse eroded what little liking Shikamaru might once have managed to scrape together for him.

He also recalls that it’s been some time, now, since Ino mentioned him. He imagines it would be hard to sustain that kind of crush, once Ino grew old enough to understand about Orochimaru, whose appearance in the story rather undermines the idea of Sasuke as the dashing prince.

“You?” Kiba says. “Huh. Reckon he understands his place, then? So we won’t have to force him.”

“How would you have done that?” Shikamaru asks. Hears his own lazy drawl tinged with irritation, and turns his back on Kiba to look at the clouds, visible through the haze of bullet-proof windows.

“It could be done,” Kiba argues.

“Of course it could,” Shikamaru says. “I’m just curious how you’d think to accomplish it, given that any harm done him is a harm done to Naruto.”

“It hardly matters now,” Temari cuts in.

Shikamaru shrugs. It will matter.

“Go on, then,” Kiba says.

“All right, all right, jeez.”

They were all curious, of course. And while nobody particularly likes Sasuke, it’s imperative that his integration is accomplished in some manner that doesn’t cause too much harm, to Naruto or to the rest of them.

So Shikamaru has been elected their unlikely ambassador, on the unmentioned, unmentionable premise that he too is a non-shifter bonded into the family.

On the strength of this rather dubious credential, he knocks on Naruto’s door, and a little while later opens Naruto’s door.

The room’s a mess as usual, incongruous backdrop to Sasuke neat and crisp and cross-legged on Naruto’s bed. Shikamaru reminds himself not to be alarmed that he appears to be doing something on Naruto’s computer: they might have taken his mobile yesterday, might have locked him up behind a door composed of seven layers of reinforced steel yesterday, but today Sasuke is not a prisoner.

“Hi,” Shikamaru says.

Sasuke says nothing, which is hardly unexpected. He just stares at Shikamaru, in that constipated way of spoilt children who have learnt to use their silence as a demand.

“I’m supposed to welcome you into the family,” Shikamaru offers, rather dryly.

Sasuke lifts a doubtful eyebrow. Shikamaru’s interested to note that he’s entirely unmarked, that
where Shikamaru had expected scrapes, some light bruising, there’s only smooth skin. An enormous jumper is sprawled over the bed beside Sasuke’s hip – what he’d ever wanted with that, in the unseasonable heat, is acutely unclear – and the slipping neckline of his shirt reveals the edge of the seal. Shikamaru would have liked, instinctively, to study it more closely, but of course closer perusal would tell him nothing.

He would have thought, did think originally, that there must be more written on the subject of magic: that it was censorship, secrecy, that kept the human libraries so empty. As Temari’s bonded, a shifter inlaw with access to the internal libraries, surely there should be more. He’s since discovered that shifters seem to adhere to the idea that explaining magic to humans is much like explaining colours to a blind man, and exorcist writings are esoteric and religious, you’d have to know more magic than Shikamaru does to be able to tell what’s metaphor and what’s instruction. *Have humans*, Temari asked him at last, *written many volumes on how to move one’s arm? Either you can already do it, and then you don’t need it explained, or you can’t do it, and then no explanation will help.*

Sasuke could tell, he imagines. The exorcist texts that Shikamaru’s pored over, Sasuke could tell what’s prayer and what’s spell. But he won’t be telling Shikamaru.

Uselessly, he thinks of Eliot, of all bloody things. *I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each. I do not think that they will sing to me.* Shikamaru’s not his kind, and will not be sung to.

“Do I know you?”

Shikamaru blinks. Eventually it becomes clear that Sasuke, frowning at him with no great interest and no little hostility, isn’t putting on insulting airs. Sasuke genuinely has no idea who he is.

“I figured you did,” he says at last. “Shikamaru Nara. I’m friends with Ino? Ino Yamanaka?”

Sasuke makes a dismissive gesture that Shikamaru can only interpret as meaning that of course he knows Ino. Well, Ino’s a sociable girl, he supposes, and Sasuke’s never paid more attention to her than he can help. It’s not entirely implausible, in retrospect, that he’d have little recollection of a random human she’d befriended.

“I’m here with Temari Sabaku,” he says.

“Ah.” Still no particular interest, but definite recognition.

“Really?” Shikamaru drawls. “You don’t know me as the friend of a fellow exorcist, but you keep up with shifter gossip?”

Sasuke snorts. “I know you as the loadstone around Temari’s neck.”

“That’s a little harsh.”

Sasuke doesn’t sound combative, or no more than he always does, which is considerably. “Is it? A mate bond means magic becomes a shared resource, you have nothing to contribute.”

“You wound me,” Shikamaru dead-pans.

Sasuke shrugs. It’s a strange movement, on someone so young: a brittle, jagged, uneven movement, born of a broken body. The shoulder with the seal can’t move naturally.

Looking at it, it dawns on Shikamaru that part of the design isn’t actually part of the design, but teeth marks. Kyuubi’s fangs went in there, and must have gone in far more brutally than Shikamaru’s experienced, for the mark of them still to linger.
Sasuke says, on that shrug, “You took the Sabakus out of the running.”

Shikamaru supposes he did. An insignificant human, single-handedly settling the Namikaze/Sabaku leadership feud, and accidentally at that. Gaara’s crazy, Kankurou’s dead, and Temari – well, Temari has a loadstone around her neck.

“Well,” Shikamaru says, carefully not looking Sasuke in the eye: giving the impression of looking elsewhere, so Sasuke won’t guard his face so closely, “I suppose everyone was hoping for a match between her and Naruto.” Which would have settled things conclusively between Naruto and Konohamaru, because with the Sabaku heiress bonded to Naruto, there’d be an excuse to allow the bastard to inherit over the legitimate heir.

But this will be old news to Sasuke, who merely shrugs again. “Everyone except Naruto.”

“Mmh,” Shikamaru says. It’s an agreement, because no, Naruto didn’t want that. “It seems a little unfair, that Naruto alone should get what he wants.”

Sasuke, whose life has admittedly been something less than fair, says, “And is it Naruto or me that you’re currently trying to suck up to?”

Shikamaru’s interested to note that Sasuke says Naruto’s name in an easy, proprietary manner, as though Naruto has always belonged to him.

He looks past Shikamaru, over Shikamaru’s shoulder, which becomes less insulting when Shikamaru discovers Naruto approaching behind him.

Did Temari look at him like that? No, Shikamaru decides, not with quite that edge of helpless yearning. Shikamaru, after all, didn’t make trouble about the bond. Something like ninety percent of Shikamaru’s life is dedicated to avoiding trouble.

“Shikamaru,” Naruto says absently. His distant, distracted nod tells Shikamaru the same thing Sasuke’s supercilious scowl told him: you’re irrelevant. Naruto’s way of moving around him is the way Naruto moves around furniture.

And Naruto’s always liked Shikamaru, and so will be sad, angry too and bewildered but mostly sad, that he can only register Shikamaru as an obstacle. Can only feel relief that very soon it’s gone, and he can sink down on the bed next to Sasuke.

He’s careful, so achingly careful about it, and being careful has never come naturally to him, it sits awkward and stinging in his bones. But it’s like he broke through a physical barrier, breaking into Sasuke’s mind, so that now there’s shattered glass all over Sasuke’s thoughts and Sasuke has to tread carefully, carefully through his own head or he will be cut to shreds.

“You’re using my computer,” Naruto points out.

“Sasukesux wasn’t a very hard password to decipher even when we were actually seven,” Sasuke informs him.

Naruto argues that it was in fact fiendishly cunning: he’s not clever about this stuff, so trying to come up with a password too complicated to crack but simple enough to remember was never a realistic option. This way, Sasuke would have to humiliate himself in order to hack the computer, a much more efficient deterrent than tricky passwords.

Once, when Naruto was younger, at the same time more innocent and more vulgar, the password had been sasukesuxcox, but of course that was before Orochimaruu.
“What’re you doing?” he mumbles, sprawling on the bed, torn this way and that by the impulse to get closer, always closer, and his attempts to counter it.

“Checking exorcist reactions,” Sasuke says without looking away from the screen, “to my abrupt change of residence.”

“And?”

“None.”

“None,” Naruto repeats. “What do you mean, none? That’s absurd. We basically – it was for a good cause and all but like, we kidnapped you.”

“They didn’t react seven years ago, they’re not going to react now. At least not yet. They’ll be waiting to see where the chips fall.” Sasuke’s fingers move over the keyboard, and angling his head Naruto catches sight of Neji Hyuuga’s sullen, over-pretty face in the corner of the chat window.

“Orochimaru,” Naruto says, pressing the side of his face to Sasuke’s hip, so his cheek is squeezed flat against it, flayed on the sharp edge of Sasuke’s hip bone. “He’ll be furious.”

“He’s actually quite pleased.”

“Uh, what.”

Sasuke doesn’t quite shrug. Shrugging is a flagellant movement, a punishing reminder of the crippling mark. “Kimimaro only confirmed what I already knew.”

“Is this some kind of weird, if you love something, let it go? Because nobody said so, but if he’d been willing to part with you at any cost, Dad would’ve paid.”

“Your father told me Orochimaru wouldn’t give me up,” Sasuke says quietly. “Maybe he believed it, maybe he was just trying to flatter me. But it’s not true. If the price was right – this was just better. He’ll have realised what Minato wanted me for, he knew if he refused then Minato would just take me, and then he’d be the victim. He’ll regain a lot of standing with the exorcists that way, and he can demand more in compensation from Minato, to avoid open war, than he’d have been able to get support for extracting as a price if he sold me outright.”

Naruto holds himself still for a long moment, a moment that shudders and eventually shatters. “I will never give you up.”

“I know,” Sasuke says. “You belong to me.”

“Yes.”

Sasuke’s hand hovers in the air, no longer anchored by the keyboard. Naruto catches it, brings it to his mouth with the vague idea of making a joke of Sasuke’s ownership, make it something so they can stand it, maybe kissing the back of his hand in parody of feudal tradition. He hadn’t counted on it being so erotic, on wanting so much to suck on the sharp ridge of Sasuke’s knuckles.

He must have got a little better at shielding, because Sasuke doesn’t shudder away. Just extracts his hand, swats Naruto on the nose, and returns to the computer, typing something to Neji.

Naruto idly wonders if Neji’s a stuck up little bitch generally, or if that’s only to people he’s being racist to. It’s a better subject to contemplate than how mad Sasuke would be if Naruto tackled him.
He still hasn’t reached a definite conclusion when Kiba appears in the doorway. “Guys! We’re going.”

Kiba hesitates there, on the clear impulse to do something, say something, to achieve some manner of clean slate with Sasuke. Kiba never has been able to stomach exorcists, and there have been years now of him trying and mainly failing to aggravate Sasuke. The hesitation grows, and then dissipates: Sasuke’s bitch face has deterred people far more determined than Kiba.

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They’ve been in the car for about four hours, after the long stint on the plane, when Sasuke finally decides to speak in more than monosyllables. He says, “Will you fucking stop it.”

Kiba stares at him, until Temari kicks his leg; Shikamaru and the guards engage in tactful deafness.

“I’m trying,” Naruto hisses.

“If this is the best shielding you can manage, there’s not point to any of this,” Sasuke sneers.

Unfortunately, this is true.

Naruto shouldn’t have to try but has been trying, ever since they left: trying to feel at home, to soak in sudden health and familiar camaraderie. He could’ve laughed and talked naturally, could’ve done it and meant it, if only Sasuke didn’t resent it so much. If he could just… press his face to Sasuke’s neck, right under his ear, where his smell is strong. Sneak his hands under Sasuke’s shirt, touching him and pulling him closer. He’d kiss the nape of Sasuke’s neck, the bony part where shoulder turns into nape and Sasuke’s skin heats under his touch, kiss the inside of his elbow, a sucking kiss and his mouth would come away red and – he gasps away from the fantasy, lightheaded and hot with nausea.

In his mind he’s reaching for Sasuke, fingers snapping closed like padlocks around Sasuke’s wrist.

“You okay?” Temari’s hand on his arm, making his stomach twist because it’s not Sasuke’s hand. And the unspoken continuation, an unwelcome echo of this morning: you shouldn’t be this desperate.

But Sasuke still doesn’t want him, and anyway Temari and Shikamaru hardly left their room the first few days after they’d been bonded.

“I’m great,” he says, and she says nothing but takes her hand away.

He looks at Sasuke’s hands instead, helplessly drawn to long thin fingers, knuckles like a minor mountain ridge, bones and veins visible under pale skin and sparse flesh.

Kyuubi shades his fantasies red, turns them in the direction of breaking Sasuke’s fingers, small and hard and exquisite, between his jaws. To swallow them down where they become part of Naruto, inseparable and more, unidentifiable as anything separate from him. Nuzzling Sasuke’s heart, the tough red skin of it, the muscle pulsing in the open cradle of Sasuke’s broken ribs. To touch Sasuke’s insides, the deepest darkest places of him, and take him irretrievably into himself.

“Cut it out,” Sasuke hisses.

“I’m sorry!” Naruto snaps miserably. “I’m trying!”

Sasuke sneers. Genma – and holy shit, Naruto told Dad Genma was the wrong person for this
mission – abruptly starts screaming. Something light and unforgiving twists through Naruto’s insides, something that feels like the end of Naruto, and Genma burns.

Amidst the yelling and the panic, Naruto fists his hands in the front of Sasuke’s jumper, shaking him. “What the hell are you doing!”

Sasuke fucking smirks at him. “Distracted yet?”

“Yes!” Naruto roars at him. “Yes, now fucking stop!” He claws at the bond, punches Sasuke in the face.

Sasuke doesn’t even try to avoid it. Makes a sound like laughter as his head is thrown back, and Naruto’s fingers burn and splinter against the magic curled tight and alive under Sasuke’s skin.

But Genma does, eventually, stop burning. He ends up curled on the floor, a lot of him…gone. The medics move him to another car, better equipped for treating him.

The stench of burning flesh remains, and the ashes on the floor where he lay.

“What the fuck,” Naruto demands.

Sasuke looks at him steadily. “I don’t have to put up with this kind of shit anymore.”

“Outside. Now.”

“Naruto,” Temari cuts in. “We need to get Genma properly hospitalised asap. Fight later”

xxxxx

It’s an incredibly tense half an hour later that they stop at a filling station outside a relatively large town. Naruto, for the first time, stops staring at Sasuke, because now that he can move again, can actually go outside – but they need to hurry. The seat under him is shredded, his fingers still clawed.

“I’m gonna see if Genma needs anything.”

“Maybe bring lover boy along, okay.”

It’s nothing short of painfully obvious that nobody wants to be left alone with Sasuke, who smirks like a psycho but does let Naruto tug him along out of the car. “Do you think Genma will be happy to see me?”

“Cut this shit out.”

Sasuke stares back at him, clearly on the verge of saying something incredibly spiteful.

“Look,” Naruto tells him. Tells both of them. “We have a common goal here. Settling things up north, getting the demons exorcised. Uniting the shifters.”

Sasuke doesn’t need to speak to make it clear that uniting the shifters is no goal of his.

“It’s my goal,” Naruto says. “And we’re a team now.”

“I’m not a team player.”

They’re interrupted there. A handful humans, and someone who’s not, who smells wrong.
“Well, well, well, what have we here? A merry troupe of shifters? Travel permits in order, I hope.” He smiles. “Don’t growl at me now, you know very well shifters aren’t allowed unregulated travel in these regions.” He stops then, in the middle of a step. “Sasuke?”

“Mami.”

Mami smiles far more genuinely. “I knew you’d come down in the world, but to imagine I’d have to rescue you from a shifter gang. Tsk, tsk, tsk.”

Naruto steps in between them on instinct.

Mami lifts a hand. It’s a lazy, negligent movement, the movement of someone absolutely sure he has the situation in hand. A strong exorcist then, possibly a crusader – will he try to wipe Naruto out, exorcise him? It’s flashier and more efficient if it works, but it takes far more energy than just burning. Wiping people with material bodies is after all much more difficult than wiping demons, and only a crusader could wipe a powerful shifter.

He never finds out, because Sasuke steps up close to Mami, effectively cutting of whatever attack he was aiming at Naruto. There’s an inside pull, something glittering sharply across Sasuke’s hand, and then Mami’s face erupts.

Sasuke extracts Kyuubi’s claw in an artery spray of blood.

They’re on the humans before the humans can even register what’s happening. Naruto goes through them like a meat cleaver, with Sasuke like some sort of killing machine beside him. They always have fought well together, fought other people almost as well as they fight each other.

The matter is dealt with, is bodies on the ground, by the time Kiba and Raidou are out of the car. “Clean up,” Sasuke says, wiping Mami’s lifeblood from his face with his sleeve. He’ll know to duck next time he channels Kyuubi’s claws.

“Hurry up,” Naruto agrees. “Get Shikamaru on the surveillance.”

“Bring the bodies,” Sasuke decides. “Easier than to dispose of them here.”

Temari tugs at Naruto’s arm, not gently. “Get in. Get cleaned up. Both of you. Now.”

When the car starts rolling again they’re still washing up. It’s trickier than it should be, with no mirror and a limited water supply. With the aching urge to lick the blood off Sasuke’s jaw.

Naruto says, he has to say, “What we did. I don’t like to do that.”

“Liar.”

“I don’t like that I like it.” He rubs his hands dry on his jeans. Swallows. Moves on. “You knew that arsehole?”

The left corner of Sasuke’s mouth lifts, a halfbreed smirk. “He had it coming. And I like liking it.” He remembers, and Naruto remembers with him, a balmy evening and the taste of ash. This was before Naruto had ever met Sasuke, this happened in Japan, where Naruto has never set foot.

It was possibly the first time Orochimaru saw Sasuke. He was visiting, and someone he’d brought with him, some shifter driven to the edge, had become violent.

Because of this, Sasuke killed a man when he was four. What he chiefly remembered afterwards was
the simplicity. How he just had to say it.

Deus vult, in a Japanese accent so thick, Naruto wouldn’t have recognised the words if he’d heard them.

Sasuke said it, meant it, and he didn’t go hot and he didn’t go cold as the man burned and died. Natural born killer, Orochimaru said afterwards, his ruffling hand like a thorn crown on Sasuke’s head.

In the present Naruto arrives at the far more salient point, “You had Kyuubi claws.”

Sasuke smirks. “I’ve wanted to do that since…”

“Yeah,” Naruto says, grinning back after all. Sasuke’s wanted to do that since he saw Naruto accidentally eviscerate that child molester lorry driver when they were nine. He returns to his seat, Sasuke following. “And we obviously make a great team. Forming a shifter federation isn’t incompatible with your goals, so suck it up. You’re on Team Naruto now!”

Sasuke pointedly says nothing, and Naruto’s distracted by Temari checking the snuff film on her phone. If a shifter kills an exorcist – that’s unforgivable to both exorcists and humans, that will mean a shifter cleansing, several settlements burnt or bombed, thousands of shifters annihilated. But Sasuke’s an exorcist himself, and a far stronger and more valuable one than Mami. The video’s blurry and starts in the middle of things, but it’s clear that it’s Sasuke slicing up Mami’s face.

“Thank god,” Temari snaps. There’s silence then, and Naruto manages an hour or two of sleep.

He wakes to hear Sasuke demand of Kiba and Temari. “You knew about me. Since when?”

Kiba snorts out a laugh, leaning forward. Kiba will forgive you almost anything, if you cut up an exorcist, and Genma after all is still alive. “Since Naruto tried to jump out of the car after you.”

“I did not!”

“Gaara had to practically sit on you.”

Naruto doesn’t remember that. It might be true though, everything was hazy around that one searing image, just bleak background to Sasuke’s centre figure.

“Really,” Sasuke says. His pulse is visible in his throat, perceptible in his wrist where it presses briefly against Naruto’s leg. Sasuke’s here talking to his friends and it’s not catastrophe, and Naruto had thought that would mean more. He can feel himself leaning closer, cutting the inside of his cheek on a fang. Presses his forehead against Sasuke’s shoulder, which is bony even through two layers of clothing, alive with magic that sings to Naruto.

And if Naruto could just lean away – except if he leant back he’d be doing it with his arms already locked around Sasuke, would end up lying across the backseat with Sasuke all over him, fingers knotted in his hair. He wouldn’t know how to let him up.

It shouldn’t be like this again, because he knows now, knows from inside Sasuke’s head how he resents this, and that should change everything, but here he is rock hard and red-faced again.

“Naruto,” and Sasuke’s voice is level and autocratic, despite being so low it would have been private, if this had been a human gathering. Sasuke must be more upset than he’d realised, to forget about shifter hearing. “Do you actually need to?”
The world slows down, until they’re sitting in a frozen timeframe.

“We already – I’m not going to die, now.”

“I know you sell it to the humans as a one-off sacrifice, but cut the bullshit. If I never touch you again – you won’t die but you’ll weak and ill and miserable. I’ll feel you be weak and ill and miserable. And it would be a waste and – it’s not like you’re repulsive. So do you need to?”

And how is it possible to tell someone you’ve forced yourself into that him not wanting you is like death?

“No,” Naruto says, shamed into proper shielding for really the first time. “I don’t need to.”

“Good. When you do, tell me. If you wait until Kyuubi goes berserker rapist on me, I’m going to fry him.”
Skinny Love Just Last the Year

Kakashi has never liked Neji Hyuuga, who’s really nothing more than the poor man’s Sasuke Uchiha: a beautiful prodigy broken by his family. Neji’s much less stylish about it, much more a whimper than a scream.

“I talked to him,” Neji says. “He was all right.” He’s not speaking to Kakashi, which shows what he knows.

“Indeed,” Itachi says. To Neji’s ears he’ll sound inscrutable, but Kakashi hears the tint of surprise. He doesn’t turn around as Itachi steps past Neji, who will be made to feel by the movement that he’s dismissed.

“It was an unexpected thing you did,” Itachi tells him at last, when Neji’s gone.

“It shouldn’t have been,” Kakashi says. “Not to you.”

Itachi after all had asked him, months ago, What do you want with him?

Kakashi had smiled, the empty smile, the scarecrow smile. To place him like a seal over my heart.

In the present Itachi makes a non-committal sound. “Mother was upset.”

There’s no polite reply to this. While Itachi understands that his parents are hypocrites and weak, he’d hardly relish Kakashi pointing it out. Kakashi, who has never defended his own parents nor felt driven to, would not.

In any case Itachi’s parents aren’t the issue. “I owed it to Minato.”

“He’s a shifter.”

“You should have done it, then.”

Again Itachi sounds surprised, now that Kakashi has long since stopped trying to provoke it. However there’s no doubt, no hesitation. Itachi never doubts. Itachi is a true believer. “I certainly don’t owe Minato Namikaze anything.”

“I meant because you owed it to Sasuke.” He hasn’t looked at Itachi since Itachi arrived, and he doesn’t now. Keeps his eyes on the sun, what little there is to be seen of it beyond the thickening clouds.

“What was done to Sasuke was done for the greater good.”

Kakashi smiles. It’s his default expression, these days. He used to keep his face perfectly expressionless, but that takes such effort, it’s so obvious when someone has broken through your masks, your shields, exposed the raw pulp underneath. It’s better to smile, to channel any emotion into the same unchanging and thus safely meaningless expression. He’s looked at the smile in a mirror and it looks like a wound in his face. “I’ve never understood why you imagine that should matter.”

“Children die every day – very many children, and very horribly – why should he matter more?”

“I don’t know,” Kakashi says, and then after Itachi’s silence has changed, has become victorious: “He just does.” There’s defeat in the words, but no doubt. This one thing he can say with Itachi’s
absolute conviction, which has lead Itachi to so much glory and so much death.

Itachi lifts his right hand, pointing at a leftover demon that his gestures purifies out of existence. Watching him, Kakashi remembers explaining exorcising to a kindergarten-aged Naruto: _Everything is beautiful and nothing hurts._

Itachi’s voice comes calm and contemplative. “Are you suggesting we should rather have entered into WW4?”

Kakashi turns away from the setting sun, making for the car. “Sasuke was one part of those negotiations.”

“A key part,” Itachi says, but he accepts the move, away from the battlefield and away from the conversation.

They have driven for several miles – Kakashi’s sipping a gigantic slushie and listening to a radio show teetering on the fine line between absurd and absurdist – when Itachi, looking steadily ahead through the windshield like a responsible driver, finally says, “You really believe it wouldn’t matter to Sasuke that it was done for the greater good?”

“How can that possibly not be obvious to you?”

“It was some time since I spoke to him,” Itachi says carefully.

There’s a question in that, and Kakashi is too worn down, has loved Itachi for too long, to resist it. “I do know him.”

“Yes,” Itachi says, dryly, lightly. “Biblically, I should imagine. No – don’t answer that. He was…”

And Itachi sighs, and touches his own face, in a gesture that will one day too soon mean rubbing at his own wrinkles. “He was always a little attention whore. You take care of him.”

Kakashi smiles.

In his head there’s a lapsed conversation, put on pause in Minato’s office as he searches for a reply.

*Why would I want you here?* Sasuke demanded.

*Because I didn’t want to betray you* is not something you can say to someone you have betrayed.

And in the end it’s quite plain. Kakashi has no excuses.

He first discovered this when his father failed, and he first experienced the need for them; when he first found himself deemed wanting, found himself standing accused _do you have anything to say for yourself_, and came up empty.

It was a long time after that before he had anything to say again.

He was little, too little to reach things on the table without the help of a chair, too little to understand the problem. They brought orders to his father, and his father did well with orders, he was White Fang, a great warrior of God.

The orders weren’t about demons this time, but to exterminate a shifter settlement. His father was unhappy, for reasons unknown, made a face and then made a ruckus.

This made no sense, because orders were orders, and shifters weren’t real people. They were only *like* real people. Probably some sort of demon spawn, his teachers had said, some sort of halfbreeds –
halfwits certainly, the lot of them, only half human.

Still his father wouldn’t do it, or his mother either, though she was sad to say so. They told him – indirectly, they were ostensibly talking to other people, but they must have known he could sneak quietly these days so certainly they were also telling him – that Uncle Jiraiya was a shifter, which was an absurd lie because Uncle Jiraiya had always been kind and clearly human.

So his father wouldn’t do it, he went against the mission and was shunned.

And Kakashi was not a good enough reason for his parents to stay alive, after. They received orders to martyr themselves, and these orders they did obey.

He had no excuse for that.

The only way to handle this was to make sure he would never again need excuses.

Orphaned, he was sent to boarding schools and training camps, and eventually on missions. He did the work of God, honoured his duty, fought for this world that his parents had failed to protect.

It was on a late summer day when the grass had turned brown and he was walking home from the shops that he saw was his father had chosen to protect.

Uncle Jiraiya’s heavy, sloping bulk, and behind him a blond boy that Kakashi at first didn’t recognise. Jiraiya had aged, that much was evident although Kakashi only looked at him out of the corner of his eye. Jiraiya, too, looked away from him. That was for the best: Jiraiya belonged in the past, and should stay there.

It was Minato who looked at Kakashi. Minato, strange and golden, who had inherited Jiraiya’s lofty dreams. Kakashi’s parents had always said Jiraiya was brave, said he’d have to be to dream so big and so foolishly. He didn’t anymore, that was clear, but Minato looked at the world openly and brightly, like a challenge to be met.

Kakashi had thought, afterwards, that he should maybe mention something about a shifter approaching him, but then he’d need to bother the senior exorcists, need to speak… In the end he said nothing.

He especially didn’t say anything after Minato came looking for him. They were in a forest, no Jiraiya this time, no other people. Nothing worth protecting, like Kakashi wasn’t.

“I thought I recognised you,” Minato said. “I didn’t want to say until I was sure you wanted me to.”

Kakashi nodded, felt the movement jerky and too fast.

“How are you?”

Kakashi had nothing to say to that, so didn’t.

Minato nodded back. He looked sad, even when he smiled. “I’m very sorry about your parents. I didn’t understand, until after, and I… I hope you’re well. They did something very great, something I don’t know how to repay.”

Kakashi didn’t know either. Some lives are worth more than others, and shifter blood is cheap.

“Hey,” said Minato, and reached out in a movement like he’d ruffle Kakashi’s hair. Stopped short, so there was the gift of the intention without the intrusion of carrying it out.
And so into Kakashi’s tawdry, raw and lonely life stepped Minato Namikaze, this laughing blazing sun of a man. The arctic winter of childhood ended: the secret door appeared.

He belonged to Minato, then. Gave himself over in a sort of slavery to a bemused Minato, who’d never wanted to own another person.

Then of course there was Yui, and the door started closing. Kakashi had to stick his foot in to avoid being locked out. He knew Yui thought he was creepy, that he stared at her with greedy eyes. Woven into those covetous stares, into acidly polite conversation, was the insipid refrain, *he was mine first.*

Fortunately, he’d eventually been able to distract himself with Itachi, and later on with Sasuke.

He first met Itachi in a hospital corridor, shortly after getting his face scarred. He was very, very good at what he did, and the mission came first – before injury or disability, certainly before the stupid children, some of them trice his age, who were supposed to be his teammates. Because of that, he had demon energy trapped under his skin, flowing over his cheeks and chin and neck. Gabriel’s archangel light isolated and contained it, but couldn’t extinguish it.

So he was sitting in that corridor, in a quiet corner away from the beeping of the machines, when a short Asian kid walked by. When the boy pulled his ponytail over his shoulder, Kakashi saw the clan crest on the back of his shirt, and realised he wasn’t a stranger after all. The boy’s eyes in return skimmed over the clan mark on Kakashi’s sleeve, and then never looked at it again, even though everyone knew about the Hatake, about the greatness and the fall.

“I’m Itachi Uchiha,” he said, offering a tiny hand. They were about the same age but Itachi was built on miniature lines.

Kakashi took his hand. “Kakashi Hatake.” After a moment’s consideration, of Itachi’s silence blending with his own, he added, “I thought the mission went well?”

“It did. I’m here for my brother.” Itachi’s missions always went well, just like Kakashi’s. Another thing everyone knew. Itachi added, almost an excuse, “He’s very little.”

“Of course,” Kakashi said, and later when he saw Sasuke he understood.

A very little boy, Itachi had told the truth on that account. Framed by the large hospital bed and sedated, covered in bruises and bandages, he looked like a dying human child.

Kakashi had stopped by hoping to see Itachi, and was not much interested in an unconscious child he’d never met. He stayed for some time all the same, because there were adult voices in the corridor outside, audible if he stood very close to the door.

Someone unknown, possibly Ibiki Morino: “…is murder, Fugaku.”

Itachi’s father said something about how Itachi had been sent on missions at that age, to which hardly anyone had objected.

“Itachi,” Morino broke in, “is as close to the second coming as any of us are likely to see.”

He must have left then, because a woman spoke up, in an entirely private tone. “That’s enough. No, Fugaku – if you’d been sent on that mission at his age, you’d have died.” A colourless sigh, from this woman who must be Sasuke’s mother. “You might as well publicly beat him to death.”

Neither of them came into the room, which was convenient since Kakashi had no reason and no
excuse for being there.

Next time he saw Sasuke, there was no trace of the hospital on him. This was later, after Itachi had become a frequent coworker and had taken to sometimes bringing Kakashi home with him for breaks. Itachi’s parents didn’t mind: Kakashi had redeemed himself by then from the sin he inherited from his parents.

Sasuke, who followed Itachi and by extension Kakashi around like a persistent gnat, was an entirely different matter.

Kakashi wasn’t old enough to find children cute, but Itachi clearly did. He carried Sasuke around, ruffled his hair and poked his face, let him cling and blabber away in a language Kakashi didn’t understand.

He’d thought of Sasuke as shy but realised it might just be he didn’t speak much English yet, his words stilted and stiff. Every now and then he’d address Kakashi-niisan, which Kakashi didn’t know what it meant, but going by Itachi’s reaction it was apparently funny and rather sweet. Sometimes, it even seemed to make Itachi jealous, which was definitely funny and rather sweet.

This was in the days when Itachi loved Sasuke, the sort of love that would never have allowed Orochimaru to lay a finger on him.

Well, Sasuke's not the first person to be failed by love.

Itachi spoilt him, protected him, to a degree, from the cold humiliation of abandonment. That sort of kindness was cruel, because it couldn’t last, but then Sasuke was used to cruelty. Fugaku wouldn’t touch him, not even in punishment. Mikoto, who did touch, looked through him.

“They are weak,” Itachi said one evening, his face distant under bonfire shadows.

Kakashi had thought of them as strong, thought of them as warriors and leaders, but then he’d thought his own parents were strong too, before he knew better.

And so Sasuke was the way he was, shunned and spoilt and strange. Always top marks and with the snake eyes of killer instinct, but obviously he wasn’t fit for the battlefield. Morino, or whoever it was, had been right: sent on adult missions, Sasuke would die.

It was a few weeks later, during the first summer he spent with the Uchihas, that Kakashi discovered that he was wrong. Sasuke wouldn’t die, because Kakashi would protect him.

This revelation came to him on a day painted in the primary colours of childhood, with the sun hot on his hands and Sasuke’s noises in his ears. Itachi was quiet, the trained quiet of a soldier, the quiet that filled Kakashi’s life, and of which Sasuke was utterly incapable. He touched the boat railing too hard, walked across the planks too fast, breathed too loudly. He hung over the edge of the boat, reaching for the glitter of fish or perhaps just for the coldness of the water, hazy in sunlight so acute it left him almost a silhouette, branded his skin a sharp gold.

“Enough,” Kakashi said, getting up on his knees to reach for Sasuke, pull him back safely into the boat. His fingers very just closing around the back of Sasuke’s shirt when the world tipped over.

He was in the water then and not breathing. The world tipped over: who has tipped them, where’s the danger, how will he kill it?

But there were only Itachi and Sasuke, Kakashi’s sudden wings a white-golden haze bisecting Sasuke’s face. It was a distinctly displeased face, but an entirely unharmed one. He scrunched up his
nose and swatted at the wing.

Such trust in the world – in Itachi – Kakashi thought, with something altogether too numb to be surprise. To feel it break around you and be able to go with it.

Not actually very good at swimming, Sasuke looked to Itachi for rescue, but Itachi ignored him, busy righting the boat. Eventually, in gratitude for Itachi not mentioning his now retracted wings of paranoia, Kakashi fished him up. Stiff with humiliation and unfamiliarity, Sasuke nevertheless clung to him. Kakashi had hardly ever touched another person, not since his mother died, and never a child. Now there was this small, squirming, alien creature stuck to him, Sasuke’s feet climbing his ribs, and yes, Kakashi would protect this.

He thought that, was certain of that. It wasn’t the first time he was wrong.

Because it became clear that the world he’d built around himself was fragile, and in the end it broke around him like an egg shell under a hammer.

Sasuke was given over to Orochimaru, by Itachi, and so the Sasuke and the Itachi that Kakashi had known were gone, might as well have suddenly died from him.

Then Yui died, and so in essence did Minato: the Minato that Kakashi had loved. Everyone he’d ever tried to hold on to was gone.

There was Naruto instead, this little brat in screaming colour. He always carried a fox plushie, after Kakashi had finally resigned himself to the fact that Minato wouldn’t handle things, and had given it to him: a way of pretending that Kyuubi having opinions was just pretence. Because it was Kakashi, suddenly, who was the adult, like in those first chilly days after his parents were gone. Kakashi deciding that Naruto couldn’t be recognised as a shifter and be safe, Kakashi who had to find solutions, because Minato couldn’t take care of his son and Kushina wouldn’t. Naruto was down a mother and Sasuke was down a foot, and both of them were down a home: Naruto practically lived at Sakura’s house, for a few weeks, before Tsunade stepped in.

Though usually when Kakashi saw Naruto, it was because Naruto was around Sasuke. Naruto had been relatively fond of the Uchihas once, explained at one point that he liked the smell of Mikoto – that “she has mum smell, Kyuubi thinks so too”. Very early, that must have been, before Mikoto had ceased in any meaningful way to be Sasuke’s mother, and Naruto had taken against her.

After that, after Orochimaru, they were mostly fighting, eyes bleeding red with actually insane hatred. For the first time it became clear that Sasuke hadn’t been protected, not by Kakashi and not by anyone else, and he didn’t need to be. Ferocious and crazy, breaking and burning and, after all, the host of an archangel, Sasuke wouldn’t die.

The one time he was calm, during those first turbulent years, was when he understood that Kakashi knew. They were in one of those hellish corridors, linoleum and beige light, when Sasuke understood this, understood that Kakashi knew not only that he’d been entrusted into Orochimaru’s care, but also about what Orochimaru did to him. Something, Kakashi still thinks although that may be conceit, something died in Sasuke then. His parents had taken parts of him, and Orochimaru decimated most of what was left. More died slowly, gradually, winked out like a light that’s stood for a long time in a draft and finally goes out. Itachi refused to help him; Kakashi tried, once, took Sasuke by the hand and walked and walked, but where would they go? In the end he didn’t fight it, he surrendered Sasuke to Kabuto when they were confronted.

*Love had failed*, his mother’s favourite novel once told him. *Love was an emotion through which you occasionally enjoyed yourself. It could not do things.*
Sasuke seemed to be of the same opinion. No, he said years later, *I wasn’t surprised. If Itachi had taken me, he would have kept me. But you’re not Itachi.* He sounded off-hand about it, sitting in Kakashi’s desk chair pulling on his boots.

*Itachi did,* Kakashi pointed out in a lazy drawl, with something he told himself was just curiosity, *hand you over.*

Yes, Sasuke agreed, eyes on his own fingers, tying his laces. *What is it he always says?* And he looked up, with a sharp smirk like broken glass. *The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away.*

*I was hoping,* Kakashi said, in a slow, sugary, sarcastic voice, *that you’d say you know I would have never.*

Sasuke had snorted at him, not particularly unfriendly, twisting the laces to make the boot close around the narrow metal of his left foot.

Really Sasuke was never a subtle child. It was when his foot was gone that he stopped trying to run.

But all of that was years ago. Finished with the slushie, Kakashi chucks it into the backseat, turning up the volume on the radio and humming along to whatever insipid song is playing.

Itachi glances at him out of the corner of his eye. Kakashi is broken differently now. Love has rent him.

Regrettable, but really no surprise, because human love, greedy and incomplete, will do that. One needs to love God.

Kakashi would tell him to piss off, if he voiced these concerns, which is too bad for Kakashi.

xxxxx

“Let’s stop for a bit,” Temari says.

“But –”

“Let me rephrase. We will stop. Among other things because nobody wants you to pee yourself.”

Raidou snickers. The car stops.

Outside is a rainy afternoon, soft and grey as wet wool. They’ve arrived in one of those roadside villages that haven’t quite become towns, the sort you can walk straight through in an hour.

“Let’s go find lunch,” Kiba says, matching Naruto’s stretching. “I’m starving.”

“Might as well,” Naruto agrees.

It’s a relief, to be out of the city more than to be out of the car. Sasuke too moves more freely, more carelessly.

Some of the guards stay with the car, the rest of them start walking. They’re only two streets away when Sasuke stiffens. It’s a remarkably different stiffness from the one he’s displayed all morning, the haughty uncomfortable stiffness of a loner forced into company. This stiffness in contrast is anticipatory, predatory rather. “Demon.”

The sudden adrenalin rush is contagious and giddy. “Where?”
Sasuke just starts walking again, quicker now, with purpose. He does toss a, “Leave the human” over his shoulder.

“No worries,” Shikamaru mutters, letting the rest of them pass him by.

It’s no more than a block before Naruto can feel it too, the faint wrongness like hints of a poison gas in the air. The feeling is sharper than it used to be, more certain: tinged with Sasuke’s exorcist sensibilities. It’s another block before the others visibly become aware of the threat, so yes, this is Sasuke’s awareness, Sasuke’s magic a purgatory burn across the inside of Naruto’s face, leaving his skin tight and tingling.

There are, he thinks, no people. The demon must have been here a while, and this place must not be priority, must not have merited an exorcist. Whoever survived has fled or hidden.

Another street, picking up the pace, around the corner of a building, and yes, there. He sees it more clearly now, with Sasuke’s mind tied to his, but it’s still a hazy thing, still something that human eyes cannot translate into a comprehensible image.

It turns towards them immediately and with alacrity, must be able to scent Sasuke’s magic.

Sasuke smirks at it, the smirk Naruto’s thrilled to and wanted to beat off his face since they were five.

There is light then, divine grace held tangible in Sasuke’s hands, coalescing into a blade between his fingers.

And Naruto is on the ground, kneeling like a sinner, and Naruto is on fire, burning like a sinner. The white light of God eats through him, turns to hellfire crackling under his skin.

“Run. Run!”

Sasuke pulling him up, Sasuke dragging and kicking him until he runs. The fire’s gone, and so Naruto can stumble into a decent run, Kyuubi too wild and raw to really heal him yet.

They stop a few corners away, shocked panting faces all around. “Fuck,” Sasuke says. “We need to go.”

“We can’t just leave everyone,” Naruto points out. “It’s just one demon, we can take it.”

“It’s not just one,” Sasuke says, but it doesn’t matter because the demon too turns the corner. Sensing Sasuke, presumably, sensing something holy to defile.

Naruto hangs back for a moment, trying to get his unaccountably ragged breathing under control. But everyone else is getting into position, and he slaps open one of the backpacks to extract a weapon.

Demons are incorporeal, utterly invulnerable to physical attack: what’s needed is energy. Preferably exorcist magic, but high-tech human weapons and shifter magic can dispel them too.

There’s a certain irony in Sasuke, crusader prodigy, hefting a DEW gun. Most of the shifters, the stronger ones, do better with their magic, keeping the guns for backup.

The demon roars. This is a soundless occurrence, but the shockwave smashes Raidou and Kiba into a wall, hard enough to break it. Naruto curses and forces energy into his hands, shaping it into something he can throw, something that explodes on impact and disintegrates part of the demon’s blurry outline.
Temari slashes wind at it, energy winds that tear off chunks of demon, and Sasuke keeps firing, and Kiba’s up again now, and this is working. This is happening. Someone throws a grenade into the demon, which lurches sideways into a house hopefully empty of survivors.

And something cuts through Naruto.

He’s still and stupid with shock for a second, Kyuubi rushing senselessly and uselessly through him, searching for an injury that doesn’t exist.

Sasuke, who stood untouched by the raw energy blasted by the demon, is hit by rubble. And physically Sasuke is so horrifically fragile, human fragile. It’s easy to forget, between Sasuke’s cocksure arsehole attitude and Sasuke’s invulnerable magic, that this little thing – a hit any shifter child could shake off, that an adult shifter would hardly react to – registers on Sasuke as critical injury.

There’s a terrible moment of shell shock fear before Kyuubi rushes across the bond, and Sasuke’s fine, Sasuke’s safe. Life goes on again, after that frozen moment of maybe.

He turns with renewed energy to the demon, which is hardly half its previous mass. They’ve got this. Hardly a minute later they’re grinning all around at each other, sharp and victorious and relieved. Only Sasuke remains stiff, antsy even in stillness. He blinks through the blood dripping down his face. “Incoming.”

“Holy fuck.”

Three demons, four, five, and that is too many. That is desperately too many.

“Che,” Sasuke hisses. There’s that light again, a sharp sudden slash of holiness. It snaps through one of the demons, and the demon disintegrates instantly.

It also snaps through Naruto, who is flayed on the inside. There’s dust in his eyes, blood in his mouth: he’s on his face, has fallen utterly helpless, smashed headfirst into the ground. Brought low so easily, by their one effective weapon.

Someone – not Sasuke – pulls him up, supports him. “Fuck you, Uchiha! You can’t do that!”

Naruto tries to speak, to say Sasuke has to do this, the alternative is coming closer fast and is a devouring demon, but his mouth just snaps soundlessly.

“Carry him,” Sasuke says, bending for another grenade. “We need to move.”

There is, Naruto discovers while hanging limp over someone’s shoulder, nowhere to run. No safe haven appears, and the demons are closing in.

They stutter and stumble into a broken building, and Naruto’s world grows steadier. It stills moves in starts and stops, sudden whiteouts, but the colours are beginning to resolve into recognisable patterns.

Not all of them, Naruto blearily realises, have made it here. People are missing.

Love is a terrible thing, because it makes that all right: people are gone, but the person, his person, the person that matters, is here.

Is turning impatiently from Temari and an apparent strategy conference, and towards Naruto. Temari takes a swift step after him, and Kiba crowds them, but Sasuke has never been a team player, never
hade any patience at all for other people. Has always has the power to deny them, negate them with the force of his disregard.

“Do it,” Naruto grounds out. There aren’t enough people left to reliably make it out, not with Naruto out of commission. “I can handle it.”

Protests, Temari sneering that she’ll knock Sasuke unconscious if he tries, but what matters are Sasuke’s eyes, certain and furious. “No.”

“Sasuke –”

“No!” Sasuke snaps. “I will not be stolen from again.”

“Fuck,” Kiba grumbles, dragging Naruto out of the way as the wall crumbles under the demons’ assault. “Hurry!”

Back out on the streets, mist and stillness and energy ripping through it, the darkness hunting them. It grows cold inside his bones, makes them heavy and alien as rusted metal when he tries to move on his own.

And then.

Light, softer and warmer than Sasuke’s icy purity but of the same heavenly ilk. It burns against his closed eyelids for a long moment before he can open his eyes again, squint at the golden silhouette of a winged girl dancing through the air and incidentally through the demons.

He’s standing on his own, though leaning heavily on the remains of the wall, tension cut so abruptly he’s ready to fall again, when she lands. The lightning whip becomes a lance and then disintegrates; the white-golden aura fades until there’s Ino Yamanaka’s vaguely familiar and vaguely supercilious face scowling at them. “What are you idiots doing here? Sasuke! Oh my god, what are you doing here?”

It’s always been so obvious, how the rest of them cease to exist as soon as another exorcist is spotted. You don’t talk to a dog when you can speak to its owner.

Sasuke grunts something at her, rubbing the drying blood from his eye.

“Oh my god,” Ino says again, stepping closer but then stopping, not entering shifter lines. “You’re hurt!”

“I’m fine,” Sasuke says, surly and possibly insulted. “Why are you here?”

Ino makes an airy gesture. “I was sent out to clean up some of the nearby towns.” She shrugs. “I mean, they’re nothing big, but they bought their indulgences so…voila, here I am. Then I felt them gathering here. They must have reacted to you.” The play of expressions over her face, animated and bright, grounds to a slow, uncertain halt. “Sasuke. What are you doing here? I mean, I mean – I heard, um.”

“We’re just passing by,” Temari says. “It’s not exorcist business.”

“You know you can’t go around infested areas on your own,” Ino tells her, and it’s not snide, not really. All the more condescending for it, that Ino’s even speaking with a sort of weary, impatient concern, as though to a foolish child she doesn’t much like but has been charged to look after. “If you absolutely have to go, you need to bring an exorcist.”
“We did,” Kiba snaps.

Now would be a great time for Naruto’s throat to start working, to push out words instead of helpless little gasps of air that still taste raw and bloody, taste of burnt innards.

Ino blinks, all lashes and avoidance. Her voice comes very tentative, but it comes. “Sasuke… why didn’t you…?”

Perhaps, Ino’s face suggests, she has spoilt Sasuke’s escape plan: the plan to let the demons slaughter the rest of them, so Sasuke could go home after he’d exorcised them.

It might have worked, too, if that had really been Sasuke’s plan.

Sasuke shrugs. Kiba, guiltily, looks towards Naruto. Sasuke speaks up before he can blurt anything. “Bond fucked with the seal.”

“Oh,” Ino says. “Do you want to… I mean. Are you coming with me?”

Naruto feels Kyuubi’s agitation as a sudden acute tension, his muscles spasming. But he knows, really.

Sasuke says, “No.”

“Oh,” Ino says.

Sasuke looks at her for really the first time, with no particular emotion. “Nobody expects you to force me. Just be on your way.”

“Maybe you wanna say hi to Shikamaru first,” Naruto suggests, lurching forward, keeping himself upright by moving. Just two steps, three, and he’s next to Sasuke. Feels immediately steadier, comforted, Sasuke’s warmth and Sasuke’s smell.

“You brought Shikamaru here? You irresponsible arsehole! Of course I want to see him!”

“He brought himself,” Temari says dryly, but she doesn’t protest Ino joining the group. Naruto keeps to the back of it, focussed on expediting Kyuubi’s healing, and Sasuke stays with him.

For a moment it makes him furious.

Terrible indeed is love. It has brought him so low. Sasuke hates him, and Sasuke’s magic, the holy calling that Sasuke lives for, burns Naruto like purgatory flames. They’re walking past dead guards, dead people he knows and couldn’t protect, and he’s so weak, so fucked up, that when he bends to close their eyes – what little is left of their eyes – he falls and scrapes up his knees. All this, and yet what he’s truly aware of is Sasuke’s presence, and Sasuke being here makes everything bearable, and it pisses him off so much he wants to cry.

Sasuke, he understands, could do anything. Naruto will still love him, still need him to live. Will have to forgive him, to be able to go on, because this is the big love, the terrible love, which can’t be altered by Sasuke doing unforgivable things.

If Sasuke murdered everyone in the world that Naruto has ever cared for, Naruto would still love him.

“You’re going to hyperventilate,” Sasuke says.

“Go to hell.”
“I won’t carry you.”

“Go to hell,” Naruto says again, ragged now and raging, his voice thick, with blood or tears he can’t tell. “I wasn’t expecting you to, I don’t need you to!”

Love makes you strong, they say.

That’s not true, not really.

Hatred has never mastered him like this. Hatred could never make him cry and beg or hit and demand, could never make him do the unforgivable or overlook the unforgiveable.

“Fuck you,” Sasuke says, and turns his back.

I will not crawl after you, Naruto tells himself, but his legs wobble and he half falls and for a terrible forty centimetres he does.
Evening drizzle hits Naruto’s face when he steps outside, more a caress than a slap. Moisture beads on his scarf, a sudden glitter like fairy crystal.

Sasuke has turned his back on the abandoned building they’ve set up camp in, standing with his arms crossed and staring at nothing, in a way that looks more like glaring nothing into submission.

“Hey.” Naruto says it softly, or tries to say it softly.

Raidou and Temari were antsy about Sasuke going outside, about Sasuke being alone, but Shikamaru talked them down: where would he go? There’s no one who wouldn’t hand him over, either to us or to Orochimaru.

Naruto, to the insultingly obvious surprise of everyone present, hadn’t needed to be talked down, because of the utter lack of hesitation with which Sasuke had declined leaving with Ino.

“We’re,” Naruto starts, and then lets silence settle around them for a bit as he settles down on the decrepit lawn chair next to Sasuke. “We’ll be entering demon territory again soon.”

“I’ve been telling you since yesterday, you idiot, learn to shield.” Sasuke calls him an idiot all the time: this time he means it.

Naruto draws in a breath, and then lets it out. “Yeah. I do need to learn to shield better. And I will. But that’s not all there is to it.”

Sasuke finally looks at him. “You’re the one who can’t shield, and you’re the one who burns.”

“But you were angry with me,” Naruto points out, softly the way that comes from being sure. “You wanted me to burn.”

Sasuke looks blank. “You think I wanted to burn you more than the demons?”

Naruto shrugs. “The demons didn’t betray you. Anyway it’s not like they were a threat yet. Not to you, and you don’t care about the others, if they’re killed.” Silence for a bit, because words are difficult now. “It doesn’t – Kyuubi’s magic isn’t affected when it heals you. Because you don’t want it to be. So it needn’t – I need to shield better but you have to not want me to burn.” He fiddles with his sleeve, pulls at a loose thread. “You’re angry with me.”

“I’m furious.” It’s said with fury. Standing painfully still, Sasuke is animated and vibrating with rage.

“Why?” Naruto stands up on that challenge. “I didn’t choose this.”

“You were supposed to be better than that.”

He was braced for that blow, which is crushing but can’t be allowed to crush him. “You mean because I – went with instinct.”

Sasuke’s face whitens with fury, lonely life-long fury. “Your instincts are your problem,” he spits, and snaps around on his heel, his back thrust at Naruto like a sudden shield. “You fucking animal.”

Naruto grabs his shoulder and snaps him back around. “That’s the problem, isn’t it.”

Snapping Sasuke around turns into pushing Sasuke hard against the wall, until Sasuke kicks him off,
breaking his thigh bone in the process.

Naruto curses and has to realign it, push the broken bone pipe back into his flesh so it won’t heal wrong.

“That’s what this is about,” he says, even surer now, a dark certainty that eats through him. “I let you down.”

“Yes,” Sasuke sneers at him, pared down to raw truth, truth that is dangerous and wild because it can’t be taken back afterwards. “If you did it, you were supposed to have chosen it!” He breathes in shallow and hissing, like the air hurts him. “You hate this too.”

“I’m supposed to love belonging to you?” Naruto yells back, pushing Sasuke back into the wall. “You hate me!”

But the terrible thing is that he does. He does want to belong to Sasuke, does want Sasuke to claim him and keep him, so that he can feel Sasuke’s possession in the marrow of his bones.

It’s horrifying and demeaning and he hates himself for wanting it, but yes, if only Sasuke would want to keep him, if only Sasuke would belong to him in return, there’s nothing Naruto would love more than to be utterly Sasuke’s property.

They’re disintegrating.

Something breaks, and at first he thinks it’s him but then he realises it’s Sasuke.

“Yes!” Sasuke roars at last, and in the rain and the sudden skinlessness Sasuke’s a child again, emotionally orphaned. There’s no moving on, ever, from October 27, seven years ago, displaced from Itachi’s arms into Orochimaru’s. “You were supposed to choose me.”

“I did,” Naruto gasps out, so much desperation, he’s grabbing at Sasuke and drowning on dry land, breathing in rain and gagging on it. “I do, I did, I do. I do.”

“But it’s not real,” Sasuke rages. “You never wanted –”

“I always wanted…”! This is real. It’s,” and the truth is bleak and the truth is stark, “the only thing that’s real now.” He speaks then into Sasuke’s skin, his forehead pressed to Sasuke’s jaw. “It could’ve never been anyone but you.”

Sasuke’s exhalations hit the back of his neck. His fingers dig painfully into Naruto’s face, nails catching in the whisker scars.

“This is it now,” Naruto says. “We’re it.”

It leaves him wretched and painfully gratified, that Sasuke must be able to feel it through the bond, feel how he owns Naruto, how Naruto resents it and also thrills to it, and resents the thrill, and chases his own tail in darkening spirals of loathing and obsession.

Worse, feel how Naruto’s hunger and insane possessiveness grow and grow. It’s unacceptable, it’s obviously wrong and sick and hateful, nothing at all like proper love, good love, how he feels he would do anything to keep Sasuke. By force if need be, that he’d drag him back from anywhere, never let him go, break every bone in his body if he had to: that he’d kill Sasuke himself before he let him disappear – Naruto understands easily that these are monstrous feelings to have, much less to expose Sasuke to.
“Naruto,” Sasuke says, and the name is certain and thrilled. He says it like speaking a holy word, a word of power for him to take hold of.

Naruto makes a helpless sound of longing and need and oh god, how good it is. Take me, keep me, own me…

“Sasuke,” he breathes, clinging, submissive, but Sasuke’s name too is a word of power, a staked claim. Stay with me, I will kill us both before I let you go…

For the first time Sasuke’s… not excited, not interested in closeness, but susceptible to Naruto’s excitement, to Naruto’s desire to be always closer. Though he’s stiff as a board in Naruto’s arms, he’s not trying to leave them. More than that, his arm bends sharply over Naruto’s shoulder, his fingers hard and possessive against the nape of Naruto’s neck. The tails coming out and sweeping up Sasuke’s legs, over his back, are intensely sexual to Naruto but make Sasuke relax. If he – if Naruto opened his mouth now, against the pulse point in Sasuke’s throat, Sasuke might not push him away.

But that’s not – that’s not what he wants, that’s not good enough. It wouldn’t be right.

Sasuke has issues about sex, and Naruto breathes out, rests his head against Sasuke’s shoulder, arms locked firmly around Sasuke’s hips.

Sasuke has, to be frank and pragmatic and not crazily emotional about it, been sexually assaulted somewhere in the region of two and a half thousand times, and Naruto isn’t going to do anything that could in any conceivable way be interpreted as adding to that number. They talked about it once, in strange factual tones when they were so young that it might’ve been the first time Naruto ever actually said the word rape. Well, not every day, but when he does he usually does it a few times, so I guess over a week it averages out to once a day. And it’s been two years, so two times 365 – he wrenches away from the memory of Sasuke’s childish voice, already strangely deep for someone so little.

“Sasuke,” he breathes again, gathering Sasuke more tightly to him, and yes. To have and to hold, so full of sensation, of bond craving and thorny human need, that he’s going to burst open with it, his skin bloated and trembling on the edge of eruption.

Sasuke stays with him, if not enthusiastic then at least marginally willing. Contact panic doesn’t hit until they’re intruded upon.

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“Fuck,” Shikamaru says. He doesn’t usually swear. It’s pointless, words lose their value if they’re overused, if they’re used to obscure instead of express intelligent meaning.

But he followed Kiba out because someone had to, and now Sasuke steps sharply out of Naruto’s arms.

The black look Naruto sends their way makes Shikamaru actually, instinctively, take a step back himself.

He’s really never wanted to place himself as the obstacle between a hunger-crazed predator and its meal.

And usually it’s easy to overlook, with Naruto in particular, that shifters aren’t human, but in this moment it’s ruthlessly obvious, is screamed by every caveman instinct still lodged in Shikamaru. Naruto is not his kind.
And you can live with shifters, you can even love shifters, but only as long as you don’t forget that they are shifters.

“Let’s go back inside,” he says, and Naruto’s face is still such that Kiba doesn’t question him.

Sasuke stalks past them all and in through the door, and so Naruto breathes out long and slow, and the crazed beast bleeds out of his expression as he follows them in. Talking again, approachable again.

Sasuke sits down in a corner, sharply away from everyone else despite the smallness of the room. Shikamaru notes with interest that he procures a rosary from somewhere and sinks into what appears to be some sort of meditative prayer, which is an entirely odd activity to associate with Sasuke Uchiha. White-golden light flickers across him until he sits there glowing with grace, so perhaps he’s just soaking in magic.

Or perhaps not, because when Kiba steps too close he catches fire.

It’s nothing too bad, they beat it out quickly and Kiba can heal the burns within an hour, but Shikamaru elects to keep a healthy distance from Sasuke all the same. The smell of burning flesh lingers long after Kiba’s skin is whole again, and Shikamaru looks at Sasuke and thinks of the Inquisition, the witch hunts, the crusades.

Naruto, this time, isn’t visibly affected by Sasuke’s magic. He’s pulled himself together, stuffed Kyuubi back inside his human skin, and is laughing and teasing and stuffing his face with cold greasy takeout. Ino’s always been envious of shifter metabolism.

Shikamaru sinks down on his mattress, using Temari’s arm as a pillow. She says, quietly, with more disappointment than he’d have expected, “Kiba doesn’t understand.”

“No,” Shikamaru agrees.

Kiba isn’t bonded yet, and Kiba isn’t a subtle man. Kiba grumbles something, in a tone that pretends to be joking, something about Sasuke being difficult, and clearly misinterprets how Naruto doesn’t protest.

To Shikamaru, and evidently to Temari, it’s plain that Naruto doesn’t speak up because Sasuke doesn’t need defending.

Perhaps because Sasuke can defend himself, or perhaps because Kiba could just never be a threat, but the end result is the same: is Kiba blathering ahead and blithely ignorant of how his talking is simply making it clear that he’s not worth listening to.

It was a different matter when Sasuke wasn’t actually present. When Shikamaru first met Naruto, at the boarding school Naruto kept trying to run away from, Shikamaru was very careful never to mention Sasuke. Naruto had been wild then, intensity and impulsiveness raging unchecked and violent. He’d been brutally miserable and brutally energetic, a whirlpool Shikamaru had instantly decided to keep well away from.

This plan had failed within the first four days of Naruto’s tenure at the school, because someone had apparently mentioned to Naruto where Shikamaru was from, whom he knew. Just when dusk was settling outside, Naruto thundered into his room, and everyone else left. People did that, in those days. Naruto could pull them in, Naruto has always been difficult to ignore, but the set of his shoulders, how his face was blazing and his fingers twitching into fists – well, it was hardly the first time these signs had sent people running.
He bent over Shikamaru, who was slouching in his desk chair, and Naruto wasn’t actually pushing him up against the wall, wasn’t touching him at all, but it felt like he was.

“How is he?” Naruto demanded, so many contradictory emotions in his voice that it came out almost unintelligible. “Oh my god how is he? You have to…!”

“I just know Ino,” Shikamaru said. “I don’t – I just see him around sometimes, we don’t talk.”

This wasn’t good enough, but Shikamaru had nothing of substance. Fortunately Naruto could be distracted by talk of Sasuke in general.

Little details that hadn’t meant anything to Shikamaru, that certainly hadn’t endeared Sasuke to him, left Naruto with this wobbly, over-invested smile.

Sometimes – just a few times, much fewer than he would’ve expected – he’d catch Naruto on the phone and immediately understand that he was speaking to Sasuke. The words didn’t matter. Naruto’s whole body was curled around the phone, plastic cracking under his white fingers, and his voice came stuttering and raw and breathless, erupting like a geyser.

Of course, to say that Sasuke wasn’t popular at the school was putting it mildly. There was Mist Town Massacre, and beyond that the fact that exorcists in general weren’t well liked. The fact that Sasuke had this way of looking at people so they understood that they weren’t worth being looked at.

Back then, when Sasuke wasn’t there and so couldn’t make the choice to ignore the people talking about him or to shut them up, Naruto didn’t tolerate it. Shikamaru had understood that Naruto had been talked about a good deal himself, half-breed bastard that he was, but if he’d defended himself with half the implacable belligerence that he defended Sasuke, Shikamaru couldn’t imagine that it would have lasted.

The only time he snapped at Shikamaru was when he snapped, “Could you have done better?”

“Well,” Shikamaru said. “No.”

Partly because strategically, in order to minimise the total number of dead, Mist Town Massacre had been the right call.

Partly because he had no delusions of martyrdom, nor of being particularly resilient to torture. Placed in a situation where he was subjected to daily agony and had little meaningful prospect of escaping, he’d have killed himself. It would’ve been the sensible decision.

So if he’d been Sasuke, he wouldn’t have been involved in Mist Town Massacre, but only because he would’ve already been dead.

“Then shut the hell up,” Naruto said, Naruto who always wanted to talk about possible better ways.

Shikamaru felt his own teeth snap shut, and he’d meant to agree because he always picked the path of least resistance and what did he care about Sasuke, anyway? But he hadn’t meant to snap his mouth shut instantly. He understood then about being alpha, about being someone who can say do not and make it stick at bone level.

Other people needed more persuasion. “Yeah,” he heard Naruto say at one point. “Human trafficking is hilarious.”

Whom he’d been talking to, Shikamaru couldn’t tell, because Naruto jumped them and beat the shit
out of them, to the point that when he was pulled off Shikamaru couldn’t identify them.

“What?” Naruto demanded, still kicking. “Torture porn is hilarious, why the hell aren’t you laughing?”

A grumble, not really intelligible, and Naruto laughed a cold sharp laugh completely unlike him. “Sasuke never needed me to hold back, you pathetic fucking coward, and don’t you ever speak of him again.”

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Naruto isn’t the only one who looks wan in the morning. To be fair, Kiba spent the better part of the night with Naruto on the floor outside Sasuke’s door, and Sasuke – well, sleep wears away on Sasuke’s mental walls, which means he kept waking up in the small hours of the night, when Naruto had gone sleep-deprived and desperate, to intense erotic dreams about…well, about himself, which was an altogether strange thing for Naruto to experience second-hand. Or third-hand, since they were really his dreams, regurgitated through Sasuke’s mind and made strange by it.

Nobody’s in the mood for a leisurely morning: it’s a matter of minutes before they’re back in the car, scarfing down breakfast rations that taste of dust and preservatives.

Sasuke has done that thing where he makes himself apart, untouchable. But Naruto’s never been one to hold himself back from touching what was forbidden to him, was always the child who touched the altar candle. And he wanted to look at it and for it to last, but he wanted to touch it more and it was worth the burn.

Mum was exasperated, not really angry. *You’re the one who wanted to come to the service, Cubbie. Of course we can’t come back if you break their things.*

He’d only wanted to come because church was such a big part of Sasuke’s life, and he was tired of being called stupid because he didn’t get all the dumb references to it. But it was astonishingly tedious, like one interminable class in a language he couldn’t understand, where he was supposed to stand and sit and read along with words that meant nothing to him.

Pushing the memory aside, he sits down next to Sasuke, almost touching but not quite. “So, um. Can I sleep on you for a bit?”

“Are you brain damaged?”

“Are you? We don’t – even you aren’t quite this much of a bitch when you’ve got some sleep, and I’m all… I want to sleep, too. Before we hit demon territory.” One sleepless night shouldn’t matter so much, but the bond has drained them both.

“If you could keep your mental pornos to yourself, this wouldn’t be a problem.”

Naruto stops himself saying, if you’d just sleep with me there wouldn’t be a problem. “You didn’t mind,” he says instead, hopeful beyond the grinding, sleepless frustration. “Before we left, when I got into bed too, when you were asleep.”

“I would’ve minded if I’d been awake.”

“You were awake yesterday.” It’s more a question than a challenge, his voice softening at the memory of Sasuke standing unmoving in his arms.

Sasuke looks away. “Those were your emotions.”
“If you’d wanted not to on anything like the same level…” Then it wouldn’t have mattered what Naruto felt. Naruto’s emotions can only overwhelm Sasuke when Sasuke’s own feelings on the matter are much weaker. He’s dry-mouthed, oddly short of breath, his voice all levity around maybe the heaviest words he’s spoken, “I thought you liked having power over me.”

He hadn’t really expected Sasuke to deny this, so hadn’t expected Sasuke to hiss at him, white-lipped and venomous. “How is you forcing yourself into my life giving me any power?”

“I was already in your life!” He splutters, incoherent maybe but Sasuke understands: how Naruto’s in unrequited need, slavering and desperate for scraps Sasuke has no real incentive to throw him.

Sasuke sneers back at him, an equally incoherent barrage of how Naruto demands and invades and drags him down into this needy aching co-dependency, how Naruto took something from him and made it dirty, made them dirty.

The bond is a live wire between them, crackling and cutting, his mind a sudden chiaroscuro painting of annihilating light and black hatred.

He hates himself, too, which is new and familiar all at once. He hated himself for the first time after his failed attempt to assassinate Orochimaru: when he was locked in that cage, beaten and impotent, a screaming bystander while Orochimaru asserted his possession of Sasuke. And he never – it was years ago, he’s obviously out, but he never did free himself. It was Sasuke who unlocked the door which had remained stubbornly closed under Naruto’s screaming, crying, begging, kicking, hitting desperation.

There’s no point in saying, this isn’t what I wanted.

“It’s the only way it could have been,” says Sasuke, implacable and inexplicably calmer, his constant fury brought down from boiling to a quiet simmer.

If there was no bond – if it was just that I love you…

Then I wouldn’t have trusted it.

Whatever his other resentments, Sasuke does like having power over him. Sasuke’s incapable of trusting, of believing himself safely or reliably loved. But soul-deep addiction, the reassuring ownership of being needed, that’s something he can believe and understand.

And Naruto has taken things from Sasuke, he has, but he’s also – given himself over in this compulsive way. To give Sasuke this immense power over him, the power to make him happy and so to make him miserable, to place Sasuke as the centre of his life…he’s trembling with it, scared of it and high on it, and he didn’t choose it but he can’t regret it.

Sasuke puts his hand on Naruto’s face, scratches scorching, heaven-lit fingertips along the whisker scars.

He’s always liked the middle one on the right best: the first one he made.

The whisker scars are Naruto’s now, he’s made them his to the point that they move and deepen with Kyuubi’s upset. But he got them when Orochimaru had locked him in that cage, a cage he couldn’t quite fit in. Some of his bones broke against the confines, and healed wrong: had to be re-broken, once Naruto was finally out, so they could be realigned and heal right.

Just after he’d been caught and locked up, Orochimaru grabbed his face and started marking him as the beast he was. He did one line on the right and two on the left, traced Naruto’s uncleanness across
his face with the fire of Heaven. Traced it into skin and soul, far beyond the reach of Kyuubi’s healing.

When he was done, he turned to Sasuke. “What do you say, Shinigami? Would you like to balance him up?”

Sasuke looked at Naruto, stared into eyes like drowning, and he did want to and Naruto wanted him to.

He burnt his mark into Naruto, where it can never be erased. Naruto’s carried it on his face ever since.

In the present he takes Sasuke’s hand, pressing it even closer, into his flesh, until Sasuke’s nails scratch against the bones of Naruto’s face.

“Not to interrupt the lovefest,” comes Temari’s dry, agitated tones, “but I just spoke to Hayate. Things have moved. We’ll be in pretty thick demon territory within the next eight or so miles. It’s better we stop now, wait for escort here.”

“That’s such a waste,” Naruto says.

For once, Sasuke doesn’t contradict him. “Don’t be a coward. We can take them.”

“Yeah?” Naruto says, on a grin breaking so it feels like dawn all over his face.


“I was fine,” Naruto dismisses. Looks at Sasuke. “We’ve got this.”

“We’ve got this.”

“Naruto –”

“I said we’ve got this. Okay? Trust me.”

Sasuke’s smirk/sneer, his version of a grin, is savage and anticipatory. He’s tense but it’s the good kind of tension, twisting up the sinews of his arms. Naruto grins back at him and follows him out when the car stops five miles ahead.

They’re on a deserted stretch of dirt road, and he can already see the demons as a dark mist towards the edge of his vision. Real mist could never move like that, hurtling towards them like a gathering tornado. “Plan?” he says.

“Pray.” It’s a clipped order, and startling. “I don’t care if you believe it, say the words.”

Sasuke’s already chanting, in that exorcist voice echoed by angels, but it’s not an invocation Naruto’s ever heard from him before. It takes him a long moment to recognise it, to translate Ave Maria gracia plena dominus tecum and start babbling along, Hail Mary full of grace…

They get traction. The words taste of light and sooth on his tongue, buzzing with the resonance of Sasuke’s chanting, but they do not burn him.

“…et in hora mortis nostrae.” And the light comes.

Naruto has seen archangel light, the light of Uriel, and this isn’t that. On the words fruit of thy womb, Jesus his tongue curls around the possibility of scorching, but the light is warm, and he is safe and he
is—loved. Light like an embrace, like grace, like mercy.

Sasuke keeps chanting, brow furrowed and freckled with sweat, as he walks towards the demons.

And it’s heart-stop astonishing, a miracle: Sasuke, champion of the Archangel of Vengeance, glowing golden with the holy power of forgiveness, of motherly love for mankind. It’s the Corinthians kind of love, the love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

It’s blinding but only in the way summer sunlight is, the kind of blinding that leaves you squinting but ultimately pleased about it. The rest of the group hangs back, clustered around the protective bulk of the car. Naruto tags along as Sasuke hunts down the demons, and as the light spreads around him like rings on water, melting the demons out of existence, Naruto feels himself embraced, protected by the light rather than eradicated by it. Sasuke, he understands, is shielding him, Sasuke and the words Naruto keeps repeating. “Hail Mary, full of grace, pray for us sinners, hail Mary, full of grace, pray for us sinners…”

They’re a twelve minute walk from the car when the last of the darkness fades, and Sasuke stops, chanting halted abruptly as a cut rosary. He breathes out deep, chest visibly contracting, and the light fades from him, much more quickly than his usual archangel radiance. That, the cessation of Uriel’s light, tends to leave Sasuke wistful, resentful, with none of this sudden relief. Sweat glitters on his neck, gilding the line of his throat.

“Virgin Mary,” Naruto says. “I didn’t know you could.”

“She’s easy,” Sasuke says dismissively, rather sharply. “Open to anyone who asks.” It’s a tone of voice Naruto recognises from every other time Sasuke’s made derogatory remarks about people being easy, the tone that makes Sakura bite her lip on any admonition because obviously she’s not in a position to tell Sasuke not to slut shame or make rape jokes.

Naruto nudges his shoulder, rather roughly. Self-hatred is as ugly and miserable as any other kind of hatred.

“We are awesome,” he says, letting the relief turn to exuberance, coursing effervescent through his veins along with delayed adrenaline shock. “This can work.”

“It’s an—adequate first step.”

Naruto snorts, hitting his arm. “Bitch, bitch, bitch. Look, demons exorcised, me on my feet!”

“I want my wings,” Sasuke tells him.

“I know. I’ll—look, I’m working on the shielding. I’m not trying to blackmail you or anything, but it will work better if I can get some sleep.”

Sasuke’s post-exorcism relaxed face ices over. The idea of Naruto touching him is disgusting. This time there’s no question of Naruto’s feelings being stronger: there’s the memory of bed sheets stained with Sasuke’s vomit and Sasuke’s blood, and disgust so strong Naruto physically shudders away from him. He’s—god, he’s hard from the memory, fucking hard from the fucking memory of fucking assaulting Sasuke, and that makes him more disgusted, it spirals and spirals, a physical sensation of his stomach twisted, innards wrenched out of place and torn as though by Kyuubi’s claws. He has to lock his jaw so hard his teeth grind and crack against each other, and still a trickle of vomit stains his lips, the corner of his mouth.

I did this, he knows, and staggers one step, two, and then he’s jack knifeing towards the ground,
spasming with the force of his projectile vomiting like he hasn’t for years.

“Sasuke,” he says, when he’s managed to straighten up, says it around wiping his mouth with his hand and then having to wipe his hand on his trousers, and bloody hell, he’s never going to be clean again. “If you need me to die. I mean. I don’t think you do. I hope you don’t. But if you do. Tell me.”

“Stop lying to me!” Sasuke snaps, remorseless. “Either you martyr yourself or I embrace this horrible farce – that’s dishonest, that’s fucking cheap. Don’t you dare!”

“I,” Naruto says, hands still on his knees, no longer wiping, just gripping, his stomach a violent churn that makes it impossible for a long moment to straighten up. “There’s no other way I can let you go.”

Absolute honesty, stripped down to the bare brutal bones of it, and Sasuke’s called shifters inhuman for much less than this instinctive insanity, but he doesn’t yell about Naruto being an animal.

“You mean that,” he says, and how could this possibly be a surprise, but his voice is blank with the realisation.

Slowly, slowly it comes to Naruto that this is what Sasuke could never have hoped to have: to be claimed, in the finally and forever sense. To own someone, and to be irreversibly owned in turn, to be irreplaceably and unconditionally Naruto’s, first choice always.

“I mean that,” Naruto says.

“Let’s get going.”
Minato remembers the first time he saw her. The memory has attained the patina of an antique, incessant mental fingering wearing down anything vulnerable until only the core, diamond hard and constitutive, remains.

The first thing he noticed was the polka dot pattern of her dress, which stood out and not in a good way: a young girl’s dress, worn by a small, reserved woman moving with the birdlike uncertainty of old age. The next thing he noticed was her face, which was striking but not pretty: broad forehead, sharp cheekbones, uppity nose.

By the time he was looking at her face, it was hours after he’d seen and dismissed the dress. He’d ended up next to her, going up a staircase she was coming down. She held an empty glass, but the drink had made her quieter, jerkier, instead of relaxing her.

Minato didn’t recognise her, didn’t know her name or who’d invited her. He just saw the glitter of her nails drumming against that empty glass, saw her gaze slide past him to fasten on, suddenly caught out by, a painting behind him. An early Vanessa Bell still life, one of the set pieces of his childhood. And so he’d stopped there in the middle of the stairs, touched her elbow and caught her eye.

Two hours later he was in love. It was inexplicable, but then that’s the nature of love.

Kakashi never asked. Kakashi would have never asked. But Kakashi watched with hungry eyes, his silence a demand and a reprimand, when Minato’s mother asked, some months after he’d first met Yui, What is it about her?

I don’t know, Minato admitted, carelessly rather because the admittance signalled the opposite of defeat. If I started pointing out specific features to justify my affection — that would mean it was over, you know?

Kakashi looked down then, in understanding, though Tsunade didn’t.

Later, outside, waiting for Yui, Minato confirmed, You know.

Yes, Kakashi said, looking out over the lake, which was artificial and unlovely. It’s like they say. If you asked me to say why I loved him, I could say no more than, Because it was he, because it was I.

Minato can’t remember anymore if he answered, because the next frame shows Yui walking towards him over the grass. Her figure in memory is limned by august light, transfigured into an icon, a symbol of summer romance.

It’s not a spectacular love story, he never pretends it is. Boy meets girl, talks to girl, sleeps with girl, falls in love with girl. It’s happened to millions of people, it happens all the time.

It was never one of those great loves, it was never the kind of love that you might get lost in, never the kind of love that people write songs about. He could see it reflected in Kakashi’s wary, judgemental eyes, the knowledge that it was all just ordinary, finite and mundane. He might be politic about it, he might call it an adult, a mature, a reasonable love. The sort of love that lends itself to a saddening but amicable divorce, the sort of love that lets you stay friends afterwards.

In contrast, he’s never managed to remember the first time he met Kushina. This is to be expected, since they’ve always been part of each other’s lives, long before memory began.
He’d have to be blind not to see that she’s better suited for him. He thinks he even admitted it, one of the few shameful times he was drunk around Kakashi: that if this was a movie he was watching, he’d be exasperated by his own character, his inability to see sense and respond to it. Stupid Romeo refusing to leave Rosaline behind for Juliet. He can see it, he’s always been able to see it, Kushina understands him and is good for him and he needs Kushina to live, he even loves Kushina, but he’s never been in love with Kushina, and understanding that he ought to be can’t change that. In the end, love is not a choice.

“I can’t understand it,” he says in the present. “Not really. Naruto’s – life or death intensity about it all.”

“Well,” Kushina says, fairly lightly. “To be fair to him, it was rather a life or death situation.”

“You know what I mean. Even after, he was still…”

“I know.” She says it softer than she might have. Of course she knows. She always knows.

She leans over, red curls against his cheek and the smell of jasmine and sweat filling his nose, and kisses his face.

Afterwards she stops by the kitchen, where Konohamaru’s leaning over Tsunade’s shoulder, trying to mimic her energy manipulation. Kushina sneaks up to ruffle his hair, and he’s still young enough, just barely, to lean into her touch. Naruto too had trouble with this, she remembers, though unfortunately for different reasons: Konohamaru, more’s the pity, has never been the child with so much excess power that even an adult might have trouble controlling it.

“Is Dad coming soon?” Konohamaru asks.

“He’d better,” Kushina says. “Or I suspect he might find a certain little wildling invading his office, hmm?”

It’s funny – she’s decided it’s funny, so that it doesn’t have to be anything else – that Minato’s guilt over finding himself unable to love Konohamaru in quite the reckless, senseless way he loves Naruto has lead him to overcompensate to the point that both boys are quietly, unquestioningly convinced that he loves Konohamaru more.

Well, Konohamaru has two parents who love him. Naruto, with only Minato left, and more importantly with Sasuke simmering and uncooperative, perhaps needs someone to love him best.

“Bye, Maru,” she says in her best motherly voice, pressing a kiss to his underwashed hair. She always makes sure to see Konohamaru before meeting Mikoto, to summon up the appropriate moral outrage. She’s never considered herself a particularly maternal woman – honestly Konohamaru was an accident, and if they hadn’t needed to establish a dynasty she would have aborted him – but to hand him over to anyone, much less to Orochimaru, oh never, never…

It’s only a ten minute walk to the restaurant where Mikoto, always compulsively punctual, is already waiting. Her appearance, Kushina’s reminded, is very much Sasuke’s. There’s nothing of Fugaku in the littlest Uchiha, who has his mother’s face and features, his mother’s hands and hair, only he wears them so differently that the similarity is obscured, hidden away.

“I’m not late, am I,” she says, slipping onto her chair.

Mikoto smiles politely, that perennial close-lipped smile that means absolutely nothing. “I’m happy you could make it.” It’s easy to forget – Mikoto takes care that it’s easy to forget – that she’s the true Uchiha heiress. Fugaku’s the distant cousin, adopted into the main family because of their marriage:
Mikoto’s the real deal.

They’ve spent so many hours together, through years of being faction queens, and yet there’s this impenetrable wall. Sasuke might be difficult, but he’s difficult in a way that Kushina can get a handle on: Mikoto remains enigmatic, incomprehensible and untouchable.

“I assume you must be busy,” Mikoto says while Kushina signals for coffee.

“Hmm?”

“I understand you must be engaged in negotiations with Orochimaru.”

“Well, no,” Kushina says, because she’s been feeling sorry, in a theoretical way, for Sasuke, but now suddenly at this unsubtle prodding she’s sorry for Mikoto. “There’s nothing to negotiate, really. Sasuke’s family now. We don’t give up family.”

“Right,” Mikoto says faintly, and pity leaves as abruptly as it came.

“Jesus, Mikoto. You and Fugaku won’t protect him, fine – you could at least be grateful someone else does. He’s your child.”

“He’s not ours,” Mikoto says blankly. “He’s Orochimaru’s.”

“And now he’s ours.”

Mikoto offers a movement that would be a shrug, if she were the kind of person who shrugged. “That’s between you and Orochimaru.”

“Could you stop? I realise this is your public stance, but –”

“Sasuke,” Mikoto says, any emotion iced out of her voice, “allowed himself to be defiled by a beast. If he’d still been part of our family when this occurred – well, he would not have been anymore. This sort of moral failure is simply…it cannot be countenanced.”

Kushina lifts her eyebrows, stirring sugar and more sugar into her coffee. She’s long past the point of personal insult. “You’re suggesting a physically human child should have overpowered Kyuubi? I must say, you have a great deal of faith in him.”

Mikoto, who never talks with her hands, makes an impatient gesture. “If he’d fought to the last and been overpowered, that would have been a weakness of the body. He chose not to. That is a weakness of the soul.” She lifts her tea cup, on the clear impulse to gag the flow of words, but ultimately puts it down without drinking. “He could have easily pushed Kyuubi to the point where self defence kicked in, then he could have obliterated him.”

Kushina isn’t honestly sure whether it was a case of Minato underestimating the self defence release, or of Minato never truly doubting that Sasuke would ultimately comply, which can only mean that Minato himself isn’t honestly sure. It had better not be a case of Minato risking them all just so that Naruto could be killed by Sasuke rather than by the matesickness, so he must have been at least reasonably certain that things would go Naruto’s way.

“That’s a small, sad world you’re living in,” Kushina remarks. She says it around a mouthful of coffee, with honesty certainly but without rancour.

Over the years she’s said much worse to Mikoto, who called Kushina’s adoptive son a defiling beast not five minutes ago – it’s a startling thing when Mikoto snaps, “And your life, then? All this
sanctimonious talk of family – you’ve never loved anyone. You were forced into bondage with a man who didn’t want you.”

“I love Konohamaru,” Kushina says, and everything has shifted and changed, she’s the one speaking mildly to Mikoto’s faintly flushed cheeks. “In fact, if that’s the criteria we’re using, I love a great deal of people too much to hand them over to a lifetime of enslavement and torture at the hands of a psychopath.”

But that’s no real denial, because of course Mikoto’s right, for all the good it does her. For Minato there was Yui, and they’re both aware that his lasting obsession is linked to the manner of her death, but knowing it doesn’t change it. If Yui’s life had been lost to a traffic accident, to an illness, it wouldn’t have broken him. Perhaps he could, eventually, have loved someone else.

For Minato in any event there was Yui. Kushina for her part has never been in love with someone else. Nor with Minato either, truly. She didn’t let herself be.

It would, she’s aware, not have been difficult. She’s loved him most of her life, and their bond is balanced and was welcome: it would’ve been easy, then, to fall in love with him. But it would’ve been a fool’s game, when consummating the bond seemed to him an act of unfaithfulness, when he loved a girl who’d born him a son.

So there hasn’t been him and there hasn’t been anyone else. Maybe it’s better that way. Maybe it’s worse.

“I’m surprised,” Mikoto says at last, poise regained and ruthless, “that nothing was done earlier. It seems so accepted now, this idea that it must be Sasuke.”

“Well,” Kushina says, on the far side of it becoming obvious and unable to backtrack into a time when it was not. “Forming mate bonds with exorcists is exceptionally rare.”

“Indeed,” Mikoto agrees.

“Mmh. Haku and Zabuza and – well, Haku and Zabuza.”

“You will – keep him, then,” Mikoto says abruptly.

“For better or for worse.”

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They’ve finally arrived and are getting out of the cars when Temari stops him, hands him her phone. “It’s Hayate. I’ve put him on speaker.”

“Hayate, hi,” Naruto says. “What’s up?”

“We’ve got a situation,” Hayate tells him. “Speaker might not be the best idea for this.”

Sasuke lifts a pointed eyebrow.

“It’s fine,” Naruto says.

“All right. We’ve got somewhere in the region of 50-100 supposedly anti-shifter humans in the southeast woods. Armed, but not professionally. More troublingly, we’ve had credible reports that they’re bringing two or three beastmads. Who helped them get those under control, we don’t know at this point. Unit 1 through 3 have received their marching orders.”
Beastmads – shifters who have lost their humanity, have become containers for their inners beasts, all predator instinct and berserker strength. No, an ordinary band of humans could never control them.

“Cancel those,” Naruto tells him. He meets Sasuke’s eyes. “Keep the units here. We’ll go.”

“Naruto,” Hayate starts. “This needs to be contained.”

“We’ll take care of it,” Naruto says.

Temari makes an impatient sound. “For fuck’s sake.”

“It’ll be great,” Naruto insists. “It’ll be a bonding experience.”

Sasuke snorts. “I think I’ve had enough bonding with you.”

“Oh yeah? You’d rather stay here and hang out with the gang than hunt down some hostiles?”

“Che. Fine.”

Naruto’s heart flutters, because Sasuke grins. His real grin, the one forbidden first by Mikoto and then by Orochimaru. It looks strokey, the left side of his mouth curving upwards but the right remaining flat: half a smile. It’s an incredibly ugly expression even on Sasuke’s very pretty face.

“I’m not sure about this,” Hayate says.

“If things really go south, I’ll let Kyuubi out to clean house.”

“All right,” Hayate sighs. “It’s your decision.”

“Why don’t you just do that?” Sasuke asks. “Let Kyuubi clean house.”

Naruto shrugs. “I don’t like to do that. If I’m gonna hurt people, I should take responsibility for it. Make sure it’s no worse than it has to be.” He jumps out of the car. “Let’s get kitted up.”

He must be smiling like a besotted fool, because it’s only two metres before Sasuke says, “What?”

“I just – see, I know you. Nothing like a little carnage to turn that frown upside down.”

“Like you’re any different.”

“Eh, I’d be happy just hanging out here holding your hand like a ninny.” He says this quickly, continuing before Sasuke has time to shut him down, “But yeah, it’ll be good to get to do something.”

Sasuke stays by his side as he sorts out the situation – who goes where, who’s in charge of what. They’re in the supply rooms by the time Sasuke’s expression forces him to voice a, “What?” of his own.

Sasuke smirks, “You’re finally treating your minions as minions.”

Temari audibly swallows a laugh.

Naruto bites his lip, on a grin that hurts. Sasuke never lets him get away with anything, Sasuke always, always calls him on it, and god, he’s missed that.

“Shut up,” he says, instead of you’re the best part of my life, you’re what I was always missing,
throwing a bullet proof vest at him.

Sasuke snorts, but focuses on picking out his arsenal while Naruto sorts out the last of the administrative issues with Temari. Sasuke still favours sniper rifles and devastator bullets, and is far more conscientious about protective gear than Naruto’s ever been.

“Are you taking the rocket launcher?” he asks Naruto with what sounds like genuine, if mild, curiosity.

“It never hurts.”

In the jeep, equipment stashed and Sasuke in the passenger seat beside him, Naruto says, “I’m taking lead on this one.”

Sasuke nods.

“You’re not…fighting me on that?”

“It’s your turf.”

“Yeah,” Naruto agrees, rather more softly. For this, Sasuke trusts him, and will work with him.

“What?”

“You’re all – well, trusting me with your life, actually. Which would be a greater sentiment if you, you know, valued it a bit more, but still.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“Well, yeah, I know you can, but…I’m gonna have your back.”

Sasuke breathes out deeply. “I know.”

“Good. And you’ve got my back, too. I know. You don’t need to say it.”

Sasuke’s never believed in much, but he has always believed that Naruto will protect him to the best of his ability. He’s just never believed that ability to be particularly impressive.

Sasuke leans back in his seat, curling up a little. It figures that he’d be able to relax now, en route to what promises to be a bloody and violent search and destroy mission. “What’s your status now?”

Naruto almost lands them in a ditch, distracted by Sasuke’s softening face. “Hmm?”

“You were in the war. I’m assuming you’ve improved since you were eleven.”

Naruto stares out through the window shield. “Uh, yeah. There’s not much I won’t heal from now.”

“You don’t like to talk about it,” Sasuke says, perfectly neutral.

“I can talk about it. I’m just – gonna choke up, and stuff. It was bad. Not end of the world bad or traumatised for life bad but – it was war, you know? It was this tension, all the time this tension, it never stopped, and people died all the time. Their people, our people. I did – I did things I didn’t want to. I had to. I felt like I had to. Some of them I had to do but I couldn’t, so – so Kyuubi did. And maybe I wanted to stop, but I – if I did, it just got worse. It was just a cheap, a coward's way
out, stopping, it didn’t make anything better for anyone. It would’ve just been about keeping my own hands clean at the expense of other people.” He swallows, looks at Sasuke now because there’s nowhere else he wants to look ever, and Sasuke’s face is still neutral and relaxed. “And then I got so matesick I was useless, and they sent me back.”

“Okay,” Sasuke says. “God, you’re such a wimp.”

Naruto laughs, as an alternative to crying. Touches Sasuke’s hand briefly, so briefly there’s no time for it to be snatched away from him. “Yeah well, you’re about the least wimpy person I know, so I guess that’ll sort itself out now.”

“Hn.”

“So anyway, the beastmads. I’m gonna try and keep them alive if I can. I don’t expect that from you.”

“You think I’m too weak to take them alive?”

“I think they’re not your people, so you don’t feel obligated to try.” He changes gears. “Look, if you had free access to your magic, obviously you could do whatever with them, but like this – I’m gonna ask you not to barbecue my soul, so.”

“Hn.” For a moment Sasuke looks absolutely petulant and frustrated that Naruto’s not giving him the opportunity to pick a fight. Then there’s a hint, just a tiny hint, of that misshapen strokey smile, and he relaxes further into the seat, dozing off.

Naruto swallows around the knowledge that he shouldn’t, but half a kilometre ahead he does it anyway: sneaks a careful arm around Sasuke’s shoulders, tugging him over to lean against Naruto’s side.

It’s like Naruto’s whole body just erupts at the contact.

He has slow down, drive granny speed, with Sasuke’s light breaths, Sasuke’s warm weight resting on him.

Fumbling, clumsy, he strokes Sasuke’s neck, which at least in his sleep Sasuke likes. He makes this little sound, pressing closer.

Naruto’s heart is beating so hard, it’s a wonder it doesn’t wake Sasuke.

Even at granny speed, they’ve arrived within a few hours. Putting Sasuke back in his seat before waking him would be dishonest, but Naruto does stop stroking his neck before he leans forward and kisses him loudly on the top of his head.

Sasuke mutters, steadying himself on Naruto’s thigh.

It comes to Naruto that Sasuke’s actually been very comfortable with his body all along, has kept touching him. Mostly in violence, but still – he could’ve hurt Naruto without touching him if he’d wanted to.

He sits up and now and looks mostly sleepy but also serious. “Do I need to worry about you trying to fuck me in my sleep?”

“No.” He infuses the word with all the conviction he has, and he means it. “I wouldn’t do that. That’s not what I want.”
It remains unclear whether Sasuke believes him. “Time to go,” he says, stepping out of the car. They suit up quickly. Naruto always used to have trouble with multi-carrying, got the straps confused and tangled, but his fingers know now. The war ground the routine into them like calluses.

Finally he falls on his knees to tighten a strap on Sasuke’s protective gear, and for a frozen moment Sasuke looks down at him with his eyes all pupil. Kyuubi stirs to murderous, possessive intent.

“Before we go,” Sasuke says. “I’ll try it out. Don’t burn.”

Naruto sits back as Sasuke steps into the air, one careful step at a time. There’s a tight feeling inside him, a pressure that threatens to erupt, but he doesn’t burn. Sasuke gives him a considering look, and light gathers in his hands. Naruto swallows, has to steady himself against the ground. The white-on-white strain of exorcist magic stings and sizzles along his veins.

“Right,” Sasuke says. “So I’m piggybacking Kyuubi for now.”

“Yeah,” Naruto says. “He can feel them already. You could too, just leech his senses.”

“They know where’re here as well?”

“The shifters do, but I doubt if they’ve told. Um, if they have told, though. They’ll be able to smell what you are.”

Sasuke shrugs, descending to the ground and hefting the last of his guns. “Good. Nobody wants to kill an exorcist.”

Naruto snorts. “Tell that to Kiba. Or to Jiraiya.”

“Tch. There’s hardly a place in the world they’d be welcome after that. Let’s go.”

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There turns out to be closer to seventy than a hundred hostiles, which is kind of too bad. They come in from above, Sasuke in the air and Naruto in the trees, and have taken out at least twenty people before the humans realise there’s a threat.

And finally there are no more misunderstandings, no more uncertainties. Sasuke is exactly where Naruto needs him to be, with him every step of the way.

And Sasuke’s vicious, brilliant, absolutely merciless. There’s never a second of hesitation, just bloodshed and killer instinct.

Kyuubi has never wanted him more.

The woods turn into a slaughterhouse.

And like he told Sasuke after they’d killed Mami, he doesn’t like that he enjoys this, but he does. He’s stronger, better, utterly dominant to these humans.

There’s very, very little now that can hurt him, the bond feeding Kyuubi with previously unimagined energy.
One of the beastmads is down, after Sasuke shot her in the head seven times and she couldn’t regenerate anymore: Naruto focuses on the other two while Sasuke turns to hunt down the fleeing remains of the human forces.

His grins splits into Kyuubi’s, his jaw dislodging to fit their fangs.

By the time Sasuke returns, Naruto’s perched on the shoulders of a massive, beastmad man, using his legs to cut off the man’s airflow.

His other opponent has fallen, blood and brain matter a halo in the grass.

Sasuke drops three prisoners on the ground and stalks over. For a moment, again, his eyes have that full-pupil look.

Naruto’s mouth falls open. Horrified, embarrassed, he hears himself actually growling.

“Get rid of him,” Sasuke says. “There’s no coming back from this.”

He’s right. Once a beast has taken over, has been left in charge for an extended period of time with the human consciousness essentially dead, there’s no return.

And Naruto would like to keep this man on principle, bring him home, but they’d have to maim him into just a piece of meat to get him safely in the car.

So he clings as the man bucks, kicks through his rib cage to prevent him pulling off Naruto’s leg, and forces his hand through the man’s skull. His fingers sift through the brain, he keeps them there until the man stops trying to heal, until all the life has run out.

Sasuke steps closer, studying the dead face. “Kabuto worked on this one.”

“Really?” Naruto bends his own bones back into place, letting Kyuubi’s healing rush over him. It’s heady, headstrong, he wants Sasuke down in the grass with him. “You think he donated him to them?”

“It makes sense.”

“Was Kabuto – that’d be who gave them the means to control the beastmads. We should’ve heard about them, though.”

“He wasn’t beastmad when Kabuto brought him in.”

“That fucker.”

Sasuke shrugs. “A few weeks with Kabuto could drive anyone mad. At least now we know where they got them.”

There’s a keening moan from the right, where Sasuke dropped his prisoners. “Er, should you have just left them there?”

Sasuke smirks. It’s wider than usual, and not just because the blood on his face obscures the line of his mouth, makes his thin lips look fuller. “Broke their necks. They’re not going anywhere.”

Naruto blinks. “You paralysed them.”

“Easier than tying them up.”
“Mmh.” That’s fucking horrifyingly stone cold, but he’s reaching for Sasuke’s arm. The sleeve has been torn along a long, deep cut.

Sasuke draws in a sharp breath when Naruto’s fingers close around his wrist. Naruto watches Sasuke’s chest heave as Naruto drags a finger along the injury, smearing Kyuubi’s healing over it until it stops bleeding, and can’t breathe himself.

He looks up at Sasuke in question, in disbelieving hope.

Sasuke looks away, mouth pinching in displeasure. “Bloody magic rohypnol.”

Naruto laughs, still cradling Sasuke’s arm in greedy hands. “I love the way you look at me.” Like Naruto alone is in solid primary colour in a world of dusk and stark light. Like Naruto’s all he needs to see.

“I idiot.” Sasuke pulls his hand free and turns away, marching over to the paralysed humans. “Talk.”

Some mumbled protests, until Sasuke steps on someone’s hand. They might not be able to feel it, but they can certainly hear the crunching sound.

“You know who I am,” Sasuke tells the man he stepped on, and the man talks.

They’re Luthors, one of the splinter groups from BEAST. Out here planning some harebrained attack on the Namikaze stronghold, without even a clear idea of who supplied the beastmads.

Sasuke leans down with Kyuubi’s claws protruding from his hands, clearly intending to dispose of them.

Kyuubi purrs his approval, tensing inside Naruto to jump him, bring him down for a good hard – Naruto cuts that thought off. “Wait! Hayate’s gonna wanna have a go at them.”

Sasuke gives him an annoyed look but straightens up. “Fine. Load them up.”

“You could help me, you know!”

Sasuke shrugs. “You’re the one who wants souvenirs.” He looks through a dropped jacket, finds a packet of nuts in one of the pockets, and starts eating. Scavenger’s habit.

“Souvenirs, really? Also gimme some, you greedy bastard.”

He steps up close to appropriate some of the nuts, and gets a little dizzy from Sasuke smelling of sweat and blood and adrenaline, and of Kyuubi’s power, which still glitters on his hands. The pulse in Sasuke’s throat jumps. Naruto’s fangs ache.

Entranced, he puts a careful, careful hand on the side of Sasuke’s ribcage, where the protective gear has been ripped open and he can touch skin. It heats immediately under his touch.

Sasuke looks at him for a long moment. “Get them loaded.”

Naruto licks his lips. “Okay.”

He’s not – this isn’t Sasuke wanting him. This is Sasuke not actively hating the idea of being close to him, and so being drawn to him by the bond.

This is not okay.
He picks up the paralysed Luthors and slings them over his shoulder, dumping them in the trunk while Sasuke retrieves any scattered weapons they brought.

Straightening up, he catches sight of himself in one of the car mirrors. He’s an … okay looking guy, he supposes. Kind of scrawny, but Sakura’s said nice things about his eyes. He’s not really used to assessing the attractiveness of blokes: Sasuke’s mindblowingly beautiful and has never needed any assessment, and Naruto’s never been much interested in looking at anyone else.

He tries a smile, and then scrunches up his face in embarrassment.

The scars are kind of big. Considering that Sasuke’s given him half of them, it’d be pretty unfair if Sasuke held them against him, but – the scars are kind of big. They’re…ruggedly handsome, maybe.

Also Kakashi has a lot of facial scaring, and Sasuke always denied it but he did sort of maybe have a crush on Kakashi when they were kids. At least, once he’d got over being jealous of Itachi’s attention.

Anyway Kakashi’s more of the attractive older man stereotype, and Naruto’s – being stupid, really. It’s silly to think something shallow like the shape of his face would matter, when Sasuke’s etched his mark into Naruto’s cheeks and Naruto’s soul, when there’s the bond, when Sasuke’s spent years and years being sexually assaulted.

But he did say he’d slept with people because he wanted to, and he clearly doesn’t hate sex or anything, and –

“Are you coming?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m coming.”
They’ve driven for maybe fifteen kilometres when Sasuke says, with no more than his usual annoyance, “I might be on the verge of a stroke.”

“What?!”

“I was airwalking almost the entire time. The seal cuts deeper when I use magic.” He shrugs, shoulder spiking up like a shark fin. “It should be fine as long as Kyuubi’s healing isn’t cut off.”

Naruto presses his face into Sasuke’s arm on irrepressible instinct, and gets himself elbowed in the nose. “We should check it out. Like, we could go inside your mind and have a look? With a bondbridge, you know, Temari was talking about it, like how you do sometimes with humans mates. We, um. We visualise the bond as a bridge between our minds. And us on it, and…”

“I know,” Sasuke interrupts. “Haku and Zabuza supposedly did something similar.”

“Yeah?”

“It should work. I’ll get a better look at Kyuubi, too.”

Naruto’s face hurts from repressed expression. Again Sasuke’s turning the bond from something that’s happened to him into something for him to use: again Naruto can believe that Sasuke doesn’t have to hate everything about this.

“How do you know?” he asks to distract himself. “About Haku and Zabuza, I mean. Wasn’t that like two hundred years ago?" He smirks. “Were you preparing all this time to be with me?”

Sasuke ignores the last part. “There’re a few books about them.”

“Really? Huh. No, wait, I think I saw that. At Kakashi’s? Why would he have those, though? I thought they were really frowned upon. Like, worse than the porn.” Haku and Zabuza were and to a large extent still are persona non grata with both exorcists and shifters, though nowadays certain human circles idolise them. The lines were more sharply drawn back then, in an era when it was inconceivable for exorcists and shifters to attend the same school, or indeed walk on the same street. Haku, and by extension Zabuza, died because the other exorcists wouldn’t step in until the demons had already killed him. Even now, it remains a sore point.

“Guess he thought it was romantic.”

“Cause they were like super outcasts? And the whole tragic death thing…on account of, you know, the Crusader Council spitting on anyone getting involved with a shifter.”

Sasuke snorts, an impossibly sharp sound. “Well, he did have a huge crush on your father, so he –”

“What?!”

Sasuke shrugs, an even jerkier movement than usual. “Who knows. It was Itachi said it, it’s not like he gets emotions.”

“But – but what the fuck – on Dad?”

“If you care so much, ask him.”
“But – but – eww. I figured if anything he’d be into Itachi. At least that makes sense!”

Sasuke looks sick, looks shattered. “Maybe he is.”

“Why are you… I mean, I get that Itachi’s a piece of shit, but…”

“Shut up,” Sasuke snarls. “Just – shut the fuck up about Kakashi.”

“I – okay. Okay.” He knows how to press Sasuke’s buttons, and this is the self-destruct one. “Okay. Now stop the car and let’s get ourselves a bondbridge.”

When he visualises it, it arcs against his closed eyelids.

And there, on the bondbridge at the very edge of Sasuke’s consciousness, is Naruto. Grinning, overbright, waving; then scowling, paler, as he takes in the mindscape behind Sasuke.

Turning around, Sasuke stares dispassionately out across the abstract city of his mind: dirty buildings in darkness, the seal a black storm cloud obscuring the scourging light of Heaven above it. The bond has hit it like a bomb. The landscape is fractured, and the seal intermittently admits light that burns parts of it to ash.

He doesn’t need Naruto’s borrowed perception to know that he looks like a vagrant inside his on head.

When he blinks, the city’s gone and the seal is no longer a storm cloud but a metal construction, its twisted spokes buried bleeding in the tissue of his brain. Touching it makes hostile light scald him, an echo of how Naruto felt when Sasuke started exorcising and then stopped, because if he’d kept going Naruto couldn’t have survived.

Kyuubi’s power is the only thing keeping his brain from exploding into a mess of burnt blood at the provocation.

“Come here!” Naruto calls.

“Hn.” He walks across the bondbridge into Naruto’s mind, which is damaged by proxy but only by proxy, and oddly seems to consist mostly of sewers. Looking down at the water that flows through them, he sees vertiginous seascapes, endless atlantises glimmering under the surface.

In the centre there’s Kyuubi, who looks almost exactly as Sasuke’s imagined him, as Naruto’s always described him: this huge creature, wild even in captivity, a monster of magic and want. Sasuke in an exhausted show of defiance sits down with his back resting against the bars of Kyuubi’s cage, and Kyuubi’s breath ruffles his hair, its dampness like a lick up the back of his neck.

If the humans ever really understood that this is what lives behind Naruto’s silly smiling face, the bombs would fall and the world would burn.

Of course, if the humans had ever grasped what lives behind Sasuke’s eyes, they’d have drowned him like witch, like a kitten. Put him in a sack and put the sack in the river, trying to extinguish an unforgiving light fit to immolate them. With the seal in place, their iconoclastic rage might have exterminated him.

Kyuubi pushes against the bars, equal parts magic and flesh but unable to escape the cage that is clearly a larger version of the one Orochimaru locked Naruto in, the night Naruto got his scars.
Sasuke, unlike Kyuubi and quite possibly even Naruto, could open and close it as he likes: within the confines of Naruto’s skull, Sasuke is a force of incomparable power.

Out of the corner of Naruto’s physical eye, he can see his own material body, limp in the car seat. Deep in its trance, it looks like comatose people on television look.

After a while Naruto comes and sits beside him, in the sewer outside the cage. He’s been snooping around on the bondbridge, but he understands that he’s not allowed in Sasuke’s head and has respected that.

Kyuubi’s less friendly with him, huffing and puffing until Naruto chases him away.

He returns soon enough, lying down on the far side of Sasuke and nudging his back through the bars.

“You get it, right?” Naruto says, his voice echoed and amplified by the strange architecture of his mind. “How you feel about the bond – that it’s all contradictory. It’s not real so you dismiss it. But at the same time it’s the only sort of connection that’s real enough for you to trust. You get that that’s all messed up, right?” He makes a frustrated sound, angling sideways towards Sasuke, his eyes so big now. “That you mattered to me before the bond, that you matter to me aside from the bond – is that something you can believe?”

Sasuke swallows, stiffly. “Sometimes.”

“Oh. Okay. Okay.”

Silence again, just Kyuubi’s heavy breathing and the dripping sewer water, until Sasuke says, “I meant what I said before. I don’t – want you to be dead.”

Naruto looks like he’s going to bawl, but in the end swallows and then smiles.

xxxxx

They drive for hours, taking turns sleeping, until they’re back at the estate. Leaving the Luthors and the weapons to Unit 1, Sasuke lets Naruto lead the way inside the main building.

Green walls, he notices in the entrance hall. He notices it distinctly enough, apparently, that Naruto thinks he’s said something aloud.

“Hmm? What?”

“Green walls,” he repeats. “Like in a mental hospital.”

Naruto makes a face like sticking his tongue out. “Clearly they knew you were coming.”

Sasuke’s distracted from replying by the sound of his own name. It’s spoken in a familiar voice, accompanied by familiar footsteps, and so he allows the speaker to throw her arms around his neck.

“Sakura!” Naruto exclaims, Kyuubi’s vermilion surprise creeping back under his skin. It’s for the best that Sakura has her face pressed into Sasuke’s shoulder, so she doesn’t see. More importantly, it’s for the best that Naruto’s no longer capable of lying to him: the surprise is genuine, Naruto really didn’t know she was here, didn’t try to spring this on him.

It’s astonishing like walking again after the prosthesis was first attached, to have someone now that might be counted on. Nobody can be trusted, but he doesn’t necessarily have to take Naruto on trust:
Naruto can be known and so potentially could be relied on the same way as Sasuke’s hands, Sasuke’s memories, Sasuke’s decisions.

Sakura finally steps back, smiling shakily at Naruto over her shoulder but keeping her hands closed tight in Sasuke’s shirt, knuckles against his heart. He allows the touched passively. It’s the path of least resistance, and his resistance would break their relationship.

Her touch doesn’t signify.

“Sakura,” he says at last, and she won’t notice this but he can see Naruto hearing the surprise between every clipped syllable in her name.

“I was hoping,” she starts. “I mean. I wanted to see you.” She breathes in, collecting herself and releasing him with a rather embarrassed smile. “I heard about – the bond. Ino said. So I went to try and see you, and Tsunade made arrangements, and – well. Here I am.”

“That’s so like her,” Naruto grumbles under his breath, even as he steps forward for his own hug.

That too is insignificant. There’s a bland, distracted kind of pleasure from Naruto, which is nothing unexpected. He reacted much the same even back when he claimed to be in love with her, an idea Sasuke wasn’t alone in dismissing as bizarre.

Faced with Kyuubi’s raging desire, Sakura would try to run, and would be devoured.

“My room,” Sasuke says.

Naruto looks up from Sakura’s dye-damaged hair. “Hmm?”

“My room. Where is it?”

“Uh, I guess you can just pick whichever you like?”

Sasuke nods, turning to the staircase. Sakura catches up with him in the upstairs corridor, where about a third of the bedrooms seem unoccupied. He decides on a corner room fairly close to Naruto’s, closing the door behind them.

It looks like a low-class hotel room, an empty cheap space. Sasuke has nothing to put in it.

Sakura says his name again, sitting down on the unmade bed. “Are you all right?”

“I’ll live.” He’ll stop by Naruto’s room later, pick up some clothes, some toiletries. A phone charger, Naruto’s always losing them so he must have spares.

“I thought…” She hesitates, wets her lips. He has the impression that she does these things – licking her lips, looking down, stumbling over her words – to signal safety, signal that she’s unthreatening. What remains unclear is whether it’s subconscious, which would mean she’s afraid of him, or deliberate, which would mean she condescends to him. “I thought you’d be happier, with Naruto.”

“He’s a monster.”

Sakura smiles, heartened by his distracted tone. “What is it they say? *When is a monster not a monster?* /Oh, when you love it.*

Sasuke thinks about a later line in that poem. *When is a monster not a monster?* /Oh, when you are the reason it has become so mangled.*
Kyuubi’s hunger is eating through him, leaving his insides hollow and brittle with this horrible need, an emptiness eroding and expanding like a black hole in the core of his body. The hunger pain feels like a corrosive burn scorching through his skin, scalding the air in his lungs.

His blood boils with the memory of Naruto’s fangs eating through the seal, Naruto husking out his name and pressing inside his body. It was a feeling like going over an edge, familiar from his kamikaze attempts to trigger the self defence release, which Naruto keeps calling suicide attempts.

It doesn’t matter to this need that Naruto was supposed to be better than this, was supposed to be above base instinct. That Naruto always insisted he would choose him, and that it would mean something.

Sometimes when Sasuke was small and on the very edge of sleep, Orochimaru talked about love as a horror story. Pretty love, love that isn’t supposed to be about using someone, never lasts. And I doubt you’d know how to live in a world that didn’t constantly fail, rock bottom after rock bottom breaking open under your feet. Shinigami-chan…

The sensible approach would be to take charge of the situation and get it over with, and not being practical about it implies the sort of sentimentality that kills you.

“It was kind of them,” Sakura says. “Tsunade and Minato. To arrange for me to come here.” She says their names easily and almost fondly, as though they were still simply Naruto’s caretakers, as if they could be Sasuke’s family too now: as if they could ever be anything but subhuman filth, another set of thoughtless would-be jailors. “Anyway. Should we go down?”

“Hn.”

Downstairs Naruto and the rest have gathered around a television set, playing some video game.

“Come on, then,” Naruto says, looking up before he could possibly have heard them approach and throwing a controller at Sasuke.

Sasuke’s fingers close around it automatically, as though they’re back in the days when this was normal. He smirks at Naruto, climbing over the back of the couch to sit beside him. Their arms touch, and Sasuke has never felt desire like this, pure as hatred, as heavenly fire. Every time he breathes his shoulder nudges Naruto’s, and every time it does the craving stabs through him, his guts clenching painfully around this longing like around a death wound.

Naruto stares at him for a long tense moment, then takes the opportunity to kill Sasuke’s character.

“Fucker.”

Naruto sticks his tongue out, doing an utterly ridiculous victory dance. “Headshot! Godlike!”

xxxxx

“If you two arseholes could stop TKing for a moment, we might actually survive this!” Kiba’s exasperated tones.

Sasuke leans forward, sneaking up behind Naruto and gutting him with a power drill. “Never said I was a team player.”

“Fucker,” Kiba grumbles. “We’re gonna lose again.”

“Can’t help it if I’m the only challenging competition,” Naruto gloats. “That said – ouch! Bastard!”
“You’re giving me a headache,” Shikamaru grumbles. “Couldn’t you trash talk in your indoor voices?”

“If you hadn’t fallen asleep in the middle of the first match, you could’ve…”

“Yeah, yeah.”

There’s a knock on the doorframe behind them, and Sasuke turns around. “Sakura.” She left not long after they went downstairs, for an extended bathroom break that he expects turned into calling Ino.

Naruto twists around too, somehow managing to take out most of the enemy squad while waving awkwardly at Sakura. “Hi.”

“Hi. I hope I’m not interrupting.”

“Of course not,” Sasuke says, turning his back on the others, shutting them out, so she’ll come in properly. He hadn’t meant to sound gruff.

“Good.” She smiles rather shyly, approaching the couch. “Um. I don’t know how to say this, so I’m just going to come right out and say it. Have you been – giving me space, lately?”

“…yeah.” That and there was Kakashi, who seemed at the time a more realistic proposition.

She nods. She’s standing quite close, this girl he’s known for almost as long as he can remember. Who’s seen him cry and laugh, and still remains. “I thought about what you said. About us looking at things very differently. I – Sasuke, don’t be like this, okay, please.”

He lets her take his hand. “All right.”

“All right.” Her smile is more determined now. She alights on the arm of the couch. “So, um. Did you… finish the reading assignment? Because that ending was so frustrating! It would have needed so much more development, and his relationship to Sonja was still completely twisted. She seems almost afraid of him, you know?”

Sasuke’s missed a lot of school this semester, even for a non-human. At this rate he won’t graduate, but school was only ever relevant as a passage rite to university libraries, and so ceased to matter the moment Kyuubi bit through the seal. Still, he did finish the book. “She’s a murder groupie. I’d think that’s part of the appeal for her.”

Naruto’s head appears over Sasuke’s shoulder. Heat radiates from his body, so tangible that Sasuke thinks for a long moment that Kyuubi’s energy has started leaking. “What’re you taking about? Not Crime and Punishment? Shit, that ending was so dumb! So he realised it’s not a great idea to go around murdering people – fine. But that’s got nothing to do with randomly finding religion.”

“His problem wasn’t killing people,” Sasuke points out. “His problem was he wasn’t any good at it.”

He’d expected Naruto to protest, maybe, but he snorts back, almost a chuckle. “Heh, yeah. This whole ubermensch thing, if you’re gonna put it up against God and have it lose, you have to actually have an ubermensch. Not just someone who thinks he’s an ubermensch.”

Sasuke shifts, forcing Naruto’s face away with his shoulder. “The whole point is there’s no such thing.” A stupid point, made by a misguided author who’d never met a proper exorcist.

Naruto makes an impatient sound, face scrunched up in thought. “People aren’t that weak. They just – need to have their basic needs met. Then they can get up on their two feet. If he did, Raskolnikov
wouldn’t have killed that lady, and we would’ve been spared reading about his bullshit finding God in work camp.”

Sasuke snorts. “Isn’t that where you think God belongs?” This wasn’t always the case, but Naruto took against God when he realised God lends his light and his power to the likes to Orochimaru, and doesn’t care how it’s used, doesn’t bother saving those Orochimaru turns it on.

*God helps he who helps himself*, Sasu’ke’s told him more than once, but that’s never made Naruto more sympathetic to the idea.

Sakura cuts in, redirecting the conversation, “I might have settled for being spared reading about Marmeladov.”

“Ugh, yes! If anyone should’ve been axed…” Naruto keeps moving around as he talks, never having been able to keep still, and keeps brushing against Sasuke. “Sure, poor guy needed help and all, but he was responsible for other people! At least they didn’t just sit around crying about how hard their lives were when, hello Marmeladov that’s actually your fault and maybe you should step the fuck up and fix it instead of just using everyone else.”

“They shouldn’t have let themselves be used. It’s not like he forced them.”

Again Sakura cuts in, diffusing, “I take it you don’t consider alcoholism an illness?”

Naruto belatedly looks away from Sasuke. “You can stop drinking,” he says, sounding sad but also sure. “It’s hard, but. People can stop.”

Sasuke lifts an eyebrow but doesn’t speak. He’s come to understand that Tsunade drinks more than is good for her, and everyone knows Jiraiya’s been a drunkard ever since Sasuke crippled him, but that’s not Sakura’s business.

“Sometimes,” Naruto says, softly, with that sick intensity of his, “sometimes people are trapped. Then you have to change things for them, if they can’t on their own. So they can get back on their feet. Or even just show them a way to change things themselves.”

But there’s no changing things for people who are really trapped, who have lost too many things that can never be got back or replaced.

“How noblesse oblige,” Sasuke drawls. Drawling is a way to obscure his accent slipping through, forbidden by his mother but encouraged by Orochimaru, and automatic now.

“It’s not like that.”

“You think someone’s your equal after you have to save them from themselves, and they follow you out of gratitude?”

“I… No, but it doesn’t have to be that black and white.”

“Look who’s talking.”

“There can be – mutual saving,” Naruto insists. He’s so close that Sasuke can feel his every exhalation against his own cheek.

He tilts his face. “If you keep this up, I’m going to stuff that saviour complex up your arse.”

That’s a peace offering if Naruto’s ever heard one. He chooses to laugh, opening his knees a little.
“You better prep me good if it’s as big as you say.”

“Be glad it’s not your ego, or you’d never sit again.”

“Guys,” Kiba interrupts. “You gonna play or what?”

“Um. Sure,” Sakura says, with the smile of someone making an effort. “I’m afraid you’ll have to rescue me, though.”

Naruto grins. “I give great rescuing hero.”

Sakura laughs, and it’s not very long before the two of them abandon the game, slipping into conversation. It’ll have been a long time for them too, since they spoke regularly. Sasuke decides to keep pummelling opponents, especially Kiba, until eventually Sakura leaves.

“Fucker,” Kiba grumbles, not without admiration. “Are you anywhere near this good in reality?”

“Depends,” Sasuke says, taking the opportunity to stuff a hand grenade down Kiba’s character’s jacket.

“Yeah? How about a match, then?”

Naruto abruptly switches focus from attempting to insert a cheese doodle into Shikamaru’s ear.

“I’m no good at play fighting,” Sasuke says.

“Who said anything about playing?” This is a clear reminder that Kiba is the kind of stupid that means he beat Sasuke up, once or twice, in the childhood days of a new seal. Naruto had trashed him for it: Sasuke’s only real option, at the time, had been to burn Kiba out of existence with heavenly light once a demon appeared.

“Eh,” Naruto cuts in. “If you don’t use magic, you might lose – don’t give me that look, Kiba’s bigger and better trained for this. And then you’ll be pissed and there will be magic, and I don’t actually want you to kill him.”

“You must have rules.”

“Totally do,” Kiba agrees. “Look, how about I go downstairs and fix up some mats and stuff, and you can come down when Naruto’s done worrying? Come on, Shikamaru!”

In their absence Naruto rubs at the back of his head. “I really will be very sad if you murder him.”

Sasuke kicks at his knee. Because it’s Sasuke, it hurts like a bitch. “What makes you think I would?”

Naruto shrugs. “I’m pretty sure he doesn’t understand what he’s up against. Even before we were bonded, he couldn’t take me, and now – I don’t think he gets that you can use it all. I mean. Kyuubi and your magic.”

“I wasn’t actually planning to exorcise him.”

“I didn’t think you were. Just, you get mad sometimes, and you’re used to my levels of healing. Kiba can’t take that much damage.”

“I get mad at you.”

Naruto surprises him with a quick kiss. It’s just a butterfly brush against the side of his jaw, a world
away from Kyuubi’s feral, unhinged touches. It’s something Naruto might have done, if – if things had been different, if there had been no bond.

That’s a pointless thought.

It’s fleeting, because the kiss leaves Sasuke feral and unhinged. He’s frozen with it, stock-still, shock-still, his skin burning with animal desire and with – yes – his ownership of Naruto.

“Sasuke…”

Sasuke moves like he always moves, with barely restrained violence, in the economic stabs of a natural born killer. He straddles Naruto’s legs even as he locks his hands around Naruto’s face, angling it for a deep, harsh kiss that steals Naruto’s breath away in every frightening, literal meaning of the words.

And Naruto just loses it, in this new and terrifying way. He understands that this is wrong and twisted, a bad and selfish thing to do, and it makes no difference. That understanding has no power over him, can’t affect how he pushes greedy hands under Sasuke’s shirt, closes clawed fingers around the nape of Sasuke’s neck.

He’s there now, in the place where will doesn’t matter, where bond craving is breathing and Naruto’s drowning.

He gags on Sasuke’s tongue and just swallows, moans for more and bites in blind desperation, catching Sasuke’s skin, Sasuke’s taste like something tangible in his mouth. He can’t see, can’t think: there’s no room for that, and no need for it, with Sasuke nudging his knees apart and slipping down between them. Naruto groans in protest, Sasuke’s shirt rips and then his skin a little as Naruto tries to keep him, oh god please, this one thing – until Sasuke unzips his jeans. There’s barely a moment’s shock before Sasuke’s mouth is on him, remorseless and heavenly, and Naruto’s hips buck up hard. Sasuke grunts and gags, reaching up to lock Naruto’s thighs to the coach, but he doesn’t stop sucking. It doesn’t have much effect, holding down Naruto’s legs, because Naruto grabs his head, tugging him closer, always closer.

“Sasuke, Sasuke!” He gulps it like a litany, like Sasuke small and ravaged and locking himself into his rosary prayers like into a safety belt.

When he comes it feels like a bomb going off inside him.

He opens his eyes to Sasuke sitting back on his heels with his face flushed, lips open and swollen and wet. Some of his hair remains stuck between Naruto’s clutching fingers.

“Sasuke,” he says again, more tentative now but deliberate too. Trying to negotiate a path through an unfamiliar forest, trying not to stumble into any sudden abysses.

Sasuke wipes his mouth and starts to stand up, away from him, and fuck it, he can climb back out of any potential abyss: snags Sasuke’s wrist, pulls Sasuke down on top of him. Sasuke catches himself on the back of the couch, making a face that forces Naruto to release him. “Don’t touch me.”

“But we just – you just.” He doesn’t need to gesture at it, really: at his own spent, still-naked dick, at his sperm sticking to the corner of Sasuke’s mouth. At the wet spot on Sasuke’s trousers, from when he came too.

For a protracted moment Sasuke’s face remains oddly blank. Then he leers. “Haven’t you heard? I do this shit for a living. I don’t have to like it.”
Naruto sits forward, elbows on his knees. Tucks himself back in, because he can’t stand to see it anymore. “I can’t be some disgusting chore to you.”

And Sasuke certainly wasn’t disgusted when he did it. Sasuke was desperate for it, on fire with Naruto’s desire, which will become overwhelming the minute Sasuke’s balancing revulsion slackens.

Sasuke looks away. “I can think now.”

Naruto can too, head cleared by intense orgasm. “This can’t happen again. You’re all –” He makes a gesture, for this thing that he knows but doesn’t know the words for.

Sasuke’s voice is quiet. “Like I said. You were supposed to be better than this.” He smirk-sneers, a rather subdued expression. “I suppose it’s to my advantage that you’re not.”

“You couldn’t stand me if I were! …could you?”

“I don’t know,” Sasuke tells him, scraped raw and naked, down to the bare chafing bones of truth. “What does it matter now?”

“All the time that I was away, I wanted back with you. I – everything that happened, when I thought about something funny or I was upset or – or anything. I wanted to experience it with you. You’re who I wanted to tell it to. How could you – how the fuck could you do that to me. Throw me away like that!”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t have let me,” Sasuke sneers. “If you hadn’t been so weak!”

“I tried!” Naruto screams at him.

“And what the fuck good is that?”

“At least I did something, I fucking tried, I…! You just cut me off! Why didn’t you – that was fucking weak, that – you let me down.”

“That was the one good thing I ever did!” Sasuke hisses back. And they’re on their feet now, close enough that Kyuubi’s lashing tails sparkle through Sasuke, who pays this no mind. Just breathes in, a deep shuddering breath. “You couldn’t help me, Naruto. You couldn’t even help yourself.”

“If you think you helped me by turning me away like some worthless child, then –”

“I helped myself,” Sasuke cuts him off. “You were a liability.”

“I’m not a liability now,” Naruto finally manages to say. “We’re a team now.”

Sasuke might not have answered even if Kiba hadn’t reappeared in the doorway. “You guys coming or what?”

“No,” Naruto tells him. He cuts off Kiba’s protests, “Now isn’t a good time.”

Kiba takes a step back, but persists, “No such thing as a bad time for kicking exorcist arse.”

Sasuke’s never had much patience for verbal warnings. Light sizzles across his fingers, his eyes spinning red and deranged.

Naruto didn’t need this reminder that killing has always come naturally to Sasuke, that he’s no stranger to cruelty.
Kiba starts to burn.

“Fuck’s sake!” He pushes at Sasuke, which makes Sasuke stumble backwards but has no effect on the magic. So there’s nothing to it, because Kiba’s screaming now, and Sasuke’s clearly prepared to burn him as some kind of fucked up punishment for Naruto: nothing to it, so Naruto lashes out at him through the bond, darkness and claws and foxfire through Sasuke’s mind.

And this was never about Kiba, so it’s a given that when Sasuke retaliates, it’s Naruto being hit by that searing angel light. He stumbles to his knees, the outline of his own body hazy with imminent exorcism. But Kiba, panting on the floor there in the doorway and bleeding a little from his ears, is fine.

And Naruto too is fine, because the light goes out. Sasuke kicks him in the head, and Naruto falls over, but not before grabbing Sasuke’s leg, forcing Sasuke down with him.

“Fuck you all,” Sasuke hisses. He’s up before Naruto, still healing massive internal damage, can stop him. Steps on Kiba as if Kiba’s simply part of the floor, storming off God knows where.

“Your boyfriend’s a bitch,” Kiba gasps.

“Yeah well,” Naruto says. “What else is new.”
When You Try Your Best But You Don't Succeed

Naruto understands that it’s not real yet, to Sasuke. Sasuke’s been on a long leash for years, and this isn’t the longest he’s been away from Orochimaru: he goes to school, he goes on missions, Orochimaru doesn’t mind what he does with his time as long as he comes when he’s called. As far as Orochimaru’s concerned, he could even venture back to the Uchihas, visit what was supposed to be his home. It’s Sasuke who hasn’t wanted to, who went the first handful times he was sent but then refused, stubborn and silent about this salting of the wound.

That the leash has snapped, that hasn’t registered yet, not in any real way. The impact will come eventually, but as of yet Sasuke’s mind is operating under the presumption that this is a temporary reprieve. Remission, not cure.

Naruto sits up slowly, his skin hot and tight – less from Sasuke burning him than from Kyuubi’s maniacal desire to rush after Sasuke to assert his dominance and his claim. Naruto pushes that desire away, locks Kyuubi up tight. If he’d thought about it, he’d have thought that that would calm Sasuke down, too.

Instead there’s an eruption, the phantom sensation of his mind breaking, he’s gagging on a torrent of blood that it takes him a long time to understand isn’t his, isn’t real.

In that suspended moment of disbelief, Kyuubi tears free and roars across the bondbridge. Naruto helps him along, Naruto claws and kicks at Sasuke’s walls, helping force a passage for Kyuubi, because – because Sasuke told him, *I might be on the verge of a stroke*, and then Naruto lashed out at him through the bond.

Sasuke is on his hands and knees in the upstairs corridor, stroking out.

There’s blood everywhere, flooding Sasuke’s brain and leaking from his eyes and ears and nose and mouth. He keeps stroking out as fast as Kyuubi can heal him.

“Let me in,” Naruto hisses aloud, pushing away from Kiba’s concerned hands. “Fucking open up you fucking bastard.”

Sasuke doesn’t, but his continuous brain haemorrhage means Naruto can force his way in. He tears down Sasuke’s defences, claws his way through Sasuke’s resistance until Kyuubi can light Sasuke up from the inside, and the bleeding finally stops.

Naruto’s up on his feet and two shaky steps forward when Kiba interrupts. “Naruto. What’s happening?”

“I have to go to him.” That imperative drives him forward, shoulder against the wall for support.

“What the fuck’s he doing to you?” Kiba hisses. “Is he still attacking you?”

“He’s having a stroke.”

Kiba blinks.

Naruto grins. It sits strained and ugly on his face, he can feel it, stiff like the grin of a skull. “Bond’s not great for non-shifter minds.”

“Jesus,” Kiba mutters. “Freak. But you can heal him, right?”
“Mmh. I gotta…” He’s steadier now, stumbles quickly past Kiba and up the stairs.

Sasuke too has got his feet underneath him. He’s braced against the wall and trying to wipe blood off his face, mostly smearing it around. The whole corridor stinks of it, that precious, faintly burnt copper smell of exorcist blood, and the particular tang that means Sasuke, who glares at Naruto from under his fringe. Kyuubi’s burrowed so deeply in him, orange energy sparkles off his fingers as he wipes at the blood.

Naruto walks up very close, as close as Sasuke’s menacing prickliness will let him, and sits down on the floor, his shoulder just short of brushing Sasuke’s knee. It’s not two seconds before Sasuke sinks down beside him, head tipped back to rest against the wall so the last sluggish bleeding from his eyes can trickle to a stop.

He takes Sasuke’s hand, gets to hold it for maybe two seconds before Sasuke lifts it away. Before he does, Naruto has time to say, “It’s you and me. It’s always been you and me.”

“You get that you’re not the first person who’s said that to me, right?”

There’s this flash of – but it can’t be. Kakashi’s not the type to say these things, least of all to his best friend’s kid brother.

“Yeah, well, I mean it.”

For a long time Sasuke stays silent, and Naruto does too. Just pushes his certainty into the bond, this ridiculous and unquenchable earnestness.


“Yeah well,” Naruto says, “It’s how people are.”

Sasuke makes a deeply unconvinced sound.

It’s not the first time Naruto’s told him, “People need people. That’s what being human is.”

“But you’re not.” Sasuke looks at him steadily, more tired than annoyed. Blood clots his lashes, streaks like war paint across his face. His head is still titled back and sideways, and he makes an impatient gesture. “You don’t have to be.”

And it dawns on Naruto gradually, one of those late-autumn dawns when you’d almost given up on ever being warm again but here suddenly is the sun gilding the dew – it dawns on him that Sasuke doesn’t mean that as something negative.

He picks Sasuke’s hand back up, keeps hold of it when Sasuke tries to jerk it free, and bends greedily over it. Sasuke’s fingers twitch when Naruto licks in between them, but he doesn’t exert enough force to get free. “Naruto.”

“Shut up,” Naruto says, licking Sasuke’s palm clean of blood, pushing away Sasuke’s sleeve to suck it from his wrist. “I’m cleaning up after myself.”

Kyuubi visibly rolls around inside Sasuke, orange energy rippling through Sasuke’s skin. It sounds like he’s purring.

With Kyuubi filling Sasuke up from the inside, Naruto can’t be sure whether Sasuke meant for this, or knows about it: about Naruto caught in a memory rendered incongruous by Sasuke’s chilly expressionless face. It’s a memory of Orochimaru’s voice in his ear, whispering it’s you and me,
which shifts into a memory of crawling across the floor in a too-large plastic suit, scrubbing so hard he’s getting bruises on hands that aren’t his own, child hands he hasn’t seen in years, because Sasuke has long since outgrown them.

Boots in front of him, the fancy kind of wellingtons that are made to look like leather. Orochimaru standing over him, and having to take a break from cleaning up Orochimaru’s messy ways of dealing with defiance to suck him off. The grainy, bitter taste that makes Naruto gag, even though he didn’t mind the second-hand experience of it in reality, downstairs before everything went to shit: how his mouth is so small here, how it takes technique not to choke.

Orochimaru saying something, he misses the exact words on account of the panicked ringing in his ears. And then Sasuke’s voice, clear and echoing in the tiled room – the abattoir – younger but unmistakably his: “Do you imagine this is what I dreamt of, what I planned for? A life on my knees.”

Orochimaru’s indulgent laughter, and he pulls Sasuke to his feet. His hand is enormous on Sasuke’s shoulder, and he bends to say, “All this I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”

All this appears to be a roomful of corpses.

Beyond that is the knowledge that this room is where Orochimaru taught Sasuke not to have that liability, the liability of caring for anyone else. You could spare them, if only you would do as I ask… If you don’t, I will hurt them. Torture them. Kill them. The lesson was finished when Sasuke would no longer concede even to blink his eyes in order to spare someone being tortured to death in front of him.

It sounds so melodramatic, but Sasuke’s memory of it is dusty and ordinary, an everyday memory of boredom and discomfort. He thinks of it as one of the easier lessons Orochimaru taught.

xxxxx

Sakura mostly only knows Shikamaru as Ino’s friend, not as someone bonded – and there’s a joke in there somewhere about Of Human Bondage – so walking with him is ordinary and everyday, if a little awkward.

She rounds a bend in the corridor, and everything changes.

They must be distracted, Naruto and Sasuke, because otherwise they would have heard. Would presumably have stopped.

She blinks, feeling like Alice looking into Wonderland, seeing something so outside of her experience that she’s ill equipped to interpret it.

Naruto, crouching predatorily over Sasuke, clawed paws covering most of Sasuke’s torso. He appears to be – it appears Sasuke has had a very heavy nosebleed, and Naruto appears currently to be licking the remains of it off his face.

More startlingly, Sasuke too glows orange, which clashes rather ridiculously with his red eyes. His head falls back as Naruto’s mouth slips down off his jaw and attaches itself to his neck. White light twitches across his fingers with every heave of his chest.

Beside her – and suddenly he’s a comrade, not a friend of a friend with an uncomfortable tendency towards sarcasm but a fellow human being – Shikamaru’s blasé expression has come over brittle.

Naruto never turns around.
It’s in the lounge downstairs that Shikamaru finally responds to the silent question she directs at him, her unspoken insistence on reassurance.

“Well,” he says, “It’s easy to forget. Ino’s just this girl. But one shouldn’t let oneself forget. Sasuke’s no more human than Naruto.”

“What up?” Kiba demands, waltzing in. Sakura’s ashamed to twitch, to think, shifter. She remembers her mum talking about Naruto’s father, saying, he’s very human for someone who’s not. Dad had got angry, but it was Grandfather Ibiki who ended the discussion. Grandfather, who’s the reason she can walk unmolested through friendships with the likes of Sasuke Uchiha and Naruto Uzumaki, and who can be very particular about how shifters are spoken of. “Is Uchiha freaking again?”

“He had a lot of Kyuubi in him, is all.” Shikamaru shrugs. “Hadn’t seen him like that before. It was just a reminder that he’s not really human at all.”

Sakura blinks. Feels slow, muddled. “But you must have… You’re bonded to a shifter, you must have yourself.”

Shikamaru’s look at her is frank, not really dismissive, not really judgemental. “If Temari’s beast went that deep in me, I’d be obliterated.”

“A sigh, as Shikamaru sinks down on the couch, fluffing up a pillow. “Sasuke’s mind can hold an archangel. I’d think he can handle a shifter beast.”

“Right,” Sakura says. “Right. Of course. That makes sense.” The silence grows and grows, until she says, in this too-fast voice, “I guess it’s good it was Sasuke. I mean, that it wasn’t a human. Naruto couldn’t have – Sasuke couldn’t have stood for that.”

Silence again, but of a different kind. Shikamaru lifts his eyebrow, but it’s had time to descend again before he speaks. “Let’s be real here. If Naruto got some reluctant human and that’s what he needed, we all know Sasuke would have held them down for him.”

Sakura understands intellectually that her cringing away from this statement is illogical. If Sasuke really thought that was a fate worse than death, Sasuke would have killed himself a long time ago, which would have been a horror and a waste. And Sasuke’s no stranger to killing – she doesn’t question that he’d kill for Naruto, or for her – so she can’t make sense of why this seems to her somehow worse.

“Naruto wouldn’t,” Kiba breaks in. “I mean, for Kankurou, he didn’t…”

“He wouldn’t hold someone down for you,” Shikamaru agrees. “He would for Sasuke.”

“Hmm,” Sakura says tonelessly. Wonders if he had to hold Sasuke down. If that’s something Sasuke would think he deserved to be forgiven for.

That’s what they fought about, Sasuke and she, that’s why Sasuke’s been giving her space.

To forgive, she’d said, nonplussed into toneless quoting, is an act of compassion. It’s not done because people deserve it. It’s done because they need it.

The way Sasuke looked at her, with those high-intensity eyes distant, let her know that he didn’t get that sentiment in any meaningful way. He understood the words of course, but the idea behind them wasn’t graspable.
Much like she felt when he replied, *Itachi acted in accordance with God’s will. He doesn’t need forgiveness. Anyway I’m going to ruin him.*

*Sasuke – no…*

And every word came oddly familiar and inevitable: this scene had been a long time coming. *Why are you more disturbed by me turning on someone than by other people turning on me?*

*Because then you’re not guilty!* They were in her room, a thunder storm outside like they’d stepped into an old novel, where the weather always matches the mood.

*I’m not martyr material.*

*That’s not fair. That’s not what I’m saying.*

*What is it you want to hear? That I never wanted to do any of it? That I hate killing people? That I tried to avoid hurting anyone, and if I had to do it, I always tried to make it quick?*

*Oh, Sasuke…* and she was reaching for him, and maybe this was another choice with no good outcomes.

*Because none of that is true.*

She saw herself in the dark window behind him, saw herself visibly rearing back. *Are you…trying to drive me away for my own good or something?*

He smiled thinly, not an expression he’d ever shown her before. Didn’t speak.

*Did you ever really think of me as your friend at all? You obviously never trusted me.*

*You were – restful,* he said, his eyes too going to the window, going past her. *And I was your bad boy charity case.*

*I feel like… everything’s gone so wrong so fast, and I’m looking back to try and see where we went off the rails so I can fix it and I just don’t know.*

*I think we were always headed this way.*

There was nothing to say. Sakura’s mouth opened and closed on the emptiness of words.

Now too there is nothing to say.

xxxxx

The skin under Sasuke’s chin stretches like a treasure map, marbled with veins trembling and ready to rupture from the force of his pulse. He pushes at Naruto’s head, and Naruto lets himself be pushed downwards but not away, sliding his face down Sasuke’s throat and chest until it’s pressed against his heart.

“Off,” Sasuke grumbles. It’s a déjà vu sort of grumbling, the kind Naruto recognises from a childhood of Sasuke feeling at home in his house and defaulting to a comfortable, relaxed bristliness.

He hears himself say, in a pass the milk kind of voice, sunny and ordinary, “You can’t leave me. I’ll kill you first.”

“I know.”
Naruto blinks, lashes catching against Sasuke’s shirt. That’s Sasuke’s warmest voice, the one reserved for things that don’t need fighting or questioning and so exceptionally rare.

Naruto can ease up then, for the first time since the bonding, because whatever Sasuke’s feeling, and it’s complicated and sharp-edged, it’s not exactly rejection. He lifts his face, to get a proper look at Sasuke’s, and they’re so close now, he’s breathing Sasuke’s air and feeling the warmth from Sasuke’s skin. “I really mean that,” he says, and still his voice comes simple and without strain. The truth is too obvious for strain. “I really will.” Speaking brushes his lips against Sasuke’s, and Sasuke’s mouth moves with his.

Sasuke learns him so fast. How to drag his fingers along the edge of Naruto’s jaw, nailside up. How to tease his earlobe, of all the ridiculous places. This is really no surprise: Sasuke always has preferred to go on the offensive.

And it’s – Sasuke’s mind turned once before into an echo chamber for Naruto’s desire, multiplying it endlessly between them, but Sasuke feels now that Naruto belongs to him and touches him accordingly: staking claim, revelling in his possession.

Naruto’s mouth gapes open, so eager to be possessed, and Sasuke has claimed it utterly by the time he sucks Naruto’s tongue back into his own mouth.

“You don’t want to,” Naruto gaps at last, “go after Sakura?”

“No.”

“You could –”

“I could go,” Sasuke agrees, and his voice is so raspy Naruto twitches in his pants. “Or I could stay.” He hisses as Naruto kisses messily over his face, as Naruto licks his eye. It tastes like he thought it would, more holy water than human tears.

Sasuke’s fingers tighten painfully on his jaw, but when he forces Naruto’s mouth away from his eye, that’s all right, because it ends up back on Sasuke’s, before trailing down Sasuke’s throat, and it tastes so good, and god, Sasuke has a neck thing, arching up under him.

“You’d really…” Naruto mumbles. Remembers that there was the idea, at first, that being physical with Naruto would mean something, in a way that this doesn’t, and the remembrance makes Naruto want to stop, but he – can’t.

“It was good, right?” Sasuke says, his voice harder than Naruto would have liked but punctuated by his heavy breathing. “Even the first time, that was good for you.”

“Mnh,” Naruto says, around Sasuke’s windpipe. Even the first time was good for Naruto, and now, with the bond, it would be good for Sasuke too. He sucks on Sasuke’s throat, remembering half an hour ago, Sasuke on his knees and desperate, gulping down Naruto’s erection as if starved. He dares to ask, cocky, “Never had sex like that before?”

“No.”

“Yeah, me either.”

Sasuke sounds unfairly dry, despite his hammering pulse. “Have you even had any sex at all?”

“…no,” Naruto has to admit. “Wasn’t any point. You weren’t there.”
He doesn’t have to look up, and indeed doesn’t want to because his face is comfortable in the warm crook of Sasuke’s neck, to know Sasuke’s eyebrow is rapidly climbing his forehead. “Is that so.”

“I would have – wanted you to be jealous.”

Sasuke’s quiet for a long time before he says, “You’re so stupid.”

“Mmh.” Naruto gives him a sad, quivering smile that is unbelievably provoking, abruptly switching topics. “Kakashi and Sakura, at the same time almost, that – that sucks. Them turning away.”

“I’m better off now,” Sasuke tells him. “There’s no one left now.”

That’s the good lesson Orochimaru taught him. When everyone is gone, when everything has been taken from you, there’s still you. Emptier equals lighter.

“There’s me,” Naruto offers.

Sasuke scoffs at him, looking away. “You don’t count.”

“Hey!”

He shrugs. “You don’t have a choice.”

Naruto swallows. “I don’t need a choice.”

“Naruto…”

“I mean it,” he insists, with those burning blue eyes, “I’d always choose you.”

“You can’t know that. You’re crazy.”

“Mmh, maybe. But let’s be honest, you like that. That I can’t choose anything else.”

The bond pulsates and burns through his mind. “You know what I’m like.”

“Yeah,” Naruto says. “You’re lucky I’m apparently into bitchiness and trust issues.” He makes a soft sound, snuggling against Sasuke. “I don’t get it. About Sakura, why she’s so upset. I mean I get it partly. But she’s known what you’re like for a long time.”

“I thought so.”

Sakura has seen Sasuke be violent, has seen Naruto be violent too. Sasuke after all was small and quiet, looked like a sweet little mummy’s boy long after he wasn’t, and Naruto has no self control and so is visibly shifter. Which meant they had to occasionally beat the shit out of anyone bothering them. These were the brutal kinds of beatings, when you kick away their legs, and sit across their chest, and beat them until they know in their bones who’s in charge.

“You were such a little kingpin,” Naruto mutters. “Some of those guys were like three times our size!”

“It’s not how big you are,” Sasuke mumbles. “Lucky for you.”

“Hey! I’m not – small!”

“You kind of are. Kyuubi’s huge, you’re – pretty smallish.”
Naruto protests loudly, sitting up in a huff with his cheeks puffing pink. He seems, surprisingly, genuinely affronted. “I am not!”

“I’m pretty sure I’ve been up close and personal with a lot more dicks than you, and let me tell you, yours is not that impressive.”

Naruto makes an inarticulate sound of unspeakable outrage, and feels… not hurt exactly, but certainly not like he’s joking.

Sasuke blinks. “It’s not a bad thing.”

Naruto appears taken aback. “It’s not?”

“No.”

Orochimaru was big. Orochimaru was very big, especially when Sasuke was little.

His head throbs, sharper and sharper, and he could think, you did this to me, but they’re beyond that now and anyway it’s not true, not really. He turns away from the sensation of the seal burning like a branding iron against the inside of his skull.

Naruto grabs for him, always so greedy.

Sasuke twists his wrist out of Naruto’s hand, breaking his own pinkie in the process. It’s healed before he’s stopped glaring, and Naruto tries a sheepish grin. “See? I come with benefits.”

“Hn.” Sasuke gives his hand a considering look. He didn’t always like Kyuubi’s healing abilities.

Not when he’d wanted to mark Naruto up, scar him forever. Not when it made it easy for Naruto to just not mention getting hurt.

He was essentially a refugee, when his Mum took him and moved to one of those human neighbourhoods with a noticeable shifter population. And shifter refugees, like any refugees, are poor and damaged and fundamentally unwelcome. Naruto had hidden it from his parents, the shunning that Sasuke welcomed but Naruto experienced as a slow erosion of existence. He won’t have needed to hide it from Kushina, who will have seen it as a good lesson.

He didn’t exactly try hiding it from Sasuke. Finally fought back when Sasuke appeared, because it was clear to Naruto if not to his attackers that Naruto might be forgiving but Sasuke – well, Sasuke’s guardian angel is the incarnation of vengeance.

What are you doing.

Naruto shrugged, looking uncomfortable before looking defiant. They were human, you know? Kyuubi would’ve eaten them alive, and it still – it wouldn’t have mattered. They just – they don’t want me. That’s what it was all about really.

You have such a bloody Jesus complex sometimes.

Still that was the end of it, because Sasuke would permit nothing else, and Naruto would rather take care of himself than let Sasuke take care of the humans.

It was weeks later that he said, I know you wouldn’t have let them hurt you.

It wouldn’t have let them hurt you either, idiot.
Yeah? It was like sunrise across Naruto’s face, before he shrugged. But like, I cared that they hated me. Obviously they were wrong and I’m going to change their minds, but – you wouldn’t have cared.

Sasuke shrugged. People are shit.

People are awesome. They can be awesome.

Sasuke snorted. Kindness is such a trite, boring emotion.

That’s just bad publicity! Naruto argued, talking with his hands and incidentally swatting at Sasuke. Kindness is fierce!

“Dumbarse,” Sasuke mutters in the present, starting another nosebleed but able to wipe it away quickly.

Naruto grins, leaning over to put his head over Sasuke’s heart. “I love this sound.”

“Enjoy it while it lasts.” He doesn’t mean anything by it but Naruto stiffens as if struck.

Sasuke’s just looking at him though, annoyed maybe but calm. He hasn’t forced Kyuubi to heal the bite marks on his neck.

“So,” Naruto says. “About these Rock bastards.”

“Mmh,” Sasuke says, stretching lazy and lovely.

“They’re not gonna like you, so,” he chances a kiss to Sasuke’s collarbone.

Sasuke unfortunately stiffens: the time for intimacy is over. Naruto curls more tightly around him, nudging his cheek against the war drum beat of Sasuke’s heart, and thinks, but I’m yours. It’s a stupid, childish thought, like: I’m hungry, or My name is Naruto. Something so obvious it can hardly be spoken.

Sasuke shifts, restless fingers picking at Naruto’s whisker scars. “Nobody likes me.”

“That’s not true!”

He can hear Sasuke lift his eyebrow. “You might need me, you sure as hell don’t like me.”

“Do too.”

“Liking is what happens when there’s not enough feeling to amount to anything meaningful.”

Naruto clings to him more tightly. There’s not enough air now. Sasuke’s popular, everyone – with the notable exception of both their parents – everyone used to like Sasuke. It’s never meant anything. It’s never been enough.

He could say, you have friends. Sasuke would deny this, but Naruto knows the names to counter with. Sakura, Kakashi, Neji. People who have stood around for years outside the bars of Sasuke’s cage. Talked to him, maybe thrown him scraps, but nobody’s unlocked the door, nobody’s seriously tried to let him out.

He thinks he’s going to faint.

Sasuke’s phone starts to ring. The caller ID says Orochimaru.
Sasuke looks at it blankly. He makes no move to answer.

Naruto takes it from him and throws it away. It keeps ringing even after it’s cracked against the wall, but not for very long.

“I don’t understand,” he says, and his voice comes childish, too loud, “I will never understand how anyone is even still talking to your parents.”

“Haven’t you heard of Abraham and Isaac?”

“That’s bullshit! If Dad had done that, if he’d given one of us away – he’d be shunned. There’s no coming back from something like that.”

Sasuke’s tone is colourless and cruel. “You know perfectly well that he was the only one who could reign in the extremist factions. Now with this deal we’re all on the same side, and you lot aren’t exterminated.”

BEAST isn’t an exclusively human phenomenon. Quite a lot of exorcists believe shifters to be halfbreed demons, see it as part of their calling to purge them with the light of God.

“About Rock,” Sasuke says.

“Mmh, yeah. Yeah, they’re not gonna be all happy to see you. So I should do it. The exorcism.”

Sasuke lifts an eyebrow. “Why would that make them like me more?”

Naruto pushes at his shoulder. “Arse. It would make them like me enough to warm up to the idea.”

The idea of Sasuke, and the idea of being absorbed into a shifter federation.

Sasuke sighs. “If you could actually do it, every shifter in the world would follow you.” A long look, before he shrugs. “But you can’t, so it doesn’t matter.”

“I could.”

“No, you couldn’t. If you really thought so, you’d want to exorcise for the humans too, get them to come around.”

“That’d be nice,” Naruto agrees. “But it’s not – Rock’s ours.” Rock will be part of them, and so must come willingly. He nudges Sasuke’s knee with his own. “Come on. Let me try.”

Sasuke’s never been one to turn down a challenge.

He holds out his hand, long fingers curled slightly inwards. Naruto has to get his knees abruptly out of the way as the blade materialises, humming lightly in a language that stings his ears, at the very edge of understanding.

Sasuke says nothing. He doesn’t need to.

Naruto reaches for the sword, closing his fingers around the hilt.

It burns.

It burns so sharply, most of his hand’s gone before the pain hits.

It feels like he screams for a long time before the noise can turn into words. By then, the blade is gone and Naruto’s curled around the burnt mess of his hand.
“Would you fucking shield me!”

“I did!”

He’s evidently screamed long and loud enough for footsteps, and very shortly for a whole horde of people to descend on them.

xxxxx

Shikamaru hadn’t particularly wanted to venture back upstairs. Normally, other people leaving him alone by doing so would be a pleasant development. Normally – well, normally he would have extended his nap.

He stands up with a sigh. “Sakura. Stay here.” He says this in his most adult voice.

Upstairs, Naruto and Sasuke are still on the floor, and Sasuke appears rather to be snarling at anyone attempting to pull Naruto upright. Naruto of course manages to spare him a besotted look over this, for all his face is ash-white and visibly dripping with pain sweat. His lips are bitten bloody, and he must have been crying because there’s something that looks like snot smeared over them.

Since no one else is likely to have the sense to, Shikamaru starts dialling Tsunade’s assistant’s number.

Someone will have to look at the mangled, burnt remains of Naruto’s hand. Shikamaru, as Temari’s Achilles’ heel, has tended to be protected, and so kept well away from mutilated body parts: he’s not absolutely sure he would have recognised this as a hand, if he’d seen it severed from the wrist. Black skin and cauterised blood cling to stumps of skeleton, which must have burnt too, a bit, because there are pieces missing.

In the end it’s Temari who says, “Can you not heal yourself?”

“Trying,” Naruto mutters. He leans against Sasuke, which seems for the first time the smart course of action. If Sasuke has to smack Kiba away again, there can be little doubt that he’ll do so with angel hands, so really leaning on his arm is a sound preventive measure.

It also turns Naruto and Sasuke into more of a unit, signalling to back off.

Kyuubi’s healing energy is so thick around what used to be Naruto’s hand, Shikamaru fancies for an instant that he can see it shape new fingers, and bring them to life. Magic, he read somewhere, is the soul acting directly into the world, forcing its will raw without the mediation of the body.

He wonders, absently, that part of him should still feel this as witnessing a miracle.

Then Sasuke abruptly winces. “Stroke.”

“Shit. Sorry.” And Naruto bends towards him with fucking concern, the energy around his hand thinning. “Okay?”

“Your hand.”

Naruto gives an unconvincing laugh. “It’ll be fine. Just needs a bit more time.”

Shikamaru resigns himself to the fact that Shizune isn’t going to answer.

Close to his foot, he spots another mobile, which he recognises as – surely it couldn’t be Sasuke’s? But yes, he discovers, picking it up as discreetly as he can. It is Sasuke’s, display cracked but
otherwise functional. It doesn’t take him ten seconds to hack through the password.

It also doesn’t take Tsunade ten seconds to answer.

Of course it doesn’t. Sasuke’s essentially the son-in-law.

Shikamaru sighs. “Naruto’s down a hand.”
“I really don’t need to be here, you know?”

“Brat,” Tsunade sneers at him from the screen, her mouth fading into pixels as it moves. “Seventy percent of your right hand has been eradicated.”

“Well, yeah. But it’s not like it’s gonna heal any faster because I’m in the infirmary.”

Tsunade doesn’t hit him with the obvious line about if it’s gonna heal at all. If she thought it would, she’d say it.

“Oh,” Naruto says.

“Cubbie…”

“It’s fine,” Naruto says. “I’m fine.”

Sasuke at last steps through the doorway, as if called by the terrified shock hovering at the edge of Naruto’s consciousness. He enters the room ungraciously, face drawn by Naruto’s panic and Naruto’s pain. Part of which, really, is Sasuke’s panic, because Naruto’s remembering things that have never happened to him.

Remembers being held down, some sort of padded bench under his shoulder blades, and gagging on the antiseptic stench. Barely enough time to resolve not to scream before he starts screaming. Part of him gone, as he’s cut down to a smaller size: his life made smaller, by having a piece of him stolen away to mark out the new limits of his existence. The noise of a bone saw and the same shocky distance from reality that Naruto experiences when he looks at the remains of his hand and is unable to really register them as that.

Sasuke’s fingers dig into Naruto’s shoulder, grinding against the bone, and he discovers that he was hyperventilating.

“What are you doing?” Tsunade demands.

“Shut up.” Sasuke takes a step towards the tablet with the clear intention of shutting it off, but is easily stopped. Just Naruto’s hand on his elbow, and he turns his back on the screen.

Previously, when Naruto’s been hurt by exorcist magic, it’s been backlash from Sasuke, or Sasuke using it against him – Sasuke has been in control of the power, has stood between Naruto and its source. This time it was Naruto who tried and was found wanting, Naruto who failed in the eyes of God.

Sasuke pushes at him until Naruto’s lying down again, and then gets on the bed beside him. Even now, with his right arm ending in phantom pain and hellfire ash, Naruto’s heart picks up speed as Sasuke moulds himself to his back. Sasuke’s hand sneaks under Naruto’s shirt, fingers pressed to Naruto’s stomach. “Use more,” he says.

“I don’t have anymore to use.”

“I don’t – have to be conscious.” Sasuke shifts against him, shifts closer. He’s terrible at it, sharp-edged and clearly uncomfortable, and Naruto might have a heart attack from how much he loves it. “I’d be less likely to stroke out if I’m not, so you wouldn’t have to share, either.”
And this time it’s Sasuke holding out a hand full of magic. Stingy, reluctant, but he holds it out and lets Naruto take it, breathless at first because what if it burns too, what if it’s his soul that’ll burn this time – but filtered through Sasuke’s mind, the power is neutered.

“Go on,” Sasuke says. His fingers are so tense they twitch against Naruto’s stomach, but he means it.

Naruto pulls power and more power into himself, forcing it through the cracks in Sasuke’s seal and through Sasuke’s mind. Sasuke hates it so much he starts panicking, but he’s unconscious before he can stop the power transfer.

Naruto’s hand does improve, a little. The pain lessens, and half a centimetre of new skin curls over what remains of his thumb. But Kyuubi can’t get traction on the burn. Kyuubi’s power is a power of this world, can affect this world, and the burn is from Heaven.

Worse, forcing power through the seal, sloppy now and desperate, triggers Sasuke’s brain haemorrhage, and so Kyuubi’s power must be diverted after all.

So Naruto just lies there, soaked in his own sweat and panting, hugging his own chest to try and keep the air in because he’s not getting enough, he’s not.

“Cubbie…”

“What? What’s the next step here? I – I – ”

Tsunade sighs, heavy enough to move the earth. “I’ll be there by tonight. In the meantime – try being intimate with him.”

“He’s unconscious.”

“Yes, and if you keep draining him he won’t wake up until you’re done. Easy now – you’re right-handed, Naruto. He might even understand.”

Sasuke would understand. From anyone but Naruto, he would understand.

Wake up, he thinks. Wake up.

And Kyuubi’s power’s not doing him any good, his hand’s a mess of dead flesh and nothing he does can fix that, so he pushes the energy into Sasuke.

Sasuke’s fingers twitch against his stomach again, incidentally pulling Naruto closer. “No good,” he says. It’s not a question.

His words hit the very base of Naruto’s neck, his eyelashes moving against the back of Naruto’s head.

Then he sits up, away, and Naruto thinks, no and is reaching for him without thought – and then gasping into the pillow, because he’s right-handed, he touched Sasuke with the stump and oh god, oh god…

“Idiot,” Sasuke mutters. But he comes back, slides his arm around Naruto’s waist again, and when Naruto’s shirt rides up he discovers that they’re skin to skin.

Sasuke sat up to take his shirt off.

“It makes you feel better, right,” Sasuke says, so uncomfortable the words almost don’t make it past his lips. “I should have, before, but.”
But undressed he’d be so fucking defensive he couldn’t have let Naruto siphon any power off him.

“Yeah.”

“If you feel,” Sasuke says. “I’ll let it – it’ll – I’ll feel it too.”

Naruto’s heart jerks inside his chest.

“It’s logical,” Sasuke says, tone ill-tempered and sore. “Strengthening the bond. More magic for you, and you’ll be more – the closer you’re tied to me, the less the light should hurt you. It only makes sense.”

“Don’t – don’t do it because of that.”

“Stop me.”

Sasuke slides his hand into Naruto’s underwear.

“Jesus! Stop.”

“Walk away.”

Naruto does not walk away, and Naruto does not stop him.

Sasuke’s completely open to it now, to the way Naruto’s lust pounds and rages. Naruto can feel him start panting, breath and chest moving against the back of Naruto’s body, as his fingers tighten around Naruto’s cock, thumb flicking repeatedly over the head.

Dizzily, dimly, he’s aware that Sasuke’s acting on Naruto’s desire, not on his own. He does exactly what Kyuubi would do, biting wetly at Naruto’s shoulder and neck. Naruto groans, wants so much, moving his hips into Sasuke’s hand and incidentally rubbing his arse against Sasuke’s body.

Sasuke reaches around him, grabbing his right arm and locking the wrist against the very edge of the bed, so the stump’s in the air and can’t touch anything even as Naruto’s phantom fingers start to twitch.

That hurts, it hurts so bad, and Naruto grinds his hips harder into Sasuke’s. Into Sasuke’s hips and, very shortly, Sasuke’s erection.

Sasuke kisses under his ear, free hand tugging down his trousers, and Naruto wants to turn around, wants to touch him back, but his arm is still trapped and it feels so good just like this.

Sasuke’s nails whisper over his erection, across his hip and over his buttocks. Naruto feels his face heat to burning, lightheaded.

Sasuke could be as rough as he wanted. Naruto would still want it, and Naruto will heal.

But Sasuke takes his time. He strokes breath-soft, circle after circle on over-sensitised skin. By the time he finally slips a finger inside, Naruto’s desperate for it, every breath thick as a groan.

“Please.” He’s never been so submissive in his life. Sasuke’s going to fuck him and he’s dying for it.

Another sharp bite at his nape, and Sasuke’s fingers skimming lightly up his ribs, and god, how is that so erotic?

“Sasuke. What’re you…? Sasuke, come back. Please.”
“Condom.”

“I don’t care, just –”

“I’m not cleaning you up after.”

“Don’t ca– Oh. Oh.”

He screams into the pillow, gets his mouth full of feathers because cotton was never meant to withstand shifter fangs.

It’s only afterwards that he thinks how Tsunade had better have had the sense to end the call.

xxxxx

“Minato, I can handle this on my own.”

Like most children, Minato grew up loving, respecting and often resenting his mother. He’s right back in that emotional state now, hearing her rough, condescendingly amused voice.

“I’m here for Rock,” he says shortly.

The capital is poised on the very edge of war, now that he’s taken Sasuke. They cannot afford internal strife on top of that.

“Don’t freak out on him,” Tsunade tells him. “It’s an ugly wound.”

“I need a clearer prognosis.”

“I don’t have one. You’ve seen the footage, he grabbed the sword, he burned. He pulled enough power from Uchiha to leave Uchiha unconscious, and he still couldn’t heal himself, not enough that it matters.”

“He should have reinforced the bond.”

Tsunade snorts. “That’s what I told him. Of course he’d have none of it, but fortunately when Uchiha woke up he had the same idea.” She looks away. “It didn’t help much.”

“Right.”

When he steps into the infirmary, he does so very quietly. For a wonder, Naruto not only hasn’t run off, but is actually in his assigned bed. Curled tight on his side, mangled hand hanging off the edge of the mattress, he sleeps, looking small for once. He keeps trying to turn around, and Sasuke, sitting beside him with a book propped against his knees, keeps preventing him, putting his hand intermittently on Naruto’s neck and gentling him.

He must feel some approximation of safe, Minato surmises, because he doesn’t seem to have noticed their arrival.

Tsunade steps briskly past him into the light. “Hello, Sasuke.”

Sasuke looks up but doesn’t speak. Naruto moves in his sleep, clearly pulled towards consciousness, until Sasuke touches his face again, dragging his thumb in circles where Naruto’s nose turns into Naruto’s forehead.

“Naruto,” Minato says. His voice sounds odd in his own ears, unfamiliar. “Naruto.”
It’s only when Sasuke lifts his hand away that Naruto stirs, sitting up quickly so his entire side is pressed against Sasuke’s. “Dad!”

In a single day, it comes to him, he lost both Naruto and Kakashi to Sasuke.

Maybe it’s karma. If he’d done the right thing, if he’d saved Sasuke when Sasuke was still saveable, he might not have lost them.

He tries to smile. It doesn’t come out right. “You’ve been very stupid, Naruto.”

What would Yui have said, if she’d seen this? Perhaps not much. She loved Naruto, but she could never control him, and so Naruto was often hurt: what Yui, with her human sensibilities, considered seriously hurt.

“I’d like to see the blade,” he says.

Sasuke looks at Naruto. There’s some silent communication, obvious enough because they’re neither of them subtle people, and then the brat holds out his hand.

This is the closest Minato’s ever been to an angel blade. It hangs suspended in the air a centimetre or so above Sasuke’s palm, absolutely incongruous in the infirmary room.

“Stop,” Naruto says sharply.

Minato looks at him in question.

Naruto shrugs, which lets him touch Sasuke more. “You’re going to burn.” Sasuke’s expression corroborates this, and clearly Sasuke wasn’t going to issue any warnings.

Minato stops, but turns to Sasuke. “Surely you can control it.”

“Surely I can control the fact that you’re a filthy beast?”

“Naruto’s much closer to it,” Minato points out, mildly enough.

“Naruto’s mine.”

Naruto makes a strange sound like purring.

Minato chooses to ignore this. “Then you’re not taking very good care of your property, are you?”

“I’m so glad,” Naruto interrupts, “that this random pissing contest is more important to you than I am.”

“Enough,” Tsunade cuts them off. “Get that thing away, and Naruto, hold out your arm.”

Minato would like to explain to Naruto that Sasuke hates him and will keep hating him, but he needs to figure Sasuke out, and so pushing and prodding will have to do. But Naruto doesn’t think like that.

Naruto wets his lips when Tsunade takes hold of his wrist, inspecting what little remains of his hand.

A dominant hand, Minato thinks uncharitably while looking past the stump at Sasuke’s expressionless face, is much harder to replace than a foot.

“I don’t know what to tell you,” Tsunade says at last. “I’m hopeful that it’ll recover in a few years.”
“Right,” Naruto says blankly. There’s no warning, not even to Sasuke, because there’s no thought at all. Naruto says right and it’s just blank space between that and Naruto making a blade out of Kyuubi’s tail and cutting off the mutilated hand.

It’s too fast for pain and in any case too much shock for that. He sits staring at the stump and it bleeds very badly, and he needs energy now at once.

“Not with them here,” Sasuke snaps.

“What?” Naruto roars.

He could withdraw Kyuubi’s healing, which is the only thing keeping Sasuke’s brain from bleeding. Sasuke couldn’t stop him drawing power then. But Sasuke wouldn’t shield him, and so Naruto would be drawing power that would burn him from the inside out.

“Out!”

Minato feels unacceptably like a child, being dragged out of the room by his mother. It’s not the first and it’s not the worst time he’s failed to protect his precious people.

“He’s too careless with himself,” he says tonelessly.

“He trusts himself,” is Tsunade’s take on it. “Perhaps too much. And I suppose it’s that he trusts Uchiha, too.”

I want him to trust me, Minato can’t actually bring himself to say. Naruto has made the correct assessment that Minato isn’t trustworthy. His priorities aren’t compatible with Naruto’s, and he can’t even deliver on the things he does prioritise.

He let Yui die, and has never trusted himself again after that. Naruto, who did forgive him that, will never forgive him for the Sasuke mess.

Perhaps, then, Naruto’s right to trust Sasuke more. Sasuke after all is incredibly damaged, but he’s not broken. Minato is.

When they go back in, Sasuke’s slumped boneless against Naruto. He visibly hates his helplessness, twitching with fury, but Naruto’s drained him well. Naruto’s sitting upright, clearly in serious pain but smiling like victory. There’s a hand now, still more energy than flesh but clearly on its way to materialise.

“A day or two, right?” he says.

“That’d be my estimate,” Tsunade agrees.

“Recklessness like this,” Minato starts. But what is there to say? It was the right call. Even if it hadn’t been, there wasn’t much hand left to lose.

“Why are you even here?” Naruto asks.

“I need to deal with Rock.”

“That’s my thing!” Naruto erupts.

“Well then,” Minato says, with another glance at Sasuke slumped limply and starting a nosebleed. Life would be so much simpler if they could keep him semi-comatose, a human battery who didn’t complicate matters or get in the way. “Perhaps we should bring in our people and lay out some
Naruto bristles, his left hand tightening on Sasuke’s shoulder. “What, so you can show me off healed and in charge of him?”

“Current rumour is he crippled you for life for daring to touch him. If you expect that to impress Rock, I seriously question your judgement.”

Naruto glances down at Sasuke, another silent exchange. “Fine. Bring them in.”

Sasuke’s a proud little thing, Minato thinks, but that very pride might make him not care how a shifter sees him.

Naruto leans over and licks up his nosebleed.

By the time the meeting is set up, Sasuke’s propped against the headboard and clean, if no more energetic. It’s another twenty minutes before he regains his energy, kicking the blanket of his feet and adopting a far more alert and defensive position. Still he doesn’t move away, and doesn’t speak. In fact, whereas Naruto’s an animated part of the discussions, Sasuke to all appearances tunes them out completely, even going so far as picking up a volume on blessings. Minato recognises it as one of the books Shikamaru dug out of some long-forgotten storage but couldn’t read.

“That’s completely ridiculous!” Naruto declares. “You can’t just march in somewhere and expect people to follow you because of something you say you’ll do in future. Like, if you’re good, we might save your lives? Way to get ourselves resented!”

“Look,” Asuma says, in a far more reasonable tone. “We don’t even know if it’ll be possible for us to exorcise their demons. Better get them onboard now, and the promise of safety will keep them in line. If they do fuck with us, and to some extent I’m sure they will, then we’ll have a perfect excuse if we can’t deliver.”

“That’s not how you treat your people, and we can!” Naruto counters any doubtful looks by wiggling his right hand. “Look? I’m perfectly fine, I’ll be as good as new by tomorrow. And this was for actually grabbing an angel blade. If Sasuke’s just exorcising, I’ll be fine. I was when he did on the way here.”

That’s not what Minato heard, but as long as Naruto survives without permanent damage, it’s good enough. Not ideal, but good enough.

“We’ll do one of the human settlements first,” Naruto continues. “Tone down hostilities with them, and it’ll be proof to Rock. Then I’ll have time to build some better shields, too, so I can be more involved with Rock.”

“We’d be in a better negotiating position if we’d delivered proof,” Hayate agrees. “They’ll grow increasingly desperate. The longer we negotiate before we swoop in, the better terms we could get.”

“No,” Naruto says. “What the hell. We are not leaving our people prey to demons when we can help them!”

“Of course not for long enough that they’ll be a depleted resource, but looking at it logically –”

“That’s beneath us.”

The heated discussion moves back and forth. Minato is, right now, more interested in seeing Naruto’s take on it than in steering it. In any case he suspects it won’t matter, because – “Yes,”
Sasuke says at last, tonelessly. “I will.”

He will do what Naruto says.

Minato’s surprised, and relived, that Naruto’s grin is take charge and arrogant rather than grateful: that they’re playing this as Sasuke obeying him, rather than as Sasuke indulging him.

“I’m surprised,” Tsunade says later, when it’s only the four of them left, “that you were so open to having the sword examined.”

Sasuke’s eyes stay cool, and he shrugs. “Examination won’t make it any less ineffable.”

He takes something from – either from his pocket or from thin air – something which turns out to be a rosary, with enough beads to wrap it twice around Naruto’s neck in an extremely tacky necklace. The beads glow a soft white-gold, and Naruto’s grimace indicates that they’re uncomfortable but not painful.

“Get used to it,” Sasuke says.

“Mnh. Dad – Orochimaru called.”

“Did he indeed. What did he say?”

Surprisingly it’s Sasuke who says, “I didn’t pick up.”

“Has he sent any messages?”

“None that I’ve read. Temari’s human stole my phone, if you’re planning to look.”

“I believe I shall.” It will be pointless: Orochimaru will have written Sasuke in the language of God, unreadable to non-exorcists.

“Didn’t you?” Naruto asks, when Dad has left. “Only I thought you did check some messages.”

“Those were from Kimimarou.”

“Ah,” Naruto says uncertainly.

Sasuke shrugs. It’s still very new that this doesn’t hurt. “Orochimaru’s pushed him too hard. He’s going to go nova soon.”

That’s how an exorcist ends: channelling so much angelfire that it burns anything human away, self-cremating. That’s how they all end up, sooner or later, in a grave in the sky.

Kimimarou is magnificent, a crusader prodigy of immeasurable power. Kimimarou is pitiful, pushed to the brink by experiment after failed experiment to extend the nova limit, and grateful for it, grateful to martyr himself for Orochimaru’s cause.

Naruto picks at the spine of Sasuke’s book, reduced almost to inane questions about it. Reduced to saying anything, so Sasuke won’t bring up leaving, or worse, just go away. “This is…uh. Blessings? Maybe?”

Sasuke gives him a rather sardonic look. “I’m going to bless you.”

“Hmm?”
“Sit still,” Sasuke mutters. Naruto can feel himself fidgeting, tense and bemused, but it doesn’t seem to matter. Sasuke starts chanting, not quite singing, and one of the rosary beads light up.

“You’re not gonna do all of them?”

Of course he is. When the first bead has attained a steady shine, Sasuke stops rambling Latin. “We’ll start with one set of Ave Maria. Then you should be ready for a Pater Noster.”

They’ve made it through maybe seventy percent of the rosary when they reach the end of their energy. Naruto’s skin is stinging now where the beads touch, and Sasuke looks about ready to drop, or at the very least start another heavy nosebleed.

“Tomorrow?” Naruto suggests. Regenerating his hand eats most of his power, and Sasuke’s been drained several times today.

“Hn.”

Naruto collapses on his side, digging his face into the pillow with gusto.

Sasuke slips off the bed.

“Stay.” The word hangs awkwardly in the air, unable to bridge the distance between plea and command.

“I don’t want to.”

“Right.”

Sasuke stands still just beside the bed, eyebrow up. “You’re not going to fight me on it?”

“You know everything I could say,” Naruto admits, in a smaller voice than he’d like. “The energy will recover better if we’re closer together. Obviously I want you here. If someone tries to bother us, Kyuubi will chase them off. If – if he calls again, I can hang up on him.”

“Don’t touch me in my sleep,” Sasuke says gruffly, climbing into the bed beside him.

Naruto doesn’t touch him in his sleep, but Kyuubi of course does. Hand finally stable enough for any of his energy to be diverted from it, he reaches eagerly for Sasuke. Unexpectedly – emotionally unexpectedly, though not intellectually because of course Orochimaru will have conditioned him – Sasuke in his sleep responds to this as something natural, curling tight and familiar under Naruto’s arm.

This means that when Sasuke wakes up shaky and gasping from a nightmare in the small hours of the morning and Naruto has the ridiculous urge to take him in his arms, Sasuke’s already in his arms. “Talk to me,” Naruto says. Kyuubi’s tails wind around Sasuke’s legs, a gloving comfort blanket of semi-demonic energy.

Sasuke blinks, once, twice, and then is entirely calm, mechanical rather. “I dreamt Orochimaru called me and I went to him.”

“Why?”

“Because he called,” Sasuke says impatiently. “Because he told me to.”

Naruto draws in a deep breath. His voice is still a night-time voice, thicker and lower than in daylight hours. “I wouldn’t let that happen.”
“How would you stop me?” It’s a real question, a factual question.

“I’ll restrain you if I have to.”

“You’d just burn.”

“I could trigger your stroke. Keep Kyuubi’s healing at a minimum. Drain your energy while you were bleeding out.”

Sasuke nods, visibly calmer. He lies down again without another word, Kyuubi’s tails still wrapped around his legs, which are pulled tight against his body. His forehead rests heavily against Naruto’s ribs.

In the morning Sasuke rolls away from him, sharp elbows and sleepy scowl.

Naruto mumbles protest, instinctive claws shredding Sasuke’s shirt as he tries to keep him. It could be so simple.

“You got enough yesterday,” Sasuke tells him.


“And I told you not to touch me in my sleep.”

“I…” He pulls at a loose thread on the pillowcase, shredding that too.

“You knew it was all right really.”

Naruto knows that it was not, but he did it anyway, because he had to.

Sasuke discards the ruined shirt with a frown, digging through a cabinet for a replacement.

“Hey,” Naruto tries, scrambling up into a sitting position. “Remember when we used to have sleepovers in the tree house.”

“Hn.” Sasuke says tonelessly, tugging on a hoodie with frayed cuffs that someone must have left behind.

“When we –”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Why? Look, it’s a good memory, right, it’s…”

Sasuke looks at him as if he’s wondering what Naruto’s playing at. “Good memories are as useless as bad ones.”

“That’s not true.”

“Believe what you like.”

“I will,” Naruto says. “You will too, just you wait!”

xxxxx

“I didn’t steal it,” Shikamaru says, holding out Sasuke’s broken phone.
Sasuke shrugs. “Hn.” He accepts the phone without further comment and puts it away in his pocket.

“Why do you do that?” Shikamaru asks, sitting down with a sigh that touches on a huff and reaching over Sasuke’s plate for the milk. “Dismiss me.”

“Don’t flatter yourself. It’s nothing personal.”

“Mmh, I know. It’s more along the lines of, humans are insignificant, could be killed instantly. Which is silly. Any human could kill an exorcist, too. Killing isn’t difficult.”

Sasuke inspects a number of cereal packages, searching for one that’s not made predominantly of sugar. “They’d do so at their peril.”

Across the table, Naruto’s talking loudly with his mouth full and gesticulating with his right hand. Its outlines are still a little fuzzy, more energy than solid flesh, but it’s a matter of hours. It’s a reminder that the days when Sasuke could be killed easily are gone.

Any human who touched him before that would have been given to the demons, to have their soul torn apart and devoured.

Shikamaru acknowledges this with a shrug. “Anyway, it’s a waste.”

Sasuke ignores him. People do that, now. It should be restful, Shikamaru resented teachers and relatives always picking away at him, but it’s – such a waste. He stopped being a person in his own right when Temari took possession of him, became simply an extension of her. A wart, if you will.

He sighs around his sandwich. What do you do when the bigots are right? Some people really are worth more than others.

Sasuke doesn’t need to say it, any more than Minato or Temari have needed to. Even Kakashi, who at least pretends sometimes not to dismiss him outright, has this condescending air about him. That in itself is fine. The soreness is about how they’re right.

If Shikamaru somehow contrived to control the entire energy arsenal of the human world, he might exterminate a few hundred demons before turning the planet into a radioactive crisp. Mist Town would have been cleansed at the expense of the entire continent as a liveable space. Using anything but exorcist magic, you have to overkill, because if it’s not enough energy to disintegrate the demon, the demon will suck it in and use it against you.

Ino, whom Shikamaru understands is considered a worthless exorcist, so weak she barely counts, easily defeats a dozen demons, with little to no surrounding damage.

_Sure_, Kakashi said once. _It’s not impossible to work with humans. You and I could made decisions together about how to approach a demon infestation. You could even make the cleanse plan. But I’d still always be the one who had to carry it out._

There’s nothing Shikamaru can say about that. Worse, there’s nothing he can do about it.

Naruto isn’t principally opposed to listening to humans, but when push comes to show and emotions are running high you need to be able to force him to listen. Sasuke… Well, Shikamaru’s planning to find out.

He takes another bite, watching Sakura sit down on Sasuke’s other side and Sasuke conspicuously not react
“Hey,” she says, very softly.

It’s another few minutes before she looks for a long time at Naruto’s hand. It’s almost finished, a perfectly workable hand though covered by a thinning layer of orange energy. A few hours at most, Sasuke estimates.

“His hand,” Sakura says at last, with an obvious effort to be toneless. “Were you – defending yourself?”

“No.”

“Sasuke…”

“I don’t have to explain myself to you.”

“No. But shouldn’t you want to?”

Sasuke doesn’t have to answer, because Temari appears next to Shikamaru, and leans over in interest. “I would like to hear why he started screaming like a spitted piglet.”

Sasuke shrugs. “Ask him.”

“I did,” Temari says. “He said he tried to learn to exorcise. Said he might have to pace himself.”

“Exorcise,” Sakura repeats.

Shikamaru’s glad she does, so there’s an excuse to dwell on it. The idea that it’s possible to become an exorcist, that the world is anything but a Calvinist nightmare with the exorcists as the elect – if anyone would try to live that mad dream, of course it would be Naruto.

He remembers that fairy tale volume, that edgy retelling or whatever that hit the top lists last year: There are special people in this world. I’ve known that since I was very small. They are the people who attract everyone else’s eyes. They are the people who start and stop wars, who found religions, who rule nations. Who become school dance queens and valedictorians and student council presidents. Yes, there are special people in this world. I am not one of them. If I hadn’t already known that, I would hate you for proving it to me.

It had made Ino cry until she almost hyperventilated. Because Ino does know, Ino has known since she was very small, that there are special people in this world, and recently she has been forced to understand that she is not one of them and never will be. She’s not a crusader. She doesn’t matter. She wants so badly to be special, wants it so very badly, and she will never have it.

“But that’s impossible,” Sakura says. “Right?”

“I’d like to learn myself,” Shikamaru says mildly. He’d like even to be able to read the exorcist books he finally found. “Well, I suppose my scholarly dedication doesn’t extend so far that I’d be prepared to start sacrificing my limbs.”

“I’m sorry,” Sakura says abruptly. She seems genuinely ashamed. “For suggesting that you’d done that to him. Only, yesterday – it looked like you might have had to defend yourself. Upstairs, when he was so… intense.”

Temari snorts. “If I were fending off a lustful assault, it’s not his hand I’d burn off.”

Sasuke looks past them at Naruto’s hand, which was all over him yesterday, just before Naruto burnt
himself. It’s an uncomfortable, a rather horrifying thought, but being intimate with Naruto has been far and away the most sexually gratifying experience of Sasuke’s life. Orochimaru knows how to touch him, how to make it pleasurable when he wants it to be, and he wouldn’t have slept with Kakashi if he hadn’t got anything out of it, but it’s very different to experience desire from the inside. To look at someone and want, rather than to want because you’re being touched in a way that makes you want.

*It’s like… Sasuke, this isn’t healthy. It’s like sex is what you settle for. Like a replacement, for things you believe you can’t have.*

That was when he stopped talking to Sakura in any meaningful way, because that’s not a thought he can have.

*Is this really something you want?* Kakashi’s voice, long ago when Kakashi still pretended he was more concerned about what Sasuke wanted than with what he himself wanted.

*Why would I let him take this away from me as well?*

And anyway Sasuke had wanted, then, to be worth something to Kakashi.

Sasuke’s fucked a lot of people, because it doesn’t matter anymore, it doesn’t mean anything, with Neji or Kimimaro or anyone really.

Across the table Naruto laughs again, rubbing at the back of his head and only wincing a little because he used his right hand. And Naruto’s desire curls tight inside Sasuke, an infestation that never quite disappears.

If he touched Naruto now – if he let Naruto bite him, let Naruto inside him…

Naruto looks back at him, wide-eyed and flushed, and for a stupid second Sasuke thinks Naruto’s going to bend him over the table and that Sasuke might let him.
Naruto completely loses track of what anyone’s talking about when Sasuke snaps to his feet and stomps out of the room.

He doesn’t go far, though. Naruto catches up right outside the door, where Sasuke directs that haughty what the fuck are you doing look at him.

“You left.”

“I’m not trying to run away.”

“I know that.”

“So leave me alone.”

Naruto makes a gesture equal parts exasperation and concern. “What’s going on with you now?”

Sasuke’s sneer comes easy and without strain, but the pulse in his throat hammers, and his pupils are slightly dilated. “Fuck off. You’re not my babysitter.”

Naruto refuses to take the hint or the bait, and steps closer. “Is this about Sakura?”

This is a strange, traitorous thought, but it would perhaps be easier if she wasn’t here. Once only he got Sasuke really talking, when they were little. They’d barely made it past the first stumbling sentences, touched on things that didn’t matter, didn’t signify – it was just warm up, the kind of stuff Naruto already knew about because Orochimaru didn’t hesitate doing it in public. Only that, and already Sakura started crying. After that of course Sasuke would never say another word on the subject.

Naruto’s never quite managed to forgive Sakura for this, although of course that’s silly and selfish. She cried because she cared. It’s just it would have been nice if she could care in a way that didn’t make Sasuke shut down.

“Sakura’s got nothing to do with anything,” Sasuke says.

“She’s been … weird,” Naruto argues.

Sasuke looks away. “She thinks you’re abusing me.”

“What!” It’s been years since he talked properly with Sakura, years since Dad sent him off to boarding school in the middle of nowhere, but this is absurd...

Sasuke shrugs, and Naruto gives it another uncomfortable thought. They’ve both been visibly beat up, which to Sakura’s mind will mean abuse. And Naruto has Kyuubi, so if Naruto’s the one doing the abusing and Sasuke’s defending himself – well, Kyuubi’s the perfect excuse, and they can both come out of it relatively innocent. If she knew what they were really like, then…

“I’m not a bad person.”

Sasuke declines to comment.

Naruto remembers Mum saying once, on this topic, Her version of a good person couldn’t survive outside its gilded cage. And Mum was a good person, Mum never did anything Sakura would
consider terrible, but she’d smiled thinly all the same, that time in the kitchen with Naruto too small to climb up on the counter without Kyuubi’s help, *Perhaps I’m making excuses for who I let into my life.*

It was Mum, too, who asked him, in that soft serious voice she got sometimes, *Of course it’s terrible. But if it were someone else. Not Sasuke, not anyone you knew. Just a child. And it was either give him to Orochimaru, or have the extremist exorcists start war on the shifters, and it would escalate, it would be all of us involved soon enough… Would it still be the wrong choice? This one child, or a war that would kill hundreds of thousands. Maybe millions, when the demons came and the exorcists were occupied.*

Naruto hadn’t hesitated. Hadn’t been able to hesitate. *It’s not someone else. It’s Sasuke.*

*If it were –*

*Wrong is wrong. This is wrong.*

He hadn’t been able to speak to her for a few days. Then he’d had to ask, *Would you give me away?*

*No. But I wouldn’t pretend it was the right choice, to keep you at the expense of everyone else.*

Naruto had been both devastated and mutinous, hugging his plushie tight and staring up at her carefully and defiantly through his lashes. *I would keep you.*

*I know,* she said, dropping a kiss on his head as though this was just theoretical, wasn’t Sasuke’s actual life. *We have different morals.*

Mum was the one who put him first in everyday life, who stayed home with him, listened to him, played with him. And still. Dad might be distracted and maybe a complete arsehole, but he’d never in a million years consider giving Naruto up. Even after Mum had left him and wouldn’t speak to him, Dad still did whatever he had to, jeopardised the entire shifter federation, to try and keep her safe when she’d been taken.

Even Kushina, who resents Naruto, would risk a war for him, although with her it’s nothing personal. It would simply be an expression of her no man left behind policy.

“Shit,” he mutters. “This is so fucked up.”

Sasuke’s still looking out the window, at rolling meadows where the grass is turning from green to brown. “Your mother never liked me.”

Naruto snorts. “If it makes you feel better, Dad doesn’t like you either.”

Sasuke shrugs. “At least he has a better reason.”

“She was trying to protect me,” Naruto says stiffly. He’s still not over – he will never be over – *I was involved. I thought you knew that.*

How the hell could he have known, how the bloody hell would it even have occurred to him that his *best friend* would think nothing of being involved in the murder of his mother…!

“She was human,” Sasuke says distractedly.

“Yeah, so?”

“So that’s no reason to dislike me. She couldn’t protect you. I can.”
“Yeah well, your own mother doesn’t fucking like you either.”

He bites his tongue clean off, has to spit it out. But that’s the thing with truth, it can’t be taken back afterwards.

There’s no emotion in Sasuke’s voice. “That’s true.”

“Sasuke…”

“You’d think I was the shameful lovechild,” Sasuke says lightly.

“Fat chance,” Naruto mumbles. Their resemblance is too obvious for anyone to doubt Sasuke’s maternity. Naruto saw a picture of Mikoto once, an old school photo, and teased Sasuke about wearing a dress for hours before he finally caught on that it was Mikoto in the picture.

Naruto thinks of her now as an internal wound, rotting through Sasuke’s intestines under anaesthesia, so that Sasuke doesn’t consciously notice it anymore.

On that thought he reaches out, fingers brushing light and clumsy across Sasuke’s stomach. It shudders inwards, away from him.

“Stand still,” Sasuke grumbles.

“Hmm?”

“Might as well finish blessing you.”

“Um,” Naruto says as the first rosary bead lights up. “What’s this for?”

“I’m going to mark you.”

“Um,” Naruto says again. It sounds different, now his throat’s suddenly gone dry. “Did Kyuubi possess you and we just didn’t notice?”

Sasuke makes an impatient sound. “I won’t have you blocking me.”

“I know that. I just – what’s marking got to do with it?”

“It’s how sacred swords are made,” Sasuke says, as though Naruto should already know this. “Except I’d start on a higher level with them.”

Naruto splutters in indignation.

Sasuke eyebrows goes up. “Your hand did just burn.”

“Fine. Okay. So I’ll be like – Excalibur. That’s cool.”

Naruto’s only passingly familiar with sacred swords: swords which exist physically, and have been invested with a power of their own, as opposed to the insubstantial blades that exorcists summon out of thin air and which are really just a manifestation of their magic.

Sasuke snorts. “Arthur was a pussy.”

“Hey,” objects Naruto, who hasn’t been friends with Sakura for ten years for nothing. “There’s nothing wrong with pussies.”
“How would you know?”

“I – like them as a concept?”

“Uh huh.”

“Shut up. They push out babies. That’s pretty fucking hardcore.”

The next rosary bead lights up, and the next, and the next. Towards the end it starts to feel like he’s carrying a bomb belt around his neck, heavy and stinging with how suddenly it could implode.

“Are you in pain yet?” Sasuke asks. Bastard that he is, he doesn’t stop what he’s doing.

“Itches. Not so much on my skin as – in my skeleton or something. My hand. That, um. That kind of hurts.”

Sasuke finishes the rosary, and the itching turns into aching. The sore muscles kind of aching, brittle and dull, only it’s a soul condition.

Kyuubi grumbles, stalking the points of light like stars against his closed eyelids. It’s pointless, a fox can’t swallow a star…

Sasuke nods sharply, and then starts to walk away.

“Wait – where are – how did I piss you off this time?”

“You didn’t. I’m going to the shooting range.”

“But wh – ah. I’m cockblocking your archangel.”

They’re not far enough north to cross the line into actual warzone, but it’s close enough for hostilities to spill over. And the conflict is shifter/human, which means primarily human weapons, which means Sasuke will most certainly want to brush up on his shooting.

Really, Naruto should do the same.

First, though, he promised to stop by the infirmary and let Tsunade look him over before she returns home.

She seems satisfied enough with his hand, humming absently and packing up what little she brought with her.

“You’re leaving today?”

“Mmh, yes. Someone needs to keep your grandfather away from Uchiha.”

“I thought he was up north.”

“I’m afraid he’s headed back home. Which will be a public relations disaster, so – speak to your father. He’s cooked up some counterstrategies.”

xxxxx

Shikamaru contemplates for a long time whether to bring Temari or Sakura, and in the end settles for both. While Sakura’s inconvenient, Sasuke’s not only antisocial but actively violent, and Sakura’s the only possible guarantee of Shikamaru leaving the proposed conversation uninjured.
Sasuke – of course, Shikamaru thinks, of course – is at the shooting range, looking like his satisfaction could only be increased by the targets actually bleeding.

Shikamaru’s a pretty good shot himself, but of course there’s no comparison. He can’t move that fast. No human could.

Beside him Temari snorts, directing a rather more amused glance at Sasuke. “Someone’s rusty.”

“Oh?”

“He’s going for the safe shots.”

Shikamaru takes this to mean that Sasuke’s not in the mood to risk missing. Oh well, they’ve come this far. He nudges Sakura until she calls out a greeting, and Sasuke stops ignoring them, pulling off his ear protection and lowering the gun.

“Sasuke,” Sakura repeats, more softly. More awkwardly, too. It’s impossible to pretend things are right between them, which is really no surprise. Sakura worked as part of a triangle, a solidly normal counterweight to Sasuke’s and Naruto’s dysfunctional strangeness. Like this, with one part of the triangle missing, they’re completely out of balance.

“We have some ideas,” Temari says. “We thought we could talk.”

Shikamaru congratulates himself on bringing Sakura, since he can only assume it’s her presence that convinces Sasuke to come with them sans gun.

They’ve settled on the grass, like they’re school children after all, when Temari says, “This whole affair is pretty heavily publicised.”

Shikamaru might have gone for a more subtle segue, but then Sasuke’s never seemed particularly impressed by subtlety. After almost a decade with Orochimaru, Shikamaru can’t fault him.

On the other hand, Sasuke’s reactions and preferences are largely conjecture. Shikamaru knows the Sasuke that Naruto talks about, and the Sasuke that Ino talks about – this Sasuke, who sits silent in front of him, remains a stranger.

“Fairly heavily publicised,” Shikamaru continues, “by the human media.” Sasuke gives him nothing, so he has to continue. “Humans are very prejudiced, and very many. Open conflict is getting us nowhere. It’s time to play the sympathy game. This is an opportunity for that.”

“I don’t care what the humans think,” Sasuke says.

Right, Shikamaru decides. So Sasuke’s point of view is rather narrow. “Well,” he says. “We’re currently at war with them. And even where we’re not, there’s a lot of strain. Which is an unnecessary resource drain on both ends. And a shifter’s individual destruction potential is several times a human’s, but there are billions of humans. So this won’t end well. So we need to stop.”

Naruto alone can and has eliminated armies, but most shifters aren’t Naruto.

“You can exterminate each other for all I care.”

“Grow up,” Temari tells him. “You care what happens to Naruto, if nothing else then because it’ll happen to you too.”

Sasuke tilts his head sideways. It’s a childish, birdlike movement that Orochimaru will have
cultivated. “What’s your interest in this?”

“They’re my people,” Temari says, with some measure of impatience. “And I would’ve been an excellent Hokage, but I wound up with a human so that’s out of the question. That’s how it goes. And it might end up I prefer Konohamaru, but there’s no telling before he’s mated and that’ll probably be years. Naruto’s it.”

The vast majority of shifters bond between ages fourteen and twenty, but it can occur both earlier and later – Minato, everyone knows, was in his twenties, though possibly that was because he was so opposed to a bond with anyone other than Yui. The youngest case on record, which was a public relations nightmare and no great fun for anybody involved, was a girl of eleven. They were certainly lucky she didn’t wind up with a human. But that was before Shikamaru’s time, before he’d even met Temari.

And Shikamaru would much rather be a kingmaker than a king, but he can see it’s a pity: Temari would have made a great Hokage. Personally he believes she still could, but then he has to believe that, to live with himself.

But she’d be an indebted Hokage then, dependent on others to defend her position from shifter-bonded aspirants, people with twice the magic she will ever have.

An exorcist is a far more controversial proposition than a run of the mill human mate. However, it’s far easier to make a case for your leadership ability when your bonded can erase any one of your rivals from existence with nary an effort.

Shikamaru sighs. It’s telling that nobody bothers mentioning Gaara. Even Naruto admits, sort of, that Gaara’s gone off the deep end, after the latest campaigns. After Kankurou.

“What’s your plan then?” Sasuke sounds disinterested, rather superior. Again Shikamaru thinks: Orochimaru’s superiority. A young child isolated at the mercy of an experienced manipulator and abuser, it’s inescapable that’s Sasuke’s been conditioned, and conditioned well.

“The popular idea right now is you’ve been abducted and you’re being held against your will. That’s of course generating a lot of sympathy for Orochimaru and your parents. Shifters are being demonised further.” He leans back on his elbows. “Well, it’s never a good day for shifters when the mating business comes up.” Usually the progressives at least advocate for them – leftists, feminists, anti-racists – but when advocating for shifters slips into advocating the permissiveness of raping humans, support does tend to waver. Shikamaru was a human interest story once, and remembers the tightrope walking of keeping it romantic, keeping the coercive connotations out. He did consent, would have consented freely if given a true choice, but it was always very clear to him that if he hadn’t agreed, he would have been forced. “This is an excellent opportunity to throw some shade back. Your parents sold you, and –”

Sasuke’s face silences him. Again Shikamaru congratulates himself on bringing Sakura, because he could not have said these things to Sasuke if she weren’t here. He remembers Genma, remembers Mami, and doesn’t imagine he’d fare any better. For most people, that sort of violence isn’t an option. Sasuke very consciously holds himself back from using it right now, on him. He can see Sasuke look at Sakura, evaluate how brutal he can be in front of her.

“My parents sacrificed for the greater good,” Sasuke says. For the first time Shikamaru wishes he knew Sasuke, because it sounds – incredibly, it sounds like Sasuke might actually believe this.

For once in his life, Shikamaru talks fast, “That’s a viable line of defence, of course, but it won’t sit well with anyone, selling your child. And your mother’s cold in a way that doesn’t appeal, especially
“Doesn’t Mr Namikaze still have the amputation video?” Temari says. The words run smooth, lazy, over an absolute readiness to defend against attack. “Suddenly Naruto will seem a romantic hero dashing to the rescue.”

“He will say it made me a better exorcist.” Sasuke’s voice and more interestingly his face is level. “Which is true.”

It’s Sakura who finally speaks up to say, “You can’t honestly think any of this is an acceptable way to treat a person.”

“The human government obviously does,” Sasuke says, still shut-down calm. “Your grandfather’s seen me around for years, let’s not pretend he doesn’t run things. It’s never mattered to him.”

Sakura’s grandfather, indeed. Ibiki Morino, who has little love to spare for his son but is fond of his granddaughter, and who will certainly be well informed on Sasuke’s situation.

“He has other priorities, of course,” Shikamaru says, silencing whatever Sakura was going to burst out with. “But it’s far easier to ask someone not to mind us interfering in your situation, than to ask them to risk exorcist protection by doing so themselves.”

This seems to be when Sasuke’s patience runs out. “What is it you’re asking me for?”

“An open mind, I suppose” Shikamaru says. He’s painfully aware of the difficulties of negotiating with someone whom you’ve got nothing to offer.

“I still don’t care what the humans think,” Sasuke says. “But in the unlikely event that you swayed them more towards your side, exorcist support for BEAST would skyrocket.”

“Huh,” Shikamaru says. “I’ll take that into consideration.”

That’s not what Ino’s told him, but Ino likes to think better of people than they deserve and Ino doesn’t know the upper exorcist echelons like Sasuke does.

“You do that,” Sasuke says, an obvious dismissal.

“Right, right,” Shikamaru mutters, dragging himself to his feet and walking off with Temari. They’re far enough away to be out of human hearing when Sakura and Sasuke start talking, and Shikamaru nudges Temari’s elbow.

“You can’t possibly know they’re saying anything interesting.”

“I know because I’m a very great genius. Now what’re they talking about?”

“You know the usual. He deserves better than this, he is better than this, whine whine whine.”

“I’m really more interesting in what he’s saying.”

“He’s not – wait.” She cocks her head a little. “Okay, he says to stop trying be friends with him as a good person. Either be friends with him as a bad person or don’t be friends with him.”

“Well, well, well.”

xxxxx
“Naruto.” Sakura’s voice comes tentative. “What’s going on with you and Sasuke?”

Naruto scratches at the back of his head. “I don’t know what you mean?”

“I thought… I hoped he’d be happier. Calmer. It’s a better situation, surely, it has to be. And you wanted him back so much – I thought, well, I thought you’d be happier, too. But everything’s tense and you’re obviously not happy, either of you, and… And so, what’s going on with you?”

“It’s – complicated, I guess you’d say?”

For the first time she smiles. “I’m pretty good with complicated.”

“Sakura. You can’t expect me to talk about Sasuke behind his back.”

“That is not what I’m asking.”

“You know he’d see it that way.”

Before she has time to reply, the door opens behind Naruto. It’s Sasuke, opening Naruto’s door the same way he might open his own, without announcement and while unzipping a mud-splattered fleece jacket.

“Ah.” He directs a brief glance at Sakura, and immediately turns to leave.

Naruto stands still for a long moment, because if he runs after Sasuke now it will be Kyuubi running. With his hand having finally fully materialised, with the memory playing on repeat of Sasuke pulling down the zipper, fabric parting across the long white line of his neck, receding from the seal and the bite marks bisecting it – Kyuubi’s refocused on the bond with a vengeance.

Distantly he’s aware of Sakura talking to him. He gets out an, I’m sorry, but in any meaningful way he’s already left her behind.

Sasuke hasn’t gone far.

Naruto opens Sasuke’s door the same way Sasuke opened his, as though he has a perfect right to. Sasuke, standing in the middle of the barely furnished room, lifts an eyebrow but doesn’t speak. His hand has returned to the zipper, pulls it all the way down until he tosses the jacket on his bed.

“Um,” Naruto says. He needs to say something, because his hand has found its way around Sasuke’s elbow.

Sasuke pulls it away but keeps hold of it, fingers locked tight around Naruto’s palm and wrist. “Salve Regina, Mater misericordiae. Vita, dulcedo, et spes nostra, salve. Ad te clamamus –”

The words catch on the layer of Ave Maria hanging around Naruto’s neck, gleaming like sparklers against the inside of his skin. It’s still Virgin Mary’s brilliance, forgiving and lovely, so there’s no burning, for all it’s a more complicated incantation.

“ – exsulset filii Hevae. Ad te Suspiramus, gementes et –”

Naruto covers Sasuke’s mouth with his own, swallowing holy words and also blood as Sasuke bites him.

“I want you so much,” he mumbles, looping his free arm around Sasuke’s neck, fingers curling around his shoulder, slipping below the neckline of his tshirt. “Can I have you?”
Because Sasuke said he didn’t want sex, didn’t want Naruto to want him – but then he got on his knees and then into Naruto’s bed, into Naruto’s body, and maybe. Maybe.

“No,” Sasuke says, but he’s not stepping away and unless he does Naruto can’t either. He pulls the shirt entirely away from Sasuke’s seal, sees his own bite mark across it and sees the world narrow down. His lips part over the mark, he licks as lightly as he can, and Sasuke draws tight as a cramping muscle in his arms.

His hand goes to Naruto’s neck, pulling sharply at his hair, but not hard enough to remove him. “– flentes in hac lacrimarum valle. Eia ergo – ”

Naruto licks harder, sucks on the skin.

Sasuke’s breathing is coming harder, a human ear could hear it.

“Sasuke. Sasuke, is this okay?”

Sasuke shrugs, even tenser now, and steps away from him. Eyes still all pupil, he sits down on the bed like it’s pissed him off.

Naruto sinks to the floor at his feet, resting his arms on Sasuke’s knees, which are taut and antsy with stillborn kicks but don’t remove him. Two tails come out and wind themselves around Sasuke legs, seeping through his jeans.

Sasuke finishes the incantation in a distracted voice, sourpuss face and smouldering eyes. “Did you set a date for the exorcism? You were talking to your father, right.”

“Mmh, he doesn’t know. I mean we all want it asap but he has no idea how fast I can learn to shield enough, so.”

“You can’t,” Sasuke tells him bluntly. “That’s why I’m marking you.”

“Well, he’s got no idea how long that’ll take either, so anyway. He’s thinking of moving more people north to settle things with Rock. Also he thinks we’d be great media bait.”

Sasuke snorts. “I thought that was only Shikamaru.”

“Him too? Huh. I guess it could work.”

“No,” Sasuke says. “It wouldn’t.”

“What Orochimaru’s doing needs to be put out there. You’re not at risk from him anymore, not like before – we can’t just let him go unchecked.”

Sasuke dons sardonic amusement as armour. Naruto pretends, for now, not to see the cracks in it. “I don’t understand how you don’t understand that he’d lie. He’s a liar.”

“What’s he lie about?”

Because Naruto’s main problem with the things Orochimaru’s said to him has always been that they’re true. Orochimaru’s voice lilting, indicating paraphrasing, because Naruto doesn’t even merit his own insults.

*You’re worthless, Naruto. You have changed nothing. You will achieve nothing. Keep this up, and you will die for nothing, and Sasuke will still be mine.*
“For one, he says he loves me.”

“That’s not true. It’s not!”

“That’s my point.”

But on some unspeakable level he understands that Sasuke has believed it, intermittently and desperately, when Orochimaru at least wanted him: when Orochimaru alone wanted him enough to act on it, and he wasn’t worth anything to anyone else.

“All right,” Sasuke says, “if it was put out there – it’s torture porn, you’d go publicly apeshit. And Orochimaru’s worth more to humanity than you are.”

“He’s not,” Naruto hisses, although of course if you’re playing the numbers game he is, because Orochimaru can channel an archangel and exorcise hundreds of demons. “And I wouldn’t just…”

“Go crazy?”

“Would you want me to?”

“Would that affect your reaction?”

“No,” Naruto sighs. “No, it wouldn’t, but I wouldn’t just…”

Sasuke snorts, a suddenly brittle sound. “No. With how you’ve been around me lately, you’d probably get off on it.”

“No!” Naruto clings to him harder. “You with anyone else – I could never accept it, never.”

Sasuke’s voice comes calm and rather coldly interested, “Would you rather I was with someone else because I wanted to or because I was forced?”

Naruto breaks a few of the bones in his fingers and also the bed frame, clenching his fists in frustration. “I don’t – Kyuubi and I feel differently about that.”

“Of course you do,” Sasuke drawls, falling back to rest on his elbows.

Naruto stares at him with stupid yearning and remembers Kakashi, of all the people he doesn’t want to think about what with Sasuke’s hurt feelings and his own confused and gritty gratitude/betrayal: Kakashi walking with him when he was still too young to walk around outside alone. It was snowing, powdery snow that made lousy snowballs. And Kakashi’s voice, People always say, oh I just want them to be happy. But what you mean is you want them to be happy with you. He reached down without breaking stride, pulling Naruto up from drowning in a snow heap by the scruff of his neck. I wanted to be happy too. Is that so terrible? A sigh. It’s a lonely business, being in love.

“If you’re trying to get me in the mood, don’t bring up my ex,” Sasuke sneers.

Naruto loses control completely, so completely it doesn’t even scare him. One moment he’s cuddling Sasuke’s legs on the floor, the next he’s on all fours over Sasuke on the bed, new hand fisted in the collar of Sasuke’s shirt.

Sasuke scowls at him with no little impatience. “Don’t bloody pretend you’re all shocked we were fucking.”

“Why would you fucking do that!” Naruto roars, feeling the sky shatter above him.
Because Kakashi didn’t need a bond prodding Sasuke into his arms. Kakashi, Sasuke chose.

Sasuke glares back at him, absolutely unintimidated. “Why the hell wouldn’t I?”

“Because – because!” It’s a growl, almost impossible to get words past the fangs.

These, he thinks distantly, are Sasuke’s snake eyes. The ones Orochimaru loves, the ones that tell you you’re going to lose everything you bet.

Naruto expected a punch to the face, would have welcomed a punch to the face. But Orochimaru’s taught Sasuke to cut deeper than that. “You know I always liked him. And he – either he liked me or I guess he was into Itachi, only Itachi doesn’t do sex.”

“You said you didn’t like him,” Naruto almost sobs.

“Of course I said that,” Sasuke tells him, angry still but with very ordinary condescension.

“He treated you like shit,” Naruto spits, and at least in this moment believes.

“People do.”

“I –”

“Yesterday,” Sasuke reminds him, “you told me you’d kill me if I ever tried to leave you. Don’t try to tell me you didn’t mean it.”

If anyone had said that to Sakura and meant it, or to Konohamaru, Naruto would have crippled the arsehole.

He gets in Sasuke’s face. “Don’t try to tell me you didn’t like it.”

Sasuke gives him that shark smile: half-smirk, half-sneer, still wholly Sasuke.

Naruto drops down on top of him. Sasuke grunts under the impact, pressed so close. Kyuubi’s tails are out in force, three four five of them, sweeping over Sasuke and tingling against the inside of his skin. Sasuke always has liked that.

But Sasuke looks at him now rather searchingly. “In the infirmary. You know I did that because of your hand.”

“Yeah,” Naruto says, after a while. He puts his head down next to Sasuke’s, on the pillow, and edges a little sideways, so Sasuke doesn’t have to take his full weight.

Sasuke makes the sign of the cross on his forehead, and places another set of Salve Regina on him. Naruto’s starting to doze off, warm after all and safe now, when O clemens, o pia, o dulcis Virgo Maria slips into Pater noster, qui es in caelis, sanctificetur nomen tuum. The words thrum and sizzle with power, insinuating themselves into Naruto’s being. Burning out gaps for themselves, hollowing out places where they can fit.

“Say it with me,” Sasuke demands at last, and Naruto’s tongue skids and stumbles around half-remembered words that he nevertheless knows by heart because Sasuke knows them with far greater certainty than he knows his own name, Credo in Deum Patrem omnipotentem, Creatorem caeli et terrae. Et in Iesum Christum, Filium eius unicum, Dominum nostrum…

These words do burn, his lips and tongue are incinerated and must be regenerated again and again, he’s gagging on ash by the time they reach Credo in Spiritum Sanctum, sanctam Ecclesiam.
catholicam, sanctorum communionem, remissionem peccatorum, carnis resurrectionem, vitam aeternam.

His soul feels a flayed thing, edges singed and battered. Kyuubi growls continuously like purring, licking his wounds.

Sasuke pushes at him. “Go back to your room.”

“No. I want to stay with you.”

Sasuke kicks him off the bed.

“Ouch! Bastard! You just gave me, like, soul sunburn!”

“Get out.”

“But…”

“Naruto. I can’t be any clearer. I don’t want you here.”

In his own room with the door locked he sits on the floor for a long time and cries.
Shed Our Skin, Let the Sun Shine In

Panic wakes him up. The room is strange around him, like the whole world is strange now, Kyuubi’s hysteria burning away his oxygen and leaving nothing, nothing.

Sasuke’s gone.

Someone’s reached inside of Naruto and scooped out the lion’s share of him, has gone into his mind and robbed him, cut him apart.

He roars and cries, inside his own head, falling off the bed and running wild.

He’s being swallowed by a black hole.

Then he’s throwing open Sasuke’s door, kicking it in so it breaks off its hinges. He has to find whatever traces are left, has to get him back, and for a moment can’t understand what he’s seeing.

Sasuke, sitting cross-legged and sleepy on the bed.

Then he’s not.

Naruto’s kneeling over him again, like last night except all different. Knees planted on either side of Sasuke’s hips, one hand locking Sasuke’s wrists above his head, the other closed tight around Sasuke’s throat.

Sasuke frowns up at him, and Naruto roars. Can’t even get a word out, just noise and desperation. Sasuke’s right here, right under him, and he’s still gone.

“Che. Calm down, idiot!”

He can’t possibly calm down. Surges forward, and bites at Sasuke’s mark.

Tries to bite at it: Sasuke’s hand rips free and blocks him.

So Naruto bites that instead, bites off Sasuke’s middle and ring fingers and swallows them down.

It’s connection, at last. This is my body, which is broken for you… Sasuke’s flesh will become part of Naruto’s flesh. Will be made into energy, which will build Naruto’s body, and so they will be inseparably one.

Sasuke’s wings erupt into the room in a surge of brilliance that blinds Naruto even before Sasuke forces his remaining fingers into Naruto’s eyes, twisting vicious and deep.

He clings to Sasuke through the blackout agony and darkness, pressing his forehead to Sasuke’s chest, while Kyuubi’s tails cling and claw against Sasuke’s uncoordinated struggling. But when he can see again, Sasuke’s ignoring him: staring at his own regenerating fingers with a sort of dumb, mute scowl. It’s the face he wears when looking at incarnations in unknown languages, memorising without yet being able to understand.

That pinched, stupefied face is framed by Naruto’s arms, and his arms are — inscriptions written in the white-on-white of angel wings twist under his skin, so full of power a word occasionally breaks through, a sudden hora mortis or mater misericordiae slashing across his wrists.

Sasuke’s wings have disappeared now, but they did manifest and Naruto was mostly fine. Because,
he thinks, Sasuke has written his ownership into the marrow of Naruto’s bones, has marked Naruto as his the same way his angel blades or indeed his wings are his.

He presses his face tighter into Sasuke’s skin. “Sasuke, Sasuke.”

“It’s just a practice block,” Sasuke says.

But it’s never felt like this before, Naruto hasn’t been this completely locked out since those first horrible moments when the bond had just formed and Sasuke first slammed his mind shut against the intrusion. He’s shaking badly, rubbing his face mindlessly against Sasuke’s shoulder to stop his teeth chattering.

“I can put in a block from your end too, now,” Sasuke says.

Of course he can. These holy words written inside Naruto are Sasuke’s words, and will cut Naruto off if Sasuke wants them to.

“Let me in, let me in, you have to let me in.” It’s a mindless litany, Naruto begging and Kyuubi demanding, the words broken in half and almost meaningless.

“Are you desperate, then?” Sasuke asks him, twisting his hip until Naruto goes rolling, ending up on his back with Sasuke over him. “Would you do anything?”

“Yes. Yes!”

He’s surged upward, half-sitting, and crushes Sasuke to him strangling-tight.

For some reason he hears his mother’s voice, Would you rather I be happy or that I be with you? Dad had made the correct choice, the justifiable choice. He’d let her go.

Naruto can’t make that choice.

You say you just want them to be happy. But what you really mean, Kakashi told him, and he understands it now, better than he ever wanted to, is you want them to be happy with you. I wanted to be happy too. Is that so terrible?

That’s when the noise hits.

“Shit,” Sasuke says, trying to push him off. “Bomb.”

Naruto can hear that perfectly well, and obviously they need to go, but his body has turned traitor. Cut off from Sasuke, he can’t function. Can’t unlock his hands from where they’re fisted around Sasuke’s arms, stares at them and curses and tries, but his will changes nothing.

Sasuke sneers at him and Naruto tries and tries, but his hands don’t move and he can’t make them.

Finally the holy words inside him move again, untwisting and sinking away, and he can feel Sasuke. There’s a second of blind, gasping relief, and then he’s off the bed and running, through the corridor and down the stairs, Sasuke beside him. He smells ash on the wind from outside, but no blood.

Dad stops them in the doorway. “Nobody’s injured. You’re not needed.”

Sasuke shrugs. “Okay.”
“What?”

Sasuke looks at him as though Naruto’s the crazy one. “There’s no point.”

“What are you even talking about!”

“If there was a demon, you couldn’t stop me going. I don’t know what you expect me to do about a bomb.”

Again there’s that unfounded feeling of betrayal. Sasuke’s never been anything less than insultingly clear about how little he cares for shifters, and yet it’s a sudden backstabbing every time.

“Well, I’m going!” Naruto snaps.

“Whatever.”

Sasuke remains behind as Naruto pushes past Dad and jogs outside.

Minato looks after him, feeling sad and stupid for being sad. Of course it’s damaged his relationship to Naruto, Naruto’s mind being tied to the mind of someone who hates him. He’d just…hoped it’d be less obvious.

Sasuke looks at him blankly, which is really the only way Sasuke ever looks at him. Minato thinks again, is ashamed to think again, that it’s no wonder Orochimaru beat him.

It was an unacceptable and more importantly unproductive thought the first time he had it, and it still is now.

Probably he should let Kushina have a crack at the brat.

Sasuke walks away from him without comment, and Minato remains for a long minute in the doorway. Outside Naruto’s getting himself caught up on the situation, and spreading cheer among the guards. Since he got back from the north, Minato reflects, he has a new way of speaking to them, a tone of obvious command he would have never previously directed at an adult. Minato doubts he’s aware of it, anymore than he’s probably aware of his feelings for Minato souring.

Still, they’d follow him now, the shifters. Not because of who he is, which anyway has never been enough in Naruto’s case, halfbreed bastard child that he is, but because of what he’s done and more importantly what he will do.

But Naruto’s still very, very young, and rather lost.

He looks particularly childish when he steps into Minato’s office a few hours later. It’s not an unwelcome interruption: Minato’s had some rather difficult negotiations with the human government on anti-shifter terrorism policies, and Orochimaru’s sent another email. Still, it seems they’re avoiding outright war, for the present.

Naruto hesitates for a moment in the doorway, trying to rub a patch of mud or ash off his cheek and just smearing it around. “You busy?”

“Come in.”

Naruto perches on the edge of a chair. Whatever else Sasuke’s messed up, he really has been good for Naruto’s energy reserves, because two tails are winding restlessly up the back of the chair and Naruto hardly seems aware of them.
“Why did you,” Naruto starts, “stop us?”

“It’s better not to let anyone confirm he’s here. We need to minimize attacks until we’re ready to act.”

“We could’ve spun that. Actually, I mean, it’s cheap and all but it’d be the best possible shield. Anyone tried to do anything that puts him at risk like that, Orochimaru would’ve sent a demon to eat their soul.” The words come stingy and bitter, but he doesn’t hesitate on the name.

Minato’s reminded that Naruto *knows* Orochimaru now, reminded of how much information is suddenly gathered right at his fingertips.

“He can’t send them,” he says mildly, steeping his fingers the way he knows Naruto hates. “He might choose not to protect someone, should a demon appear, but that’s hardly the same thing.”

Naruto frowns at him. “Of course he can.”

Minato breathes in. “He can – control them. The demons.”

The unspeakable suspicion, and now, here, in Naruto’s voice the answer. “Yeah, obviously. Any exorcist could. Well, the strong ones. Someone like, I don’t know, Ino could never.”

That too is new. Naruto blithely assessing someone, acknowledging an absolute limit to their ability and dismissing them because of it.

Minato wants him to notice what he’s doing, but noticing would require taking a step back from Sasuke, and that would limit this sudden flow of information. He says, “Sasuke could.”

There are very, very many more humans than there are shifters. And human weapons are used and abused by both sides, so numbers matter and the planet might be devastated if things escalate. To be able to send demons on them – absolute safety, controlling a weapon against which there is no human defence.

“Of course he can.” Naruto looks at him then, stops twitching for a second. “He’s not going to. It’s heresy.”

“You know him best,” Minato says, as lightly as he can, “but I have to say, he’s never struck me as someone who’s particularly concerned with rules.”

Naruto shrugs, restless again. Three tails now, and he still doesn’t seem to truly notice them. “In a pinch, sure. He’d obviously do it to save himself if he needed to. He’s not going to do it for us.”

“He was certainly willing to exorcise. I’m sure that if –”

“No. This is,” and Naruto bites his lip but continues because he’s never been one to stop, “this is basically the only thing he won’t do because it’s wrong. Killing people, torturing them – that’s fine, he doesn’t even care. But to make a demon devour their soul, that’s still wrong to him. I’m not gonna – I’d never try and persuade him to do that. Anyway it’s super heresy. It’s the kind of shit they’re forced to go nova if they do it.”

“Ah,” Minato says, and then judiciously doesn’t say anything else, ushering Naruto out of the room and walking with him because Naruto obviously needs to be moving.

It’s not long before Naruto says, “I can do it soon. The exorcism.”
Minato slants an expectant look at him, and Naruto lifts his arm. He frowns in concentration, lips drawn back from Kyuubi’s canines. Finally something glows under his skin, brighter and brighter until it’s readable, eye-searing Latin crawling through Naruto’s flesh.

“He’s – marked you,” Minato says, and feels physically sick. Thinks of Orochimaru taking a branding iron to Sasuke, and this time it’s Minato’s baby, and he could do nothing to stop it…

Naruto glows up at him. So short still, Yui’s shortness. “Yes!”

“You’re happy,” Minato says, has to say it, to hear it out loud: to hear Naruto not deny it.

“Yeah! And so now it should be fine, really soon. Even if it’s not, he can just do the Virgin Mary exorcism, he did before he’d marked me at all and I was totally fine. Mostly totally fine. I was thinking tomorrow. Before there’s anymore mess.”

“That would be convenient,” Minato says, light-voiced, light-headed. Sasuke has written himself into Naruto’s flesh, into his DNA. Has scorched his mark into Naruto’s soul, and Naruto’s happy about it. “On a different subject, Morino contacted me. Unsurprisingly, he wants the girl home.”

Naruto looks down. “Yeah.”

Minato lets the surprise bleed through his voice. “Is this some if you love someone, let them go?”

“Yeah, that never made sense.” Naruto’s not looking down anymore. Has that face he gets, uncompromising and unconditional. “If you love someone, you don’t let them go, you never let them go.”

And here they are, at the root of the rot between them. He did let Yui go, and Naruto has never understood, probably cannot understand.

“Even if they want you to?” He’s never spoken so plainly on this before, but Naruto’s no longer exactly a child and so Minato might as well stop hoping he’ll grow up to empathise. “That’s abusive.”

Naruto shrugs. It’s a jerky, ill-tempered movement that looks more like Sasuke than like Naruto. “If you can stop, if you can control it, then it’s not love. People say, like, it’s the strongest force in the world, all that stuff – well then, if you wouldn’t do anything for it, sacrifice anything, burn the world to have it – then either it’s not love or love isn’t all that. Which is fine, it doesn’t have to be for everyone, but people should make up their damn minds! You can’t both say it’s unconditional and unstoppable and then except people to stop because certain conditions are met.”

There’s a certain logic in that, which makes it worse, because harder to dismiss as delusional.

He notices Naruto tensing beside him before he sees Sasuke, standing in the doorway of Naruto’s room. “Hey,” Naruto breathes. Minato can actually feel him heating up, going a slow hot red as his body temperature spikes, when Sasuke stops towelling his hair and the neckline of his damp tshirt slips down off the mark in what is clearly some kind of offer.

Naruto steps right into Sasuke’s space, can do that now because some minute shift of Sasuke’s posture has made it their space. Backs Sasuke into the room and kicks the door shut behind them as an afterthought: what matters is Sasuke so close, Sasuke letting Naruto lift him up on the desk. The smell of him is overwhelming, a smell of skin and magic and Naruto’s soap.

Sasuke’s arms loop around his shoulders, one hand following his spine down below the neckline of his shirt. Sasuke’s legs close around his hips, Sasuke’s foot flexing against his buttock.
Sasuke’s mindscape is a minefield at the best of times, and the cutting, contradictory impulses that have driven him to this point are certainly no exception. His thoughts tumble over each other, faster and faster, and Naruto decides to cut them off. Gathers Sasuke to him with one hand, stroking his leg with the other, up his thigh as far as the loose shorts will let him and then down, curling his fingers under Sasuke’s knee the way that drives Naruto insane but just makes Sasuke frown in annoyed confusion.

When Naruto nudges his cheek against Sasuke’s chin, Sasuke readily responds, angling his head until his open mouth slides hot against Naruto’s.

The whole time, their attention is on the mark: on the knowledge that Naruto’s going to bite it. Sasuke’s entire body’s angled for it, and Naruto’s jaws ache and break around the advent of his fangs. “Mmh, Sasuke, why? I thought…”

“I thought you wanted inside me?”

The air disappears, and his mouth’s too full of saliva to fit any words. This time when the tails come out and wind themselves around Sasuke’s legs and hips, Sasuke just shifts against Naruto, flushed with arousal. He bites at the whisker scars, drags his fingers over Naruto’s human ears and then through Kyuubi’s. Naruto moans and moans, rubbing his hips between Sasuke’s legs and grabbing Sasuke’s arse to pull him closer. Realises he’s touching skin, that his claws have gone straight through the shorts, and Sasuke’s not wearing anything beneath them.

Sasuke angles his head back, shoulder up.

If he changed his mind now, it wouldn’t matter. Naruto wouldn’t even notice, and couldn’t stop if he did.

His lips brush over the mark, a chapped flutter. His tongue, just a quick swipe that nevertheless smears excess saliva all over it, and then finally his aching teeth sinking into Sasuke’s body.

Sasuke’s flesh again, Sasuke’s blood and Sasuke’s magic and Sasuke’s fucking soul filling his mouth.

And this time Sasuke arches against him, and if there’s panic it’s drowned out by pleasure erupting like a bomb.

There have been so many false starts, but this time Sasuke won’t stop him.

Maybe can’t stop him, but Naruto prefers not to think about that. He’s so synchronised with Kyuubi, he barely even hears the piercing howling from inside his own head.

His fangs click together inside Sasuke’s shoulder, and the seal takes another hit, angel brilliance lighting Sasuke from within, burning under his skin. It tingles against Naruto’s tongue, otherworldly but safe now, with Sasuke’s ownership written deep into his body.

Sasuke twitches against him, pushing closer and it must hurt, flesh tearing around the bite, but he clearly isn’t bothered.

Naruto bites him again and again, drunk on it, bites until it becomes more important to get inside him in other ways. He drags his mouth up Sasuke’s neck, sloppy kisses that are mostly licking up the blood from where his fangs drag on skin. Kneads Sasuke’s arse, pulling him ever closer. The shorts are completely gone now, and it only takes a rip and a tug to be rid of the shirt too, to have Sasuke naked. He trails a finger down Sasuke’s chest, lightly, lightly, and feels Sasuke’s heart jump under his touch.
Blood pounds in his ears and between his legs, he finally finds Sasuke’s mouth again but can’t stay on his feet, sinks to his knees between Sasuke’s spread legs.

He’s opening his mouth, still aching and overflowing with saliva, when Sasuke’s fingers clench in his hair. “Not there. You bite, you die.”

“Fine, fine.” He tips Sasuke backwards none too gently, and lets his mouth slips further down, past Sasuke’s erection and to his entrance. Licks messily and deeply, panting so hard he has trouble sucking. He knows exactly what to do, what Sasuke likes, because Sasuke knows.

And Sasuke, finally, is excited. Naruto groans and licks, pressing his palm to his own erection in stark desperation, and can feel Sasuke feel it: Naruto’s unhinged desire, the arousal that threatens to eradicate any possibility of thought, this complete obsession with Sasuke, the need to have him always. Can, more importantly, feel it excite Sasuke, feel that Sasuke’s not just echoing Naruto’s desire, though probably that helps, but responding to it independently, excited in his own right.

There’s a strange lightness in his chest, an impossible wish granted.

“Come here.”

Sasuke’s voice, and Naruto surges up. Leans over Sasuke, finds his mouth again and again, and he wants inside and Sasuke wants him inside.

It’s easier, this time. Only now, as a thick horror gagging him, does he realise how much resistance he powered through last time. The memory should make him pull out, should make him at least want to stop.

Sasuke puts his feet on Naruto’s hips, controlling his movements. Naruto’s glad of it, glad to be moving the way Sasuke wants, and Sasuke keeps saying his name, *Naruto, Naruto*, says it like an incantation right into Naruto’s ear.

Naruto’s put the full strength of his legs into his thrusts, and the desk bangs into the wall a few times before it starts to break. Impatient, he kicks it away, fitting his hands around Sasuke’s hips and arse to hold him up against the wall.

This too is something he did that first night. But this time Sasuke doesn’t elbow him in the head: this time, Sasuke holds on to him and kisses him back. It dawns on Naruto, a slow merciless dawning that whites out anything but unbelievable desire, that Sasuke’s moving with him and is going to orgasm from the feeling of Naruto coming inside him, and that thought sets him off, so abruptly his knees give out.

They end up in a heap on the floor, Sasuke still in his lap with his legs crossed against the small of Naruto’s back. The metal one is icy against his sweat-slick skin, strangely still in contrast to the right one, in which Naruto can feel the pulse.

“You fucking dropped me,” Sasuke grumbles. “I can’t believe you.”

“I didn’t drop you,” Naruto argues, tightening his arms around Sasuke for emphasis. He’s skinned his knuckles, going down, and they’re still pressed too tight to the wall for Kyuubi to heal them. “Like I’d let you go.”

“Hn.” But Sasuke’s still in his arms, legs locked tight around Naruto’s body and Naruto’s now-soft dick still as deep inside him as it can go. There’s Sasuke’s sperm smeared all over his stomach.

“Sasuke,” he starts, and then can’t say anymore. There’s this – this stinging tenderness, his heart
encaged in barbed wire that wraps around his ribs and cuts every time his heart expands, not letting him breathe because piercing his lungs too.

He remembers Sakura retelling some scene from a show she watched, some character telling their love interest, *I can’t breathe without you*. She talked about it as something romantic.

It’s not, Naruto discovers. It’s really, really not.

Kyuubi doesn’t do well with this kind of feeling. The fangs ache now, foreign and uncomfortable in his mouth, and his tails are starting to twitch with how very not in synch he is with Kyuubi.

“Naruto.” Sasuke’s hand on his neck, soft but positioned to squeeze.

“Mmh.” Naruto tries to kiss him and gets a mouthful of jaw, swept away by this tsunami wave of love, a love to drown the world.

He tussles with Kyuubi inside his own head. Wants to kiss Sasuke again, softly and forever. Kyuubi wants to turn him over and have another go, the harder the better.

“Naruto,” Sasuke says again, but this isn’t really Naruto anymore. Ignoring Kyuubi leering at him, hardening again inside him, he slips across the bond and into Naruto’s mind. It’s more chaotic than usual, painted in darker colours, which makes sense when he reaches the cage in the sewers and finds Naruto on the floor next to the bars. He’s wrestling with Kyuubi in the mud, both of them miserable and filthy, tearing at each other in a panic.

“What are you doing?” Sasuke demands.

They both freeze, staring over at him. “I thought,” Naruto says. “I was losing control, and he was wanting out bad, and I thought – I thought it was better I went in.”

“Get up.”

“I don’t think –

“No, and that’s the problem.” The gate opens under Sasuke’s hand, swings wide.

Naruto hurries to his feet, alight again on the inside. Sasuke came after him, Sasuke’s going to help him fix this, and –

Sasuke grabs him by the back of the neck and hurls him into the cage, locking it behind him.

xxxxx

The betrayed fury has simmered and soured, but when the cage finally opens he wakes up in masturbatory heaven. Comes to his senses in a body moving languidly inside Sasuke’s, with Sasuke’s hands pressed hard against the back of his hips, urging him closer. Sasuke’s eyes open under him, clearly aware of him retaking control.

They’re on the bed now, sheets scrunched up under Naruto’s knees. Also it’s morning, thick sunlight spilling through the window and over his knuckles.

Sasuke speaks over Naruto’s incoherent noises, his voice out of breath but ringing with archangel undertones. Brows scrunched up and lips wet, his face is stark with an intensity that has nothing to do with sex. “Gloria Patri, et Filio, et Spiritui Sancto. Sicut erat in principio, et nunc, et semper, et in saecula saeculorum.”
World without end, Naruto thinks, dizzy and shocky. This is an entirely different level of incantation. It rushes through him, wretches him. Bleaches his soul with the terrible light, the light that would burn out any human eye that dared to look.

In the middle of it all he ejaculates, body short-circuiting in any way it can. He collapses over Sasuke, feels his insides collapse, internal freefall into the unforgiving light that will burn away anything that’s human, anything that’s him.

“Remember you’re mine,” Sasuke barks.

Naruto presses his closed eyes to the bitten seal, and remembers that they’re part of each other. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be.

Sasuke’s hand on his stomach, and it’s Sasuke’s hand in the same way that Kyuubi’s hand is Naruto’s, which is to say not really. It’s a hand that can reach inside Naruto, straight through his soul, a hand that could palm the galaxy. “In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen.”

On the far side of the exterminating light, he’s aware of Sasuke opening his mouth, rough fingers prying Naruto’s jaws apart, stroking his gums until Kyuubi’s fangs pop out. Kyuubi twitches awake and wants, but even so Naruto can’t move at all. It’s Sasuke who has to position him, has to close Naruto’s mouth around his shoulder, push at Naruto’s jaw until the fangs go in deep.

And Sasuke’s clinging to him, legs and arms wound tight around him, face pressed to the side of Naruto’s head. He’s opened the bond wider than Naruto could have ever dreamt. “Ikiteru,” he hisses into Naruto’s ear. “Ore no mono da, dakara ikiteru.”

Naruto’s completely onboard with that, but Naruto’s – half eradicated, his soul slipping and fading. He’s being exorcised.

The world is distant and over-bright as over-exposed film, just edges of colours left. He blinks in and out, trying to negotiate the light, to power through it or hide from it, but the light of God reaches everywhere and can never be stopped.

He’s shrinking, there’s so very little left of him, and –

When it stops, he’s on his back with Sasuke leaning over him, his body immobile as clay and his head pillowed on Sasuke’s thighs. There’s so much light, light like after a nuclear bomb, the light of a star going nova and swallowing a galaxy.

Sasuke’s wings are fully released, erupting from his back. They’re brighter than Naruto’s ever seen them: brighter than he would have been able to see, if Sasuke hadn’t opened the bond so wide that Naruto can feel the touch of God.

He understands now about Sasuke believing absolutely in God but not bothering at all with the bible, because this isn’t a person in any conceivable sense of the word, not like Kyuubi or even Uriel. It’s energy and absoluteness, power and light beyond any personality.

It draws him rigid, gasping. Disappearing.

Sasuke’s wings – their wings, now, kind of – rise and rise, through the walls and the ceiling, up through the stratosphere.

“Ikiteru, kuso bakemono. Zettai mele da!”

He tries to smile, can’t. Tries to live, and can’t really do that either.
Kyuubi, useless against this level of angel burn, has left him behind like a dead shell, seeking shelter in Sasuke, curled tight in whatever corner of Sasuke’s mind remains unsaturated by Uriel’s light. His power is dedicated entirely to healing Sasuke’s brain, which tries to bleed where the seal sears into it and Sasuke draws light through it. No more Virgin Mary, no more general incantations to whoever might listen. It’s the voice of an archangel who snarls above him, “Kyrie, eleison, Christe, eleison, Kyrie, eleison.”

It comes to him that this is Sasuke begging.

Sasuke’s not very good at begging, so it comes out a snarling order, his will forced raw and relentless into the void.

And the resonance grows and grows, a hundred thousand unearthly voices echoing the chant. *Lord, have mercy.* The actual host of actual Heaven, echoing Sasuke’s archangel voice and begging for mercy, for Naruto.

It works.

The light softens, merciful and forgiving now of humanity. Of him.

It’s still there inside him, absolute eradicating light, but buried under mercy and Sasuke’s possession, tuned to Sasuke’s will.

It’s still a long time before Naruto can blink, before he can move at all, exist again as an independent person and not just as an object Sasuke’s claimed.

Before the wings recede, and Sasuke gradually falls silent.

It’s only then, with the radiance faded, that people can burst into the room. Naruto still can’t move, and Sasuke snarls rejection. There’s not much of Sasuke left in this creature, like there’s sometimes very little Naruto left in Kyuubi. There’s angel light and angel instinct, though Sasuke’s at least switched from speaking in High Church. “Kiero.”

Alarm spikes in Naruto, because Sasuke means that, means for Dad to disappear.

Sasuke blinks, amending it to, “Run.”

He doesn’t understand, right now, that Dad doesn’t understand Japanese, and wouldn’t run even if he’d understood that first threat.

Two of the people behind Dad disappear. Naruto’s breathing, never steady, goes desperately shallow.

It’s not that they die, or even really that they burn. They’re there one moment, gone the next, excised from the fabric of reality: undone, unmade.

“Sasuke,” he manages, and breaks through enough for Sasuke to notice him. For Naruto to tug on Kyuubi in desperation, tug him back home. It’s a dirty thing to do, but this is his father, he can’t let Dad disappear too – he tugs Kyuubi back home, and Sasuke falls on top of him in a spray of blood.

“Fuck. Fuck!” He forces Kyuubi back into Sasuke so fast, it feels like ripping the last torn shreds of his soul loose.

So there they are, in a heap of immobile limbs and blood and fading light. Sasuke gives him a spectacularly ugly scowl, but it’s safe now, Dad can come in and not be burned away.
Naruto manages to move a little, too, enough to shift towards Sasuke, who grumbles and glares but stays where he is, pressed skin to skin.

Then it’s Dad’s hand on his shoulder, Dad calling his name and demanding is he all right, what are you doing, what do you need?

It makes Sasuke sit up and reach for the sheet, bundling himself into it. The room around them, Naruto discovers, has been trashed, presumably by Kyuubi during the night hours Naruto spent locked in his cage.

“Why did you do that?” he demands of Sasuke.

Sasuke’s face, still not really human again, doesn’t change. “Kyuubi makes more sense than you.”

“You can’t put me in a fucking cage!”

“I just did.” Animation is creeping back into his features, humanity. He wipes at the blood on his face like a kid wiping snot.

And Sasuke’s right, of course. He’s the one who let Naruto out of the original cage, the one Orochimaru locked him inside and that he rebuilt in his mind, the only cage that can hold Kyuubi – Sasuke let him out and so Sasuke can lock him in. Until Naruto learns to get out on his own, he has no way of stopping him.

“Kyuubi does not make sense,” he grumbles. But he understands better now, understands that Sasuke gets off on Naruto wanting him so much, on Naruto needing him, but that the human part of the sentiment behind that need is incomprehensible to Sasuke. Kyuubi’s beast desire to own and fuck and dominate, that’s what makes sense to him.

“Naruto.” Dad’s voice, and he turns his head, facing him.

“I’m fine.” He manages to push up on his elbows, stealing a bit of Sasuke’s sheet to cover his lap. There’s a lot of people around now, which isn’t a good idea when Sasuke’s like this, people Naruto reckons he’d recognise, if he could see properly, if the world wasn’t still spinning and strange.

Pulling the sheet over his privates, he discovers a massive mark covering his abdomen, stretching from sternum to pubic bone. “Shit.” His own brand of stigmata, deeper than Kyuubi can heal. His skeleton is brittle and hollow as a bird’s, filled with holy writ, and he stares at his stomach and can barely recognise it as his own. “Holy shit.”

Sasuke puts his hand on top of it, and Naruto’s breathing evens out.

“Naruto,” Dad says again. “I need to know what you’ve done to yourself.” He glances at Sasuke with a great deal more dislike than he’s shown so far.

Sasuke too sounds snottier than usual. “I told you to leave.”

“You just killed four of my people.”

“You just shot me in the head.”

“What the fuck?” Naruto can feel himself wild-eyed and lost. What the fuck, what the hell!

Dad makes a placating gesture, but there’s no placating this. Naruto stares, tries to reach for Sasuke, but there’s no mark on him. Either Kyuubi healed him or Uriel didn’t let him be hit, Sasuke himself
doesn’t know which.

“I will speak to Naruto,” Dad says.

Naruto barely listens, until Sasuke goes snake eyes again. He starts to remove himself from Naruto, and god, no, anything but that. Naruto grabs for him in absolute desperation, cramping alone at sea and he will drown without this, he will, and – Sasuke finally relents. With this absolutely awful smirk, he even leans closer to Naruto, and Naruto hates himself for it but relaxes into him immediately.

With how raw the bond is, how open, Sasuke leaving would mean almost as much pain and anxiety for him as for Naruto. But of course pain and anxiety have been the lion’s share of Sasuke’s life for the last seven years, and clearly he’s more interested in pissing people off, in establishing his ownership over Naruto, than in avoiding them.

“Will you be here?” Naruto asks. Because the light lurks behind his eyelids, he doesn’t know how to close his eyes and see darkness.

“Iru yo.” It’s less shock now and more a private way of speaking, the Japanese, but still. Sasuke’s brain is a bloody mess, scrambled and scratched by the bond, by the seal, by the physical bleed. When Dad finally, fucking finally, takes the hint and leaves them alone, Sasuke lays his head down on the brand he’s burnt into Naruto’s abdomen.
When All is Said and Done and Dead

It’s been several hours when the attendant lets Minato know that Naruto, and Naruto alone, is awake. Minato puts away his laptop and finds Naruto still naked but at least wrapped in the duvet. Blue eyes blinking open, face scrunched mischievously against the pillow, he looks a child again.

The instinct to get on the bed with him, take him in his arm as if he were really five again, is a physical force. But Naruto’s arm is looped loosely around Sasuke’s back, Sasuke’s head tucked under his chin, face hidden in Naruto’s shoulder. It’s a position that makes him look unendurably young: Minato understands as obvious, and hopes that so does Naruto, that this is how Orochimaru has conditioned Sasuke to sleep, how Orochimaru gets off on seeing him.

Minato leans over carefully, brushing Naruto’s fringe aside and kissing his forehead. Naruto’s eyes blink open wider. “Dad.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Strange,” Naruto says, face scrunching up even more and his fingers tightening against Sasuke’s spine. “Light, sort of.”

“I want you to explain to me what he was doing.”

“Well.” Naruto bites at his lips, moving his free hand to his stomach. The duvet slips, and there’s the mark. It’s more discreet now, the white of old scar tissue, but it’s still a seal covering Naruto’s entire abdomen. “He was, I guess, he finished marking me.”

“I wish you’d consulted with me before you agreed to this.”

Naruto snorts. “Like he asked.”

“Are you telling me that he did this against your will?”

Minato doesn’t like hypocrisy, particularly in himself: it’s a question, not an accusation. Once you’ve bought an abused child for sexual purposes, it’s difficult to summon up the moral indignation to condemn this sort of behaviour. And yet, Naruto is his baby.

“Nah,” Naruto says, slanting a look brimming over with tenderness and need and resentment at Sasuke. “It’s not like I would’ve said no.”

“Hmm.”

“It’s,” Naruto starts, making a frustrated gesture. “Of course I’d agree. I want – I want him to have magic, and I want to be able to handle the exorcism stuff, and I wanted him to mark me, I just. It wouldn’t have mattered what I wanted, you know?”

Minato waits, always the best tactic with Naruto. In this too he’s so much like Kushina, so little like Yui.

“He’d – he has to have the magic. He’s not in this unconditionally. He’d sacrifice his other leg for me – he says he wouldn’t but he would – but the magic, that’s not negotiable.” He shrugs, making Sasuke cling to him tighter. “Either we find a way he can use it like this or – or I have to go, cause he’s gonna use it.”
Minato takes that in, directing a speculative look at Sasuke. Most of his face is hidden away, and he’s curled like a toddler against Naruto’s side, metal ankle hooked over Naruto’s thigh.

“He doesn’t want me to die,” Naruto says, rather softly. “But it’s not his absolute priority.”

Minato draws in a deep breath, and stays pragmatic. “How much influence do you have over what he says? Because I’m arranging funerals for the people he killed, and we need to spin this.”

“Don’t know, really. He’ll be nasty if he’s pissed off. But he doesn’t care about it, he’s not gonna say anything if it’s not brought up.”

Minato considers whether to point this out, but he has no doubt that Sasuke will realise it and little doubt that Sasuke will break the news to Naruto in as stressful a way as possible: “Those wings will have been visible for miles. It’ll be a fairly clear indication that something’s going on with the seal.” Naruto keeps looking at him, watchful, waiting, so he has to continue, “I suspect that will mean Orochimaru involving himself much more actively. He’s been quite laid-back so far, but with the seal in jeopardy I’d be shocked if he didn’t make a move.”

That snaps Naruto into focus like the dead guards failed to, killer eyes and all. “Orochimaru needs to die.”

“Everyone dies, sooner or later. For now he’s alive, and we need to deal with him alive.” He chooses not to point out that Naruto knows, that Naruto must know, that while Sasuke obviously hates Orochimaru, he obviously would never forgive anyone else for killing him. “What happened to the room?”

Naruto shrinks in on himself, uncomfortable and resentful. “He let out Kyuubi.”

“Mmh.” Naruto twists around a bit, sitting up straighter and then cursing under his breath as this makes Sasuke’s head slide from his shoulder to low on his chest. Sasuke grumbles in his sleep but doesn’t wake, and stays obediently close, curled foetal under Naruto’s arm.

Minato already knew that Orochimaru likes very young boys, enjoys manipulating as well as molesting them. It’s still disturbing to see this carefully performed vulnerability, the obviously learnt instincts to make oneself smaller, to cling tenaciously but submissively.

Kyuubi will love it.

Naruto smooths a hand through Sasuke’s unruly hair, looking mostly conflicted. “Why did he say you shot him?”

“Don’t wake him up now, but I did.”

Naruto’s stare is a black demand, but he’s actually waiting for Minato to speak. And so Minato tries to explain in acceptable language that he faced quite possibly the most terrifying sight of his life. Angel light burning through the walls of the building, radiating from Sasuke so strongly it physically prevented him from entering the room. Burnt out his eyes again and again, but in between he could see Naruto, what seemed nothing so much as Naruto’s corpse.

Naruto’s biting his lip again, but only for a moment. His voice comes slightly hoarse. “Will you – hand me some clothes?”

Giving up on the torn fabric on the floor, Minato reaches into the wardrobe and offers him a shirt and
a pair of sweat pants. He turns away as Naruto starts struggling into them, but still, “He’s not waking up?”

“Ahh, no, I’m kind of totally leeching off him right now. He’s sleeping for both of us.” He shrugs rather defensively, visible out of the corner of Minato’s eye. “I’ve got stuff I need to do and he doesn’t much care about anything here anyway.”

Dressed, he sneaks out of the bed and then suddenly Minato has an armful of spiky, clinging child pressed to his chest. Minato hugs him back, resting his face against the crown of Naruto’s head, until Naruto starts to step away.

“You’re steadier now,” Minato observes.

Naruto rubs at the back of his head. “Eh, well, yeah. Kyuubi must’ve spent like ten hours fucking him, so.”

“You don’t remember.”

“No. Just these sort of blurry impressions.”

They both look, quietly, at the trashed room. Broken furniture, even the floor has cracked in places. Sasuke will heal now, of course, will heal from almost anything, but it’s clear that Kyuubi will not have been gentle.

Then again, presumably Sasuke could have stopped him, if he’d wanted to. God knows Naruto almost died this morning, and that was without Sasuke intending to hurt him.

Minato thinks again about Orochimaru, about how Sasuke, whatever his natural inclination, will have been trained to respond to sexual violence with submissive pleasure.

“Well.” Naruto breathes in and out, deeply, and squares his shoulders.

Minato feels his eyebrows go up. “You’re leaving?”

“Mmh.” Naruto’s grin is crooked and struggling. “I need to get some shit together. Take responsibility. Anyway then maybe he’ll learn to admit if he wants me to stay. Just don’t, you know. Don’t let anyone else come in. That wouldn’t, that wouldn’t be okay.”

xxxxx


It’s always a surreal, choked feeling, talking to the walking dead. You can live for about a day, after your mate has died. If you can call it living.

Sasuke wiped two people out of existence, which means two other people dying now. Sometimes mate bonds suck.

“How are they?” Temari asks.

“Dead.”

There’s a certain tightness to Kiba’s and Genma’s faces, not grief so much as resentment. Naruto’s going to have to do something about that, but Temari beats him to it, “If Gaara tells you not to come in, and you do anyway, then what happens?”
A long, surly silence before her hard gaze breaks it.

“You die,” Genma says. He’s still in bed, hasn’t been able to leave it since Sasuke burnt him, and he’s down an arm and two legs, but at least he’s talking.

“Exactly. Why you’d expect any different from an unstable, anti-shifter exorcist who was brought here against his will, I couldn’t even begin to guess.”

“He’s not that anti-shifter,” Kiba says unexpectedly. “I mean.” He nods towards Naruto. “He’s with you and all. He hung out with us and everything.”

Temari arches and eyebrow, but it’s Genma who says, “Didn’t Naruto have to stop him burning you?”

“Eh, yeah. But, well, I mean. I used to beat up on him, when he had no way to defend himself. Fair’s fair.”

Naruto rubs at his shower-wet hair, tilting his head a bit. “Why doesn’t he like you? Not you, Kiba, we all know that.”

Genma looks away. “I was one of the guards escorting him to the room, the night you returned. I was careless in how I spoke to him.”

“Really,” Naruto says, rubbing at his forehead. The guards aren’t usually formal with him, or avoidant. Whatever Genma said to Sasuke, he doesn’t feel safe repeating it to Naruto. “Well, it’s good you told me. I’ll handle it.”

Kiba’s reasonably safe, because he’s tagged in Sasuke’s mind as Naruto’s friend. Genma should maybe be transferred.

He stretches a bit, feeling the seal on his stomach itch with the movement. It feels ready to burst through his skin. “I should go say goodbye to Sakura before she leaves.”

But he’s barely made it off the chair before the world freezes. “Fuck fuck shit no fuck.”

Sasuke’s woken up. There’s a cold feeling, and then no feeling at all.

The holy writing inside Naruto moves so quickly it must be visible on his face, given the way he’s being stared at, chains of prayers rolling just under his skin. Naruto claws and pulls at them, but the movement remains implacable, unstoppable. Sasuke shuts him out.

And so Naruto’s locked out, stuck with the memory of Sasuke waking up absolutely convinced he’s waking up in Orochimaru’s bedroom. Alone in a cold bed in a room like a crime scene, blood all over him and his thighs and arse sticky and itching with dry sperm, a burnt hollow feeling inside him. Something Sasuke’s woken up to on hundreds of mornings, something that’s normal in Orochimaru’s house. The gradual understanding, as he sits up, that he’s not in Orochimaru’s building, that Naruto’s the one who left him like this…and then the cold, arctic ice freezing away any further reaction.

“No no no.”

Sasuke’s shut him out so hard, for a moment Naruto’s not even sure where he is.

He runs amok through the building, until finally he finds him. Perfectly composed, Sasuke’s standing on the edge of the roof like fucking spider man, always drawn to the high places of the world.
“Sasuke.”

Sasuke turns his head towards him, face expressionless as bloody Itachi’s, a face not made for human expression. “What do you want?”

Naruto had expected anger, but Sasuke’s voice too is blank. It’s a neutral question, not even rude. He takes a careful step closer to Sasuke. “Why are you up here?”

Sasuke’s disinterested eyes sweep over him and dismiss him. “I’ve always liked heights. You know that.”

“Yeah. But.” He reaches out, to pull Sasuke away from the edge.

Sasuke steps nimbly away from him. Still his voice comes absolutely neutral. “Was there somewhere else you wanted me to be?”

“I’m sorry,” Naruto explodes miserably. “I thought, but – I was wrong. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have left.”

Sasuke blinks. “You got what you needed. Why would you stay?”

Naruto understands then that Orochimaru doesn’t really matter. It’s easy to focus on him, the abuse is so explicit, but the fundamental fissures in Sasuke have very little to do with him.

It was Itachi who got what he needed and left, who gave Sasuke away as if he’d never mattered at all.

The sheer fucking depth of Sasuke’s abandonment issues shouldn’t be a surprise, but it hits him now like one after all. He’d figured that part was fine, Sasuke’s fucking felt Naruto’s hopeless love, experienced the unconditional need from inside Naruto’s own head.

But Sasuke experienced Itachi loving him, once upon a time, and look how that turned out.

It dawns on him, a bleak winter dawn: Sasuke doesn’t trust him, because Sasuke isn’t capable of trusting him.

Rage and nausea twists through his chest, and this fucking desolation. Sasuke’s not fast enough to avoid him this time, and Naruto fists his hands in the front of Sasuke’s jumper.

Twenty hours ago, Sasuke opened his arm to Naruto.

Seven hours ago, he made the fucking angel population of fucking Heaven entreat the Lord God for Naruto’s life.

If Naruto had stayed, then maybe… If, if, if.

“It’s not that I,” he starts. “I had stuff I had to do.”

“I assumed as much.”

Naruto thinks how the last person Sasuke trusted enough to voluntarily fall asleep with sold him like cattle. “Sasuke, don’t fucking be like this. Don’t shut me out.” He starts out rough and ends up weak, a howling wind thinning into a creaking whine.

Sasuke brushes him off, a burning inhuman strength in his hands. The seal clearly is more open, though it’s still savaging his mind. “Like I said, you got what you needed. Don’t touch me again.”
“You wanted space,” Naruto snaps.

“Yes.”

“You were fucking drowning in all this, you’ve been wanting to shut it down from the start!”

“Yes,” Sasuke says again, utterly unruffled.

“Then what the fuck!”

Sasuke’s eyes are so level, so shut down. “Everything’s much clearer now. I see what this is.”

“I love you.”

He’s never actually said that to Sasuke before. Hasn’t needed to, it’s been too obvious for saying. Only now obviously it’s not.

Sasuke smirks at him. He doesn’t have to say: that’s what they all say.

Naruto reaches for him again, has to have him back. The block shifts, a glimpsed opening, and Naruto’s hit with memory, so immersed in it he can’t even see the roof anymore. Orochimaru’s voice tells him he loves him, again and again. And Orochimaru’s…doing things to him. Torture porn, they call it, and it is, it is. Naruto’s been hurt, hurt bad, but never in a body that couldn’t numb and heal, and never with the knowledge that he belonged to this person, that this was his life. This time too Sasuke’s emotions have been edited out, but the sensations come through loud and clear.

“Back off,” Sasuke tells him, still so bloody collected.

“No.”

“Ahh,” Sasuke says, and looks over Naruto’s shoulder. At where, Naruto discovers in too-slow horror movie slow-mo, someone has stepped out onto the roof, presumably to check on them. Sasuke doesn’t even speak. The man just disappears. Vacuumed from the universe, eradicated.

Naruto’s only done that a few times, wiped someone out on a molecular level. Human weapons are more energy-efficient, and under exorcist creed eradicating humans is heresy: and while shifters aren’t technically bound by that, it tends to increase tensions a whole hell of a lot when they don’t abide.

“What the hell!”

“Do you still love me, then?”

“Yes!” Naruto roars, boiling over. “But what the hell, you can’t do that! What the fuck, arsehole!”

Behind him there’s the sound of the door opening again, and Sasuke lifts an eyebrow.

Naruto pushes him as hard as he can. Sasuke topples off the roof.

It never occurs to Naruto that Sasuke won’t air walk, until he doesn’t.

Naruto yells in terror as Sasuke falls and falls. Kyuubi’s hearing doesn’t let him miss the sound of impact when Sasuke hits the ground.

He’s not drawing on Kyuubi either, and Naruto realises too late that he’s not going to, that it’s Naruto who has to force healing energy into Sasuke before his neck snaps completely. By the time
he does, most of Sasuke’s bones are already broken.

Naruto jumps after him, barely feeling the impact snap his legs before Kyuubi’s healed them. Sasuke sits up slowly, his face smeared with mud and blood and still absolutely expressionless.

Naruto jumps him and slugs him. Sasuke ends up on his back in the mud and rotting leaves, staring up at Naruto with blank eyes. Naruto belts him another one.

And another, and another, waiting for Sasuke to hit back.

Kyuubi keeps healing him just enough that he doesn’t die, and Naruto knows Sasuke could throw him off any time, turn this into something mutual.

Sasuke remains lax, face swelling and breaking under Naruto’s punches but unmoved by expression. Eventually, tears start leaking. Strictly pain tears, the sort that form as a biological reaction after a certain pain threshold is exceeded. Sasuke gives no indication of noticing them.

It sets Naruto off too, until they’re a heap of beaten, crying, and in Naruto’s case howling bodies on the ground. Mud has started to leak through his clothes when Sasuke finally pushes him off.

Naruto rolls back on top of him immediately, grabbing the sides of his face. “I love you. You know that, you can feel it.”

“For now.”

“You know shifter bonds are forever.”

Sasuke looks away. Naruto sighs, pressing their foreheads together, tearing at the block until a little bit of it can bleed through, a surge of love that makes Sasuke stiffen.

Intellectually of course Sasuke knows perfectly well that shifter bonds can never be broken. Actually believing it in any meaningful way, that’s another matter.

His voice is still mainly expressionless, though hoarser now. “You’re furious with me.”

Naruto tries a grin, mostly fails. “For now.”

Sasuke makes a non-committal noise, staring past Naruto’s shoulder, up into the cloudy sky.

“I love you,” Naruto insists again. “I love you so much. I’d never –”

“Beat the shit out of me?”

“Um.”

Orochimaru will have never beaten Sasuke this badly, because without Kyuubi’s interference Sasuke would have long since died.

“Fuck me bloody?”

“I – that’s different! Anyway I’d never –” And he searches – shouldn’t have to search at all but searches now for something Orochimaru’s done to Sasuke that Naruto can say with confidence that he would never. “I’d never piss in your face.”

Sasuke’s quiet for a long time before he says, “Get off me, Naruto.”
Naruto rolls off, stays lying next to him. Follows every breath in and out of Sasuke’s chest, transfixed. Finally forces himself into action, up on his feet. Reaches a hand down to Sasuke, “Let’s go find some demons.”

Sasuke gets to his feet under his own steam, walking with Naruto towards the entrance. They’ll need a vehicle, at the very least. Naruto stops just inside the doorway. “Stay here. Don’t kill anyone, okay? Promise? I’ll go find some car keys.”

Sasuke makes no such promise, but there’s no one else here, so it’s probably as safe as it’s going to get.

The good thing about Sasuke shutting down the bond is it means he can’t piggyback Naruto’s shifter hearing. Which lets Naruto fumble for his phone the second he’s out of sight, sagging against the wall when Dad finally picks up. “We have to go. Now. Demons.”

“What’s going on now?”

“We have to go now. He’s gonna kill something, it’s either demons or us. He just wiped Takeshi.”

“I’ll be right there.”

“Maybe we should go alone.”

“Out of the question. You can wait five minutes. I’ll get the men and equipment.”

“Dad, he’s fucking suicidal. He could go nova right here. That’d wipe us all out.”

“It’d still wipe us all even if you left on your own. I’ll be right there.”


Sasuke was not borderline suicidal when he fell asleep this morning, after saving Naruto. If only Naruto had stayed with him, if only Naruto hadn’t been one more person getting what they needed and leaving… Only of course it’s not that simple.

It’s becoming real now, that he’s away from Orochimaru. The seal’s being forced open. And Sasuke still feels like shit, still hates the world and everyone in it and himself.

Naruto has never hated Itachi more.

He’s never hated himself more, either.

He hurries back to the entrance hall, where, horror of horrors, Sakura has appeared. Where Sasuke is systematically awful to her until she runs away crying.

“Arse,” Naruto mutters, jostling his shoulder against Sasuke’s.

Sasuke shrugs, their shoulders jostling further.

Naruto remains close, their clothes touching. “Should I go after her?”

Sasuke makes the most human face he has since yesterday. “She wasn’t…”

“Yeah, I know.” He leans a little closer still, letting their shoulders lean on each other. “I am though. Ride or die.”
Sasuke’s better in the car. Stilly twitchy, moving in rather birdlike, fundamentally inhuman starts and stops, still ready to come out of his skin at the slightest provocation, but better. More grounded, more talkable.

Naruto picks away at the double blocks, pushing love into Sasuke. He’s not trying to censor it anymore, just gives it everything he’s got: this is the insane love, the insatiable love. The kind of love that Sasuke can get a grip on, the love that pushed him off a roof and beat him into the ground, the love that ate his fingers and wants to lick his heart, fuck his soul bloody.

Sasuke’s staring blankly out the window, but when Naruto reaches out – just going to nudge him, touch his knee – a wall cuts him off. Literally. Searing light, flashing in and out of existence, and the better part of his little finger falls on the car seat between them.

Dad looks over rather sharply. “Are you all right for this exorcism, Naruto?”

“Fine,” Naruto says, “He meant for that.” Dad doesn’t seem to understand that that’s a good thing, that the danger was always the unintentional damage. Naruto tips his head back, inspecting the stump. He reckons he’ll have to cut this one too, to let it grow back. “If you wanted a geisha finger, you could’ve just asked.”

Sasuke picks up the severed finger, idly playing with it. “Shisui always did talk a lot of shit.”

It was Shisui who explained about Japanese courtesans of old cutting off their fingers to give away as love tokens. Something irretrievable and irreplaceable, something that could not be bought.

The holy writ changes shape inside Naruto, twisting through his intestines. His pinkie re-grows at the same time Kyuubi washes away the last bruising from Sasuke. Sasuke’s not looking at him as he says, “What’s a foot worth, then?”

“Nothing,” Naruto says, the word steady even as his insides flutter. “You take it by force, it’s not worth anything.”

Sasuke raises an eyebrow at the amputated pinkie. “Guess this is worthless, then.”

Naruto shrugs. “You could’ve had it if you really wanted, but yeah.” Sasuke makes to flick it out the window, and Naruto hears it spill out, a thoughtless question half hope and half absurd insult, “Not gonna eat it?”

Sasuke gives him an especially weird look, still completely ignoring anyone else. Not even actively ignoring, really: they’re just scenery to him. “I’m not a cannibal.”

Heat flashes through Naruto’s gums. He remembers the taste of Sasuke’s blood, of Sasuke’s flesh being swallowed down and merging with his own.

Still he has to grin at Sasuke, who frowns in what is clearly confusion but just looks like a demand. Naruto makes an incoherent gesture, glowing at him. “Cannibalism is eating your own kind.”

When they finally step out of the car, there’s a shitload of people waiting. Dad’s been on the phone almost non-stop, and Naruto spots a lot of news crews, aside from the locals and the human military.
Some kids throw stones at them as they get out of the cars, and Naruto quickly steps in front of Sasuke. It won’t matter anymore if he’s hit, but the memory of that abandoned village, when a simple ricochet brought him down, lurks just under the surface.

“You’re not welcome here!”

It’s not the military yelling, not yet, but it’s a matter of time. Naruto knows from experience that their gun safeties aren’t on.

An answering wall of equally armed shifters is being built around Dad, and by extension Naruto and Sasuke.

“We don’t want another motherfucking shifter here!”

Shikamaru usually calls these encounters *that-escalated-quicklys.*

It stops abruptly and absolutely when Sasuke realises they’re lumping him in with the rest, seeing just another dirty monster. Which makes sense, to Naruto if not to Sasuke: Sasuke’s standing beside Naruto, inside the ring of shifters, and he looks no different from the rest of them.

Naruto has to snort at the incredulous, insulted face he makes.

Someone throws another stone.

Dad’s starts to speak, but his voice dies out in the sudden silence.

Sasuke’s wings are out.

All of Sasuke glows, heavenly light clearly visible just beneath his skin.

Most of the locals fall on their knees.

Some of them, it comes to Naruto, are kneeling with their hands pressed to their faces, smelling of blood and ash. Look directly upon a god you’ve insulted, and you’re liable to get your sight burnt out.

All the same, they’re not screaming now. Their noise, when it comes, is a noise of prayer, hundreds of people chanting in chorus. “Gloria Patri, et Filio, et Spiritui Sancto. Sicut erat in principio…” It’s a very different resonance from the angelic choir that usually echoes Sasuke’s chanting.

“I don’t go back on my word,” Dad says. “I promised you I would help with the demon infestation. This is a problem for all of us, a common enemy. So we agreed we’d tackle it together. And here we are. With a crusader.”

The silver lining to the locals completely slavering over undeserving arsehole exorcists who’ve let them languish as demon food for months, is how they don’t see the look Sasuke directs at Dad.

“Hey,” Naruto says, aiming to distract, but it’s not necessary: there’s no distracting Sasuke from what he came here to do. He steps into the air.

They’ve assembled on the furthest outskirts of one of the central human settlements. The sky is darkening towards dusk.

Naruto quickly ends up on his arse on the ground, the seal on his stomach burning. This is the big magic, and he understands and feels cold around the understanding that Sasuke’s not going to stop, whether Naruto’s seal holds or not.
Someone reaches for him: Naruto waves them off. His attention is on Sasuke, some kind of human torch in the sky.

They were impressed with Ino, he remembers, in that village. Ino dancing through the air, exorcising four demons like it was nothing.

The entire sky around Sasuke is pitch dark now.

There are seven main human settlements in the area, each hassled by demons. All of those demons are here now, whether sensing Sasuke and hurrying to defile him or called by Sasuke. There must be dozens of them.

Naruto knows that’s not going to matter. This is what Sasuke lives for and was made for, the actual reason he exists in the world.

He frowns around that thought, which isn’t really his own – Sasuke exists to be with Naruto, Sasuke exists because he’s Sasuke and necessary, because there couldn’t be a world without him in it – and then can’t think anymore. The seal burns so bad it shines, blinding, through two layers of clothing, and his skin is starting to rupture around it like stitches under pressure.

“Fuck,” he whispers, pressing a hand to his stomach. It comes away bloody and with a faint reflection of the seal design burnt into it.

He’s gritting his teeth, hiding his stomach behind his legs, by the time Sasuke finishes up. It can’t have been twenty minutes but it’s like a paradigm shift when Sasuke sets foot on the ground again, like there should be an earthquake shattering under his step.

People part for him like the Red Sea for Moses, until he’s in front of Naruto, and Naruto can breathe out the last of the tension, wipe his hands on his trousers. The seal burnt and bled, but ultimately it held.

Dad’s already turning with alacrity towards approaching cameras and humans leaders, but slants a quick glance Naruto’s way. “You’re hurt. Go home. You both should.”

Obviously Dad won’t want Sasuke here to fuck up the good impression. There’s no doubt Sasuke realises this, but then Sasuke has no actual desire to be here, so it doesn’t matter.

Raidou helps Naruto to his feet, and they walk with Sasuke towards the closest car.

The reporters are far more interested in Sasuke than in Dad, but Sasuke ignores them completely. He’s good at it too, seeming genuinely unaware of them the same way people are genuinely unaware of ants on the ground where they step. He climbs into the van without a word, and Naruto hurries after him. Finds Sasuke curled comfortably next to the tinted window, and whatever his other reservations, Sasuke’s consistently been very tactile when Naruto’s been hurt, so Naruto sits down next to him, so close their arms touch, and – Sasuke’s glare freezes him in place, until Sasuke hand pushes him away. “I said you got what you needed. Don’t touch me.”

“What the fuck? I’m…”

“You’ll heal. I’m going to sleep. If you touch me I’m burning your dick off.”
All night, after Sasuke’s closed his door quietly and all the more finally for it in Naruto’s face, Kyuubi tortures and tempts him with flashback dreams of fucking Sasuke. The ten or so hours Naruto lost, returned to him in tantalising glimpses of Sasuke and more Sasuke, a glittering shower of glass shards through his mind.

So it doesn’t seem real at first, when he wakes up to Sasuke shaking him. Sasuke’s fingers are steady and unhesitant around Naruto’s shoulder, his face pale but surprisingly not sleepy. “Konohamaru and Kushina are alive, and your grandparents. The Hokage building’s been bombed to pieces. Eighty dead and counting.”

Naruto sits up so fast, his stomach flips. Sasuke mutely hands him a phone.

It comes to him, an astonishing gift in the midst of this ghastly morning, what they have managed to build between them after all: he let Sasuke down, and Sasuke’s upset with him, but Sasuke still came to him, they can still work together.

The headlines about Sasuke cleansing the northern human settlements, about Dad apparently reaching some armistice agreement with them, are almost a mockery next to the ones about the bombing. BEAST’s claiming responsibility, but there’s no way a purely human operation could do this much damage.

Sasuke sits down next to him, reading over his shoulder. “Orochimaru.”

“Yeah,” Naruto breathes out. “He needs to die.”

Sasuke makes a non-committal sound. “The official exorcist line is condemnation of the attack.” There’s an interview with Sasuke’s mother saying exactly that. BEAST is an extremist fringe group, and the exorcist community utterly condemns any attack on civilian targets…

“This was about me,” Sasuke says.

“Yeah,” Naruto agrees. “I reckon so.” He starts calling Kushina, to get an updated list of injured, dead.

They’re wrapping up the conversation, Kushina’s stiff upper lip voice increasingly distracted, when Sasuke’s phone rings.

Sasuke’s taken the call, has listened for maybe forty seconds, when Naruto catches on that it’s Orochimaru. He can’t get a grip on how Sasuke feels about it: Sasuke’s shut himself off from that.

Physically Sasuke remains placid and untouched: there’s no telltale stiffening, no change in his posture.

Still he’s tightening up, drawn taut on the inside.

Naruto takes hold of the phone, just lightly, in a sort of offer. Sasuke withdraws from him. The call lasts maybe two minutes from start to finish. The whole time, Sasuke doesn’t say a word.

When he finally puts the phone down, Naruto can barely contain himself.

Sasuke shrugs. “Nothing useful.”
Naruto pushes his arm lightly against Sasuke’s, and then less lightly, but Sasuke’s all right.

Naruto reminds himself that Sasuke’s spent years handing Orochimaru face to face, and kicks the duvet off his legs. “I need to get a handle on this.”

Sasuke nods, but then reaches out, catching Naruto’s wrist, looking at him only when Naruto’s frozen and then sunk back down on the bed.


“Of course not. You were – you felt awful!”

Sasuke’s face is searching. “But you wanted me to react.”

“Yeah,” Naruto has to admit. “I wanted you to be – miffed. Not… not like how you felt. I never want to make you feel like that.”

“Even if you take it as proof that you could – if it let you think you can affect me?”

“I’m never going to be happy about making you feel like shit!”

Sasuke makes a low thoughtful sound. “Orochimaru was.” Then, even quieter: “Kakashi was.”

“I’m not,” Naruto tells him, as forcefully as he can. He has nothing to offer but this belief.

Sasuke gives him a speculative look before nodding. Then he shrugs, “Go get a grip on this mess.”

When Naruto’s left, he picks his phone back up.

Neji picks up on the fourth ring. Neji, really, has never been half as good at ignoring people as he pretends to be. “I’m in the middle of something.”

“You’re in the middle of talking to me,” Sasuke agrees dryly.

He can hear Neji opening and closing a door. “Did you really exorcise for them?”

Sasuke snorts. “Exorcising demons is our sacred duty, in case you forgot.”

“Yes,” Neji says impatiently, “but it’s hardly…”

“But that’s not why, is it? It’s because he heard about the wings.”

Neji swallows. “Yes,” he says again. “Someone sent a tape. You had wings all the way through the stratosphere and there wasn’t a single demon around.” He sighs, yielding: “Of course everyone knows Orochimaru’s behind it, but it’s not acknowledged. The condemnation is perfectly real, though. Nobody’s pushing for war.”

Sasuke’s never been worth a war – except to Naruto, and in his case that sentiment can’t be disentangled from Naruto’s own life being worth a war to Naruto.

At long last, into the silence settling between them, Neji says, “Your seal.”

“Let’s not pretend this is a private conversation.”

“It could be.” Neji breathes in quickly. “It could be just the two of us.”

“Neji,” Sasuke sighs. “Do you remember that time someone started opening my door, and you rolled
under the bed rather than be caught in it? You’re not prioritising me over anyone.”

“It’s different for you,” Neji says after some time. “You’ve already been discarded. I haven’t.”

“Yeah,” Sasuke says. “I’ve always been ahead of you.”

Neji makes a soft hissing sound. “I wasn’t going to lose everything for some fling that didn’t even matter to you, when you don’t care about it. If you did…”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“You think I’m lying to you.” Again Neji’s adopted this usual condescending shrink voice. If Sasuke hadn’t grown up with Itachi, with Kakashi, with Orochimaru, he might have found it annoying. His life has just been filled with too many people to whom Neji can never compare.

“I think you’re lying to yourself, but whatever.”

“Sasuke…”

“Thanks.”

He cuts the line before he says anything else. That thanks is what Kakashi would call stringing someone along, would claim he learnt from Orochimaru: to keep people available, should he need them for something.

It makes Sasuke want to call back and cut Neji to pieces.

Instead he opens a text message. I’m sorry I hurt you. But it’s better this way. I would have hurt you worse if you stayed.

It’s a trite and insufficient message, and it’s the first time in years he’s being honest with Sakura.

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Shikamaru is privately quite satisfied that Minato failed to return after the exorcism. Apparently he flew directly from the negotiations to the capital, and now with the terrorist attack he won’t be back for the foreseeable future.

Which means Naruto’s running this show. Which means Shikamaru’s in the damn show.

Minato’s called, and apparently doesn’t realise that Naruto’s put him on speaker. Naruto’s not fool enough to do it in a crowd, but the general meetings are taken care of and now there’s just Naruto and Shikamaru in the room.

Rather, just Naruto and Shikamaru and Sasuke, going by Naruto’s sudden blinding grin. Naruto’s eyes always find Sasuke the same way air finds his lungs, automatic and necessary. However, Shikamaru’s pleased to note that he doesn’t stop talking. “Yes, Dad, I can handle Sasuke. No, seriously, did it look like a hard sell to you, getting him to exorcise? No, exactly. We’ve got this. I’ll take care of Rock.” He puts the phone down with a sigh, but sounds mostly happy. “We will, right?”

“Sure,” Sasuke says. “I can do it right now.”

“I want to do it,” Naruto starts.

“That’s not happening.”
“Yeah, it’s – we’re in a hurry, now’s not a good time. I get that.”

“Are we going?”

“Tonight. I’m thinking tonight, then we can all sleep on the way there and we’ll arrive around noon.”

“Fair enough.”

Naruto sinks into the desk chair, letting it spin him around and around. “I’m thinking how to play it. They – I mean, they fucking hate you. Maybe enough they won’t even want the exorcism.”

Sasuke lifts an eyebrow, closing the door behind him. “That’s not their call.”

“No it’s not. They just – Rock’s a pretty damn pro-shifter faction. You know, Gaara style pro-shifter. And with Mist Town, you really won’t go over well.”

Gaara style pro-shifter, Shikamaru thinks. Well, Sasuke clearly knows what he means, saying, “If they’ve got any human mates locked up there –”

“Then we’re setting them free,” Naruto cuts him off. “Obviously.”

“Obviously – ” Sasuke starts.

Again Naruto cuts him off, spinning faster and faster. “I didn’t even let Gaara do that for Kankurou. You don’t put people in cages. You can’t just – take someone as your slave and live at their expense. It’s wrong and I won’t have it.”

Sasuke’s eyebrow climbs back up his forehead.

Naruto makes an impatient, cut-off gesture, chair finally slowing down. “You’re here of your own will. You could incinerate me any time, you might not have great options if you leave but you’re choosing to be here. It’s not the same as chaining some human girl up in a cage and forcing her to –”

He cuts himself off there. Don’t speak ill of the dead, particularly the ones you’ve killed.

Kankurou needed the girl, and Gaara’s never had much time for humans. Doesn’t feel they should be given a choice, in these matters: if someone dies when you don’t, you fucking well put out, or you’ll be made to. So Gaara went and got her, and Kankurou… well, Kankurou lived. For a while.

It was Naruto who couldn’t stand it.

So it was Naruto who let her out. Broke her chains so easily with his fingers, and then he was just turning around, just going to open the cage door all the way, and turned back to splatter all across his face. The chains had broken into sharp, ragged ends: sharp enough to slit a throat with. And she was dead, and he stared at her dumbly, and he knew Kankurou was dead too.

Gaara will never forgive him this, that he cost Gaara’s brother his life.

“I was saying,” Sasuke says, “that if they’ve got any human mates imprisoned, obviously I haven’t seen anything.” He pauses. “I’m not surprised you’d want them treated well, aside from the raping, but – your people die if they don’t. Why should they, just because some human doesn’t fancy them?”

“Because,” Naruto snaps furiously, “it’s wrong.”

“It’s not actually a fate worse than death.”
“You can’t expect me to believe for a second that you’d let some random shifter assault you and live.”

“Of course not,” Sasuke snaps back. “Obviously I would’ve killed them. But I would’ve understood.”

“It’s difficult,” Naruto says, almost whispering now. “I – I don’t think you should get to turn someone down without even meeting them. You should have to see them, you should have to say it to their fucking face if you’re making them die. And it should be legal to offer incentives. It’s gross, but…”

Some places do allow financial incentives. Most don’t.

Very, very few have it written into law that a prospective human mate must at least meet the matesick shifter face to face, though it’s not uncommon for social services to recommend it regardless.

But most shifters never bother with the authorities. A lot of humans do agree, out of sympathy or honest attraction. A lot don’t. Some get mated without ever understanding that that what’s happened. A lot get raped, one way or another.

Naruto’s head hangs, “And if – if they say no and you’re gonna do it anyway, you could at least have the fucking decency to make sure they’re unconscious. There’s no reason they should have to experience it.”

Sasuke snorts. “Never thought I’d hear you advocating date rape.”

Naruto’s head snaps up. “I’m not! But it’s… Knowing it’s happened and actually feeling it happen, that’s not the same. They both suck but not on anything like the same level.” He must have genuinely forgotten that Shikamaru’s here, because he continues, “Knowing about Orochimaru, even seeing – it was so fucking horrible, but feeling what he did, that’s another order of magnitude. Or – or, technically that didn’t happen to me, but… seeing someone shoot me, or cut off bits, when I’m so merged with Kyuubi I can’t feel it, that’s pretty bloody different from experiencing it when I feel how fucking much it hurts.”

Sasuke shrugs. “You’re not wrong.”

“I’m never wrong.” His entire body’s straining towards Sasuke, less moth to flame than iron drawn to a magnet, but he stays in the chair.

“Hn,” Sasuke says. Shikamaru’s about to interrupt this touching scene when he adds, “What I came to tell you. We’ve got a rat.”

Naruto snaps to attention.

Sasuke fiddles with his phone, then hands it to Naruto. “Neji sent me the photos he had access to. They must’ve been taken from inside the grounds.”

Shikamaru angles his head to look, and Naruto obediently tilts the phone. One shot of the house, from relatively close up, with the wings like an unfocused halo of light around it. Another shot, of Naruto kneeling over Sasuke with his hands fisted in Sasuke’s shirt, right in the mud and rotting leaves. Sasuke’s jaw hangs loose, angled strangely: obviously broken.


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“I’m sorry,” Shizuo says. “He took – he has Makoto. I didn’t have – I felt I didn’t have a choice.”

“I get that,” Naruto says. It’s not forgivable and it’s not mendable, but it is understandable. Shizuo’s nobody, which is why Orochimaru could pick up his mate without it apparently being noticed: which means Shizuo doesn’t have any meaningful information to betray. “Do you regret it?”

“I regret that I had to do it.”

Sasuke lifts a negligent hand. Shizuo’s edges blur with terrible light, his outlines fading.

“Stop!” Naruto barks, and Sasuke turns towards him in question, Shizuo’s wiping put on pause. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Disposing of him.”

“We’re not doing that.” He rubs at his face, trying to rub away weariness and betrayal and anger. “Look. He fucked up. But if we kill him, his mate’ll die too. We won’t get any more use out of him, and it’ll alert Orochimaru that we know what he’s been up to.”

“He’s not useful either way. But he’s your concern.”

The light goes out, and Shizuo falls to his knees. “I didn’t… I didn’t send any of the photos where you’re actually hitting him.”

Naruto looks at him in what’s maybe sadness and maybe disgust, everything muddled and no time to sort it out. “You’ve got a lot of trust to earn back.”

Shizuo nods. Seems honest about this, liar though he is. “I understand. For one of us, I would’ve never – I would’ve sacrificed, but for some exorcist wh–”

Just for a second, Naruto thinks: we can’t abide this kid of untrustworthiness. He has to be disposed of.

It was just for a second. He wasn’t going to do anything with the thought.

Just a second, and Shizou is dust to dust, ashes to ashes.

He stares at Sasuke and wants to pretend that this was about Sasuke being insulted, but Sasuke’s heard worse his whole life from people he once loved, and genuinely doesn’t care what some lowlife shifter thinks of him. This was Sasuke acting on Naruto’s impulse, Naruto’s careless thought.

“What the hell, bastard!” Naruto yells at him. “I didn’t mean it!”

“You meant it.”

“I didn’t mean it to be acted on!”

Sasuke shrugs. “More fool you.”

“I should’ve at least tried to get Makoto out. Shizuo needed to be made an example of, but not like this, and Makoto’s never done anything wrong.”

“Isn’t it so vexing,” Sasuke drawls, in an almost flawless imitation of Orochimaru’s tones, “when someone takes what’s yours?”

“That’s different.”
“How?”

Naruto knows it is, knows it down to the marrow of his bones, but can’t articulate it, can’t come up with anything better than, “Because you’re mine, bastard.”

Sasuke raises an unimpressed brow, but surprisingly doesn’t argue.

Naruto thinks for a black moment what Konohamaru would say if he saw this, how he would react to Naruto basically shrugging off the murder of a traitor comrade.

“We gotta go handle Rock. I need that to work, okay? None of this bullshit.”

Sasuke gives an impatient sigh. “I know how to prop someone.”

Naruto remains privately unconvinced, but Sasuke clearly believes it. Which is, honestly, more than he’d counted on getting at this point.

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Temari leans back in her seat, stretching out her legs. Shikamaru grumbles in his sleep, drooling on her shoulder.

Naruto’s still awake, the yawning, glowing centre of attention at the far end of the bus. With Sasuke chained to his mind, he might be more aware of it now – how people gravitate towards him, how he takes charge of them – but there’s no visible sign of it. He laughs briefly at something Kiba says, shoots of instructions to Raidou, then falls back into contemplation, expressions chasing each other like foxes across his face.

Beside him, Sasuke’s fallen asleep with forehead pressed to Naruto’s arm. He either doesn’t notice or isn’t bothered by the thick tail wrapped around his neck.

Naruto glances at him every now and then, hopelessly smitten, but his eyes remain rather shadowed.

Temari wouldn’t have expected him to find the spy so soon, or to dispose of him so soon.

But then, she never expected Sasuke, either.

And now, Rock.

She’d have liked more of a plan, but Naruto never manages these things except by winging them. Anyway it won’t be the first time they do Good Cop/Bad Cop – only now, with Rock and their rather extremist pro-shifter stance, for the first time she imagines she’ll be Good Cop. Strategically, for that, they really ought to have brought in Gaara.

But Gaara cannot abide Sasuke, and whether Rock likes it or not they need the demons gone, which means they need Sasuke present and at least minimally cooperative.

Naruto blames it on Mist Town, Gaara’s animosity, but Mist Town to Gaara’s mind was necessary casualties. If you’re too weak to defend yourself, and too dumb to stay out of the way of your betters, then you die. He alone of any shifter she’s ever spoken to has never breathed a word of dislike over the massacre.

Gaara’s hated Sasuke since preschool, since the first day Sasuke transferred into their class and Naruto laid eyes on him – since Sasuke appeared and casually picked up Gaara’s most treasured possession, scooping it up so easily, as if it never occurred to him that it had belonged to someone
else, had been Gaara’s and necessary.

She said it to him plainly only once, that Sasuke hadn’t stolen it from him because it had never been Gaara’s in the first place.

Naruto belonged to himself, until he belonged to Sasuke.

But Gaara needs to think otherwise to make it through without snapping, and nobody wants him to snap.

She remembers Sakura, of all the stupid humans, saying once, quoting of course because she’s never been confident enough to find her own words – saying how Naruto never had that emotional grounding, had any sense of where to stop with love… you can just fall into it without knowing whether you’re loved back or caring that it’s dangerous or – or ever stopping… that kind of passion is terrifying.

Well, Naruto’s crazy. That’s hardly news.

She’s still watching him as they disembark. Naruto stretches, childish with sleepiness, still too short to reach the bus ceiling.

Minato likes to do the ostentatious thing and walk into these things unarmed, but Minato honestly hasn’t had much luck with Rock. Perhaps, she thinks, because Minato’s an adult, and used to dealing with adults: with people who compromise and get tired, people who have left their ideals behind.

Shino Aburame greets them heavily armed and flanked by likewise heavily armed advisors and guards. Naruto offers a shit eating grin and makes no effort to hide his own weaponry. It’s not much, but then Naruto doesn’t need much. Kyuubi’s energy pulses visibly under his skin, and, perhaps more importantly, Sasuke sticks as close to him as his shadow.

Shino snorts. “Him of all people.”


He’s not dressed for the weather, in a dark jumper but no jacket. It’s maybe foresight, that jumper, because Naruto usually wears colour, but colour won’t hide the blood if the seal starts to rupture.

Even from here, the defence lines are plainly visible. Concrete walls and barbed wire, tanks and troops for protection against the humans. Energy canons and DEW bombs and holy writ against the demons.

So they must have got at least one exorcist up here, at some point, to set that up.

Shino notices her glance – and, more significantly, Sasuke’s glance. “Yeah,” he says. “There was an exorcist came up here. Didn’t want to help us out at first, said she was just sent for the humans. But hey, we’ve got lots more of them coming at us. So we persuaded her.” He shrugs. “She didn’t last though.”

“So you fed them an exorcist,” Naruto says. “That’s fucking stupid.”

Shino shrugs again, more defensive now. “She took out some of them.”

“Yeah, and the one who ate her will be ten times stronger, minimum. Fucking stupid.”

Shino looks past Naruto at Sasuke. “You’re not upset?”
“Tenten had no business being here.”

“It was your Crusader Council sent her.”

And Shino is so very lucky that they did, Temari thinks, because the Council considered sending Hanabi Hyuuga, and if these amateurs had dared approached her, this whole settlement would have been dust and ashes. Tenten was weak, was a nobody exorcist, and couldn’t have wiped a powerful shifter. Couldn’t have held out against more than ten demons, maximum. Hanabi on the other hand is a prodigy crusader, a true child of Heaven, and would have exterminated the Rock population like vermin.

Sasuke shrugs. “She did her duty, until she failed. Then she died. That’s how it is.”

Shino lifts an eyebrow. “Fair enough. Do let’s go inside.”

They end up in a rough-hewn room. Unlike most dictators, Shino apparently enjoys the Spartan style.

Naruto reaches eagerly for a hot drink, slouching comfortably in his chair. And Sasuke – she does a double take, sees Naruto stiffen as he clearly notices too. I know how to prop someone, Sasuke reportedly said, and it seems he actually does. His posture, his entire way of being, of looking at Naruto, establishes him as belonging to Naruto: establishes Naruto as being in charge of him.

It makes more of a difference than she’d counted on, even though she saw what happened in the infirmary after Naruto had cut off his hand and Sasuke was drained. Naruto the Hokage’s love child, Naruto the successful warrior, is one thing. Naruto the keeper of a crusader, that’s on a different level. She knows what it’s done for Minato over the years, having Kakashi at his beck and call.

“I’m presuming,” Shino says after a moment, “that you’re authorised to speak for Minato Namikaze.”

“Yeah,” Naruto says with a fairly friendly smile baring all his teeth. “Sorry you missed out on the real thing.”

“Not at all. Actually, I think I’d rather have you.”

“Huh,” Naruto says. “Can’t say I was expecting to hear that.”

“Minato Namikaze,” Shino continues, as though Naruto hadn’t spoken, “endangered his pack for the sake of a human diversion.”

“Shut the fuck up about my mother.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Temari cuts in, before they start tussling on the table. “Right or wrong, it won’t happen again. She’s already dead, it’s pointless talking about it.”

“Kushina’s been good for him,” Shino agrees.

“Kushina,” Temari replies, “has signed an agreement with the human government to hand over beastmad shifters. You don’t keep yours in line, she’s not going to stand in the way of the humans putting them down.”

“You agree with that policy?” Shino demands of Naruto. Then, to her, “Does your brother?”

“Gaara’s a private citizen. His opinions are his alone and representative of no one else.”
“I do,” Naruto says. “If you can’t control your beast, someone else has to. I’d prefer it be us, but if you let them run amok, then it’ll be the humans.”

“What did they give you for that?”

“Nothing. Well, nothing I know of. But they didn’t have to? We agreed. Fuck, Shino, it was Anko represented the humans in that negotiation.”

“Anko is a race traitor.”

Naruto snorts. “Say that to her face.”

Shino’s expression suggests that he is unwilling to do this.

Anko Mitarashi, mated to Hayate. Involved for ten years now, more, with Ibiki Morino, strong man of the human government. If it were anyone but Anko, Temari would think, daddy issues. Morino’s over sixty and Anko’s just about half his age. Of course, Anko never knew her father, or her mother either.

More importantly, Anko’s the ultimate, unacknowledged reason that there was a three-way peace, seven years ago: that the civil war didn’t end with the humans banding together with the exorcists to exterminate the shifter population once and for all. Temari has never admired anyone more. The only time she’s felt any sort of connection with an exorcist was at a function two years ago, catching Hanabi Hyuuga looking at Anko the same way Temari herself did: tongue-tied, love-struck.

That was certainly a level of taboo she would’ve never expected from a Hyuuga princess. Recalls Kushina quoting Sasuke’s mother: Sasuke allowed himself to be defiled by a beast. If he’d still been part of our family when this occurred – well, he would not have been anymore. This sort of moral failure is simply…it cannot be countenanced.

“Let’s cut to the chase,” Naruto says. “Hayate tells me you think we should help you out with this demon situation. I agree. So here with are.” He nods at Sasuke. “Bringing the cavalry.”

Shino lifts his eyebrows. “Can you control him?”

Naruto cups his hand around the back of Sasuke’s neck, proprietary and warning. “Let’s find out.”

“I’m not worried,” Shino says, slouching back in his chair. “I have to say, Tenten disabused me of the notion of exorcists as the hand of God upon this earth.” He snorts. “She tried to wipe me, you know. Couldn’t defeat my beast.”

Sasuke doesn’t move, but Shino starts to glow. Naruto’s hand tightens on Sasuke’s neck, thank God, because a humiliated Shino Aburame would be a nightmare to deal with. “Not him, Sasuke.”

Sasuke relents. The ten people closest to Shino, flanking him, are encased in heavenly light instead, instantly half erased. “Enough,” Naruto says, and after a long, tense moment Sasuke releases them. “As you can see, we’ve got a little more firepower than Tenten could bring. Which you knew. You must’ve seen the news from when he cleansed the human settlements.”

“Let’s say I’m convinced he could be useful. Why would you help the humans?”

“They shouldn’t be our enemies. The demons are.”

Shino makes an unconvinced sound, but he must be aware that this is the majority view, that there’s preciously little support for considering the humans an enemy by principle rather than by necessity,
and no possible way for a small shifter settlement to survive, should the humans turn on it in earnest.

“Things can’t go on as they are,” Shino says.

“No,” Naruto agrees. “But hanging out up here fighting with everyone and getting decimated, that’s not changing anything. If you want something better, you have to work for it.”

“Work with you? You don’t share our beliefs.”

“So convince me.”

They’re both leaning forward over the table now, and startle when Shino’s phone goes off. “Shit. Incoming.”

Naruto stands up with the rest of them, calm in the sudden frantic chaos. “Sasuke?”

Sasuke nods.

“Don’t be a fool,” Shino says, gesturing his people towards the defence lines. A flick of Naruto’s fingers, and most of theirs join them. “This many demons…” And indeed the sky above is blacker than night, a darkness that goes beyond mere absence of light. “There’s no exorcist could handle this alone.” He turns to Sasuke. “Did you call them? Because maybe Itachi could take them, but his failure little brother? There’s no way.”

“Shut up, Shino,” Naruto says absently, and Shino amazingly does.

Sasuke looks…hungry. He looks like Kyuubi.

“You look after him,” he orders Temari. “If any of them hurts a hair on his head while I’m gone, I will turn this place into purgatory.” Naruto looks both insulted and flattered, which Sasuke ignores. “Mist Town will seem a minor incident, do I make myself clear?”

“I’ll take care of it,” she says. This is quicker than pointing out how absurd he’s being: Naruto can take care of himself.

But gradually she understands what he meant. Sasuke ascends and leads the demons away, until there’s no point in the ground level defences, the guards standing by them on principle alone. His wings erupt in unearthly light, and Naruto, his face an ashen green-grey, would have sunk to the ground if Kiba hadn’t slipped a quick arm around him, taking his weight. The black jumper might hide blood, but it can’t hide the brightness of the mark, the angel seal shining through skin and fabric.

“Shit. Let’s get him somewhere he can lie down.”

“I’m fine,” Naruto protests. “I want to see.”

But there’s not much to see: a sky of snarling darkness, evil made manifest but not exactly corporeal, and Sasuke in the middle of it, an exterminating, inhuman light. Uriel’s wings burn against her retinas, extending up and out far beyond where a mundane eye can follow.

“This way,” Shino says, and Kiba drags Naruto along until they’re in an empty room with thick carpeting to lay him out on.

Shino stares out through the window. “So he really is a crusader.”

“Heh, yeah,” Naruto says, pride in his voice but his face all scrunched up with pain, sweat dripping off him.
“Does this happen to you every time?”

“Nah. But – ah God – you try keeping a released archangel from exorcising you when he’s – fuck, fuck – inside your head. I just need to, ah, learn to shield a little better, and we’ll be great.”

“I didn’t promise you anything in exchange for this.”

“We were gonna do it regardless,” Naruto tells him, and then can’t speak for some time.

Sometimes he seems to be having a seizure. Temari holds his head then, so he can’t trash it against the floor. Kiba gets his legs, and Shino after a moment grabs his arms.

Sometimes he can talk, and does. “It’s like this. Coopering, it’s not easy and it fucking hurts. But you can get things done that wouldn’t be possible otherwise. So you get used to it, and it’s worth it. You arrive somewhere you could never reach on your own.” The words seem less like a platitude, now that Naruto’s visibly, physically acting them out in front of them.

And then suddenly, the mark of death. Black smoke writhing over Naruto’s face, trapped underneath his skin. Kakashi, she knows, carries this mark of actual evil under his skin, a stain like tar twisting across the lower half of his face and down his neck. Gabriel saves his life, purified him of much of the demon taint that at first covered his whole body, but cannot fully cleanse him. A demon injury, which will rot Naruto’s soul from the inside, unhealable and always, always lethal.

Unhealable to Kyuubi, she amends, seeing the orange energy rage and then quickly fade around Naruto. Not unhealable to Uriel.

Naruto’s pallor worsens, from grey to actual white, a glowing, shining white like starlight moving under his skin. The blackness is gone, erased from him.

Naruto laughs shakily. “I guess he does care.”

“He was hurt, wasn’t he?”

Naruto nods, lips closed tightly around what she suspects is an imminent bout of projectile vomiting. “He’ll be fine.”

“He’d better.”
When Sasuke returns, the settlement is hushed. Most of Rock knows better, now, than to hiss at him. He walks stiffly, almost staggering, rather living up to that childhood nickname: scarecrow prince. Small and angular and dressed in black, he’s reminiscent of nothing so much as a baby crow, not quite ready to leave the nest but pushed out now after all. That too is something Orochimaru called him: tobenai tenshi.

Most of Rock knows better. Naruto struggles desperately to get to his feet as some traitor arsehole tries to wipe Sasuke, his outline momentarily blurring. These are strong shifters, and many shifters, and Sasuke’s so exhausted, he actually makes the sign of the cross to reinforce his will when eradicating his attacker.

“Enough,” Shino says. “The demons are gone. He’s served us well in this.” He reaches down to pull Naruto to his feet and then keeps hold of his hand, shakes it. “Let’s speak more later, you and I. Madoka, secure the perimeter. Asahi, show our guests to their accommodations.”

“Kiba,” Naruto says. “Take some of the guys and help them out. We want everyone safe too.”

Kiba nods, and Shino makes no objection. They’ve got this, and finally, finally, he can grab hold of Sasuke, fall into him.

“Stand up,” Sasuke says in his ear, in that inhuman voice that stings and sizzles.

Even afterwards, when they’re in a locked room and Naruto collapses on the bed, Sasuke remains quite inhuman.

“What the hell were you doing?” Naruto demands, voice slurring with past-injury exhaustion.

Sasuke lifts an eyebrow. “Exorcising.”

“No, before that. You were – so strange.”

Sasuke makes a far more human and rather uncomfortable face. “I told you I know how to sub.”

“Never do that again. That’s not who you are. That’s not who we are!”

Sasuke shrugs. “It worked, didn’t it.”

“You didn’t need to do that. I could have got them to come around on my own.”

“You need time for that,” Sasuke tells him. “Now you have it.”

“He’s right,” Shikamaru interjects. “Let them find out what your partnership is really like after they’ve agreed to merge. Like how we’ll check for involuntary human mates and beastmad guards after, when they can’t back out anymore.”

It’ll take some adjusting, integrating Rock, but they’re on the right track now. Shino said, You’ve acted in good faith. I’d like to do the same.

Sasuke shares a look with Temari, and she briskly grabs Shikamaru’s arm, closing the door behind them.

Naruto’s lost the ability to blink, can’t miss the possibility of an expression dawning on Sasuke’s
face. Because reasonably this means – but it can’t mean – but Sasuke takes off his clothes. He does this quickly and efficiently, with nothing showy about it. Leaves the clothes on the floor and lies down on his stomach next to Naruto.

“You can go ahead.”

“What are you doing?” Naruto’s voice comes more breathless than he’d like, around the memory of, *You got what you needed. Don’t touch me again.* “Mixed signals, seriously, look it up.”

Sasuke slants a look at him over his shoulder, eyes slitted with what might be tiredness or crankiness. Definitely not with lust.

He’s scrawny and pale, a different sort of pale from Sakura’s, tinting gold rather than pink. Naruto rests a hand on his shoulder blade, tracing the ridge where the wings attach.

“You’ll regain your energy and heal. By proxy so will I.”

“Mmh. Or we could sleep,” Naruto says, leaning over to kiss the edge of Sasuke’s shoulder. “This hot and cold thing is getting insane.”

“This is no place to be vulnerable.”

He traces the long line of Sasuke’s spine, up over his neck and into his hair. Down across the slope of his back, to the very edge of his arse. “You really don’t like it here.”

“They killed an exorcist.”

“You knew an exorcist?”

Sasuke makes an impatient sound. “Exorcists are a valuable resource. They’re not to be wasted, especially in a way that strengthens demons.” He pushes his fringe out of his face, and when it falls back Naruto takes over, fingering it behind his ear. “The only way to avoid them eating you when they kill you is to go nova, and they didn’t even give her time to do that. It’s ridiculous. They must have realised she’d be no good – any exorcist who couldn’t even wipe a few shifters would be worthless against this kind of demon infestation.”

Naruto sighs, resting his face against the back of Sasuke’s shoulder. “They did the best they could.”

“If you get them in line, they’ll be useful. If not, I’m cleansing them.”

“They’ll be part of us. A good part. A strong part.”

He plays with Sasuke’s hair, kissing his neck. There’s no pretending his cock’s not already engorged. “You could ride me.”

“No.”

“Mmh. Why not, though? It’d be really hot. I mean, if you were serious about…”

“Don’t like it.”

“Okay,” Naruto says. Thinks how it’s a convenient position when someone as short as Sasuke is getting fucked by someone massively taller, which is most people, and how it’s such an exposed position. Your face, your body, your dick, all visible. But it’s condescending and stupid to reduce all of Sasuke’s sexual preferences to conjectures about what Orochimaru has and hasn’t liked to do with him.
Sasuke tilts his head to look at him again. “What?”

“You said not to touch you. You didn’t want…”

Sasuke sighs, resting his head on his arms. “I’m half asleep. I won’t have to feel it much.”

“Yeah, that’s not really turning me on.”

Sasuke shifts until his elbow is poking quite sharply at Naruto’s dick. “Uh huh.”

“I’m not some kind of animal in heat. Just because I get hard just thinking about you doesn’t mean –”

“I want the seal more open before we return to the capital. So I want you biting. That’ll end in fucking anyway.”

Naruto makes a soft sound, not quite a sigh. Breathes into Sasuke’s pores. “I want you to want it.”

“This is what you can have,” Sasuke says with finality, eyelids descending. “Take it or leave it.”

Naruto rests his forehead against Sasuke’s shoulder blades. “We both know I’m not leaving.”

Sasuke grunts, then falls silent. Not asleep, but not really awake either. Naruto might have joined him after all, only he’s healed enough now for Kyuubi to pay attention again, and the sight of Sasuke stretched out naked for him has Kyuubi exploding with want. Naruto pushes that down, draws on the incantations Sasuke left inside him to suppress the violent urge to pounce.

With Sasuke pliant for once, Naruto can take his time. He nuzzles down Sasuke’s spine, dragging his hands up and down his sides. There’s a lot of bone just under the skin, which is so soft, the kind of softness that Naruto, who’s never touched silk, thinks of as silky. Orochimaru has obviously been careful not to leave scars, though some of the bones are a bit off, have been broken bad and healed wrong.

Kyuubi purrs, a low humming vibrating in Naruto’s throat. He kisses Sasuke’s neck and shoulders, sensitive places, his hands kneading Sasuke’s thighs, rubbing along the edge of his buttocks. For a long, long time in this strange room, in broad daylight that lets him see everything, he strokes softly over Sasuke’s back and arse and thighs and tells himself that this is trust: the closest to trust that Sasuke can come.

He’s licking behind Sasuke’s ear, smirking about tracing his name again and again across the small of Sasuke’s back, when Kyuubi starts pushing out tails. They slither over Sasuke’s skin, teasing underneath it. Kyuubi purrs even louder: the only part he doesn’t like is Sasuke’s left foot. The place where, about halfway down his shin, Sasuke’s leg just ends. The metal pole stuck to the stump in no way resembles a human limb, and really just emphasizes the impression of loss, of something missing. It makes Kyuubi hiss and spit, and the holy writing on it doesn’t help.

Distracted, he’s let one of the tails slip up over Sasuke’s arse. He can’t find the motivation now to stop it sliding inside.

Sasuke sighs, not objecting, and Naruto reaches for the tin of weapons grease stashed under the bed. It’s thick and greasy on his fingers, which he guesses means it’s good. Also fitting, because Sasuke’s beauty is the beauty of a really good blade.

He rubs a slick fingertip over the cleft of Sasuke’s arse. Hasn’t ever actually done this before, but it’s hardly rocket science. Watching it slip inside, feeling how fucking tight Sasuke is around it – he palms himself before he forgets, slathering grease over his dick. Shit, that’s hot.
Sasuke looks at him over his shoulder, eyes almost but not entirely closed. “Okay?” Naruto breathes, pushing in another finger.

“Mmh."

Last time Sasuke decided to have sex with him, he locked him in the cage and let out Kyuubi. That he didn’t this time can be either very good or very bad.

_I know what this is now_, he said on the roof, and unfortunately did not mean that he knew Naruto loves him.

He twists his fingers, fascinated by watching them move _inside_. Pulls them out at last, and tugs at Sasuke’s legs, urging him to spread them. Leans over Sasuke on his hands and knees, positioning his dick against Sasuke’s stretched entrance, and it looks… Sasuke teased him in very factual tones about being small, but it looks grotesquely big now.

If it hurts, he’ll – scream probably, because with this much archangel radiance still lingering just under Sasuke’s skin and ready to break through, his dick will probably burn up if it displeases.

He leans up a little, opening his mouth around Sasuke’s shoulder, letting his fangs sink into the seal at the same time his erection sinks into Sasuke’s body.

xxxxx

“Good faith,” are Naruto’s first words as he swaggers back to the negotiation table. All eyes are on him immediately, Temari’s too, and she thinks: he should be more pleased. Sasuke’s intentions were not subtle, and from how energised Naruto is, Sasuke didn’t change his mind.

Luckily they’re down to formalities. “You must know,” she says, an hour or two in, when Naruto’s still far more strained than he should be, “that nothing short of an exorcism can handle this level of demon infestation. The Crusader Council certainly had no intention of sending you aid, and you couldn’t possibly afford the indulgences they’d charge for a crusader. The only way out of this would be if you could convince the humans to intervene with the exorcists for you, but you’re at war with the humans. This was your only possibly means of survival. Naruto risked himself for this. Nothing else could have saved you.”

Shino isn’t stupid, but these words couldn’t have been spoken before he saw Naruto suffering, erupting in blood and curses and vanquishing light on that ratty carpet.

Everyone in the settlement will have seen the sky, which is blue, purely blue, for the first time in years.

“Yet,” Shino says, “you didn’t negotiate for this in advance. We didn’t ask for your interference in this manner.”

“No,” Naruto breaks in. “We didn’t ask for anything in return. Because this is what we do. This is what pack is. Having each other’s backs. Like you said – good faith.”

Hands are shaken. Papers are signed. There will be more details to hammer out, and she imagines they’ll require hammering with some force, but today there will be celebration. War games, and the kind of partying that happens in war zones, the almost desperate joviality.

She corners Naruto outside as fast as she can. Won’t have much time until someone else needs his attention. “What’s up with you?”
A muscle moves in his jaw. “I’m – ashamed, I guess. I didn’t, I wasn’t in good faith with Sasuke.”

“Have that out with him on your own time.”

“Yeah,” Naruto says, visibly startled to hear that everyone else’s lives don’t revolve around Sasuke Uchiha, who anyway couldn’t have been any clearer about meaning to fuck Naruto. “Thanks.”

When Naruto finally staggers back into their room, Sasuke’s sitting up in bed, watching something on Naruto’s laptop.

Naruto kicks off his shoes, collapsing on the bed next to him. “Hey.” He nuzzles a little, drunkenly, against Sasuke’s leg. “I wasn’t sure you’d be awake.”

“Hoping to take advantage of me in my sleep?”

“No.” He sits up a little, taking off his jumper. “I don’t like when you don’t… when you’re just there. Like, resigned to it.”

His drunkeness might actually be infecting Sasuke through the bond, because his swat at Naruto’s head turns into tugging lightly at his hair. “Good.”

“So,” Naruto says, quickly so he can’t second guess himself, “about before –”

“That’s fine. I said you could. I meant it.”

“Mmh.” That’s true, Naruto knows it’s true. But it’s true because getting Sasuke to agree to sex as a means to an end – saving Naruto from a matesick death, fixing his hand, cracking the seal further open – has never been the issue. He crawls up next to Sasuke, getting under the duvet with him.

“What’re you watching?”

“Documentary.” The paused screen shows Roman soldiers.

“Cool.” He rests his head against Sasuke’s shoulder. Sees up close that he kept the love bites this time, Naruto’s possession written in teeth marks and bruises across his neck. Just at the edge of Sasuke’s neckline, there’s a hint of the seal. It really is a lot more open now, writhing and alive just under his skin.

Naruto’s jaw aches at the sight, and his dick. He rests a little more heavily against Sasuke, rubbing his face against Sasuke’s arm and breathing him in.

Sasuke joined them for a little bit downstairs, doing a smouldering wallflower routine. Maybe that’s what he kept the hickeys for.

“You saw, right?” Naruto mumbles. “When I was fighting.”

“Yes.”

Just semi-playful matches, no harm done. But he’d been high, so much energy suddenly it seemed impossible to hold back like he needed to. He touches a careful fingertip to the visible edge of the seal. “It’s really going.”

“Yes,” Sasuke says again, darkly happy. He shifts, not pushing Naruto away. “You could use the tails more.”
“Hmm, yeah.”

“You can make them solid now, right? Just keep them immaterial to get them where you want them without getting blocked, and then solidify once you’re in.”

“That’d be vicious.”

“Exactly.”

“Like a gladiator,” Naruto mumbles, and at Sasuke’s snort adds, “What? Are you not entertained?”

“Incredibly,” Sasuke says dryly. He’s still right there though, with Naruto all over him, so Naruto must not be doing too badly. “You should’ve been a comedian.”


“As long as you’ve outgrown Superman.”

“You’re one to talk, Batman!”

“Batman’s…manly.”

“Uh huh. Batman’s a grown man who lives in his parents’ basement, where he plays dress up and has his butler build him expensive toys.”

Sasuke must indeed be a little drunk, because he snickers. “Whereas Superman is a sophisticated critique of the human race?”


“You’d better keep it that way.”

“Yeah, like there was ever any doubt about that.” He stretches, getting Sasuke to move his arm, rest it around Naruto’s shoulders so Naruto can press his head tight, tight against Sasuke’s chest. “When I was away. I know you thought it was better or whatever, but it wasn’t. We should never be apart. If you ever try to pull some shit like that again, I’ll hunt you down to the ends of the earth. And anyway I wasn’t away from you. I woke up and I thought about you, I brushed my teeth and I thought about you, I went to school and I hung out with people and I tried to come back and it was all just about you, until I went to sleep thinking about you, and then I dreamt about you and then I woke up and I still thought about you.”

“You care about other things,” Sasuke says. His voice stays composed but he’s obviously upset, angel light shining under his skin, brighter than the bedside lamp. “You love other people.”

“Yeah, I do. I’m – glad I do, I want to. But next to you, it just… doesn’t matter enough. It can’t compare.”

“You said, before, that you didn’t know if you’d have even been attracted to me without the bond.”

Naruto shrugs, crumpling Sasuke’s shirt in his fingers. “We were, like, eleven when Dad had me
shipped off to boarding school, so… I was drawn to you, but, I didn’t think about it in those terms? And then, when I was there – I don’t know, it didn’t seem important? I just had to have you back.”

“You’re such a stalker.”

“Mmh.” He shifts some more, tangling their legs together and eventually pushing play. It’s a pretty good documentary about Julius Caesar warring his way through Europe. “I always used to like Asterix and Obelix, you know? I got really upset whenever anyone said how the Romans won in reality. But now I think… I mean Asterix and Obelix is about just one person being super awesome and making all the difference. Which is cool, yeah. But the Romans were about so many people banding together, that they were strong because they united.” He laughs a little, into Sasuke’s chest. “Maybe that’s growing up.”

“That’s just a cheap pretence. Some people are worth more than others. That’s the way of the world.”

“Look, like, Caesar might’ve got all the glory, but he’s nothing without his legions. Thousands of just normal people.”

“Not anyone could’ve led them the way he did. Anyway those are just humans. You can send a million of them to try and ward off a demon infestation, it’s pointless. Or you send one crusader, and the demons are gone.”

“People should matter.”

“You can’t have it both ways.”

“Hmm?”

“You can’t say that only I matter and then say everyone matters.”

“Jesus,” Naruto mutters, biting lightly at Sasuke’s ribs through the shirt. “I’m the insecure stalker here, all right? At least you’ve – you’ve said. How you were with other people. Because you wanted to. And anyway you’d let me die if that’s what you needed to be free of the seal.”

Sasuke’s far stiffer now. “Don’t talk about Kakashi.”

“See? You knew exactly who I meant!”

Sasuke turns away from him.

“Sasuke…”

“Fuck off.” Sasuke pushes him off violently, and there’s still enough archangel in him that it doesn’t matter how Naruto tries to hold on. He rolls across the bed, sits back up to find Sasuke still leaning against the headboard but pulled tensely in on himself, long legs drawn up around him like those of a spider. He’s breathing harder than he should be, chest heaving.

Naruto kneels in front of him, understanding that Sasuke can’t be touched right now.

“He had very limited choices,” Sasuke says, in this distant adult voice that’s a lie. “If he didn’t bring me here, you’d die. Or it would be the shifters kidnapping me, and no exorcist could’ve stood by for that. And it’s not – I’m not dead. I’m not being tortured. I understand that he did the only sensible thing.” He wipes at his face like a child, with his knuckles. Wipes like he’s been crying, though he hasn’t. “He should’ve fucking well talked to me. I… I understand why he didn’t, it’d just be a lie – it
would just be him cajoling for my blessing, when we both knew he’d do it no matter what I said. But he’d just explain it away with some bullshit about how I shouldn’t have to make those choices, be responsible for this, it’s such fucking bullshit, fuck him, he never gave me any choice. He – he never fucking even tried to keep me. He sure as hell never wanted me enough to take me for himself.”

It has to be all right now for Naruto to put his palms on top of Sasuke’s knees.

“You wouldn’t have done it,” Sasuke says. “You’d have chosen me. Even if you were shunned, even if you lost everything else. You’d never have given me away.”

“Not for anything.”

Sasuke breathes out a long shaky breath, leaning back against the headboard. “I thought you’d be more jealous.”

“I don’t actually want you to look at me and feel destroyed because I betrayed you.”

“I am not destroyed because some arsehole I was in love with when I was a kid didn’t like me back,” Sasuke snaps.

“Good,” Naruto says, taking Sasuke’s hand after all. Sasuke hits him across the mouth, a smarting brush of fingers across Naruto’s lips, and Naruto makes a wounded sound that means he wants more, leaning his face against Sasuke’s vicious kneecaps.

Sasuke sighs again, which means he can breathe now so that’s good.

Naruto’s head too is echoing and aching with bleedover shock, his muscles hurting from phantom tension. Sasuke knives him in the head with despair and rage and how fucking destroyed he feels, but he doesn’t make him leave.

“I hate how conflicted I feel about him,” he tells Sasuke. “I always thought he was like this big brother we kind of shared. Itachi was always just yours, but Kakashi was mine too. Or, he didn’t like me at first. Didn’t like Mum. But then after she died, he sort of adopted me as his extra little brother too, you know?”

“Nobody liked your mother,” Sasuke says blankly.

“She was a fuck of a lot better at being a mum than your mother.”

Which doesn’t really mean anything, and Sasuke doesn’t bother addressing it. Unlike Kakashi, Mikoto’s an old wound, deep but scarred over. “I meant she wasn’t suitable.”

“You’re not suitable.”

“Yes, I am.”

“Okay, yeah, sort of.”

“Tch. Like there’s anyone else you could’ve got more magic out of.” He cracks a grin. “Aside from the pending civil war, I’m perfect.”

Naruto gives a shaky laugh, insinuating himself between Sasuke’s legs and resting his head under Sasuke’s chin. “Aside from that minor detail. And also maybe if you hadn’t slept with my fake big brother.”

“Given all the inappropriate people I’ve slept with, you’re lucky I don’t have aids.”
“Heh, yeah. And I guess I should say our fake big brother. Is that… is that kind of why you did? Because he was, you know, part of your family, when you still…” When you still had one, he doesn’t want to say. “And he was the closest you could get to that now.”

Sasuke frowns at him, Naruto can feel it without even looking up. “Are you suggesting I have a thing for Itachi?”

“No! Ewww. God, no.” He’s still all third-degree burn sore on the inside from Sasuke’s upset, and thoughts of Mum’s death always leave him torn and tarred.

“Because I guess I would have,” Sasuke says, with that relentless honesty Naruto has missed and is now suddenly afraid of.

“What.”

Sasuke makes a broken kind of face, shaped like a smile but it isn’t one, it isn’t. “I’d have done it. If it meant he still wanted me, if it had made him keep me, I’d have fucked Itachi too.”

It’s more of a challenge than a confession: a pragmatic truth that Sasuke, who has such a devastatingly practical view of sex, isn’t ashamed of anymore.

“That’s so fucked up.”

“I fucked you,” Sasuke snaps. “You’re not even human.”

Naruto snorts at him. “Like that’s a problem for you. I bet you’ve never been with a human.”

“Well, not by choice,” Sasuke says eventually, the smile a little less of a caricature.

Naruto stiffens. “Um. There are… all these rumours about Orochimaru lending you out.” It’s not quite a question.

“They’re exaggerated. There were a very few very high-up humans.” Sasuke snorts. “Well, also he liked to watch me perform with Kimimarou.”

Naruto makes a mental note to strangle Kimimarou.

Sasuke manages to chuckle at him. “It’s not like he had much of a choice.” He yawns, shifting around into a more comfortable position. His metal foot is icy against Naruto’s thigh, and Naruto starts rubbing it to get it warmed up. Sparks fly under his hand: the seal really is cracking, letting in the burning light of Heaven, but it means more power for Naruto too, more resilience. “He loves Orochimaru.”

Naruto stills, fingers curled loosely around the prosthesis. “Yeah, I don’t… get that.” A pause, but he knows: “You do, though.”

Sasuke looks away, but in the end has never spared himself. His voice comes bitter, sarcasm drowned out by self-hatred. “Isn’t that what you always hear from domestic abuse victims? But you see it’s true.” His throat moves when he swallows. He’s not looking away anymore, and seems so young suddenly, so unendurably human. “It wasn’t only horrible. He can be… At least he wanted me. Sometimes he was…” But Sasuke has no words for what he was, when he wasn’t horrible.

Orochimaru taught him things, made him unarguably stronger. Orochimaru sometimes touched him gently, in a way that could be mistaken for love or even kindness. Orochimaru said all the things no one else ever has, how Sasuke matters and is loved and will be cared for. How Orochimaru chose
him and will never give him up.

“I’m gonna bawl,” Naruto admits, and earns another thick-voiced, tired chuckle. He leans up, rests his forehead square against the seal. He’s hated it, hates it still, but this alone Sasuke will never forgive Orochimaru, never overlook.

“Idiot,” Sasuke mumbles.


“Tch.” But he puts the laptop away and lets himself be tugged down. He turns in Naruto’s arms, pale and grumpy and lovely. One of the tails comes out and wraps itself tightly around Sasuke’s calf. Naruto almost can’t breathe, because it’s not him doing the wrapping. Sasuke reaching into his mind, Sasuke moving his tail, curling it around himself… it’s too much. He understands now that it’s all right. Sasuke’s thrown all of it at him, the deepest, darkest shame, unspeakable until this moment – how Kakashi never loved him enough for it to matter, how Orochimaru wasn’t always horrible – and it changes nothing. Naruto’s love isn’t the kind that can change. Sasuke breathes out thickly, almost a sigh, letting Naruto’s hand slip inside his shirt and settle on the small of his back. “I know you put it off for now, but when you do discover the jailed mates and the beastmad soldiers. It’d be a waste to turn them all over to the humans.”

“Mmh. The mates, that’s – they’ll never stay voluntarily.”

“No shit. You’re breaking them in wrong. But the beastmads. They could be effective against the humans.”

“They’re also effective against civilians. And other shifters. Even if we kept them locked up in between, the question is how to get them to attack the right people. We could maybe train them.”

“Maybe seal them.”

“You think that’d – huh. I figured more, training like with police dogs. This scent is what you attack. If they get too volatile, we’ll have to rein them in.”

“Seal would be easier, less supervision. If you design it right you can wipe them from a distance.”

He falls asleep like that, tangled up warm and close with Sasuke and planning how best to utilise a berserker suicide squad.
“Indeed,” Neji says for the umpteenth time. “I see.”

He’s not fool enough to say anything of substance to Orochimaru.

Orochimaru smiles at him. He’s old now, over sixty, which makes the smile a good deal less intimidating. If he were to turn on Neji in earnest, he’d be a formidable opponent, would no doubt kill or break Neji, but under these circumstances… he’s an old man Neji’s been sent to give a message.

Still, as the smile goes on and on, it crawls uncomfortable up his spine, the knowledge that he was sent as a kind of peace offering: that he was selected as the messenger because frankly he’s Orochimaru’s type.

Hanabi’s quick to point this out when he can finally return home, smirking up at him from where she’s lounging on the couch. Hinata sends him a shy glance from her place in the corner.

“I’d imagine I’m a little old for him,” Neji says, as mildly as he can: he has no business speaking out of tune to Hanabi. Hinata’s worthless – barely even an exorcist at all, the great shame of the family – but Hanabi’s a genius crusader in addition to being of the main line, and so she’s the Hyuuga heiress and Neji’s … well, Neji’s the sort of pseudo-outcast who might very well have ended up being given to Orochimaru, if Orochimaru had been glancing at Hyuuga rather than Uchiha boys seven years ago.

He has no illusions that he would’ve come out of that kicking and screaming the way Sasuke has. Neji’s a realist. Neji settles, resigns himself.

Perhaps that’s why Sasuke dismissed the very idea of Neji, why Sasuke’s currently letting himself be defiled by a beast who at least never gave up on him, and – this is not a productive line of thought.

“Mmh,” Hanabi says lightly, with the easy arrogance of someone who’s always been loved best. “I suppose. He could never seal a crusader who’s come into their power.”

“Ah,” Neji says, equally lightly. Light as hoarfrost. “I should call Mikoto-sama. If you’ll excuse me.”

Hanabi waves him off.

It’s a short conversation. Mikoto Uchiha is relentlessly polite and cold as ice, far more intimidating than Orochimaru. She has little patience for Neji, or for anyone else really.

“He’s denying all involvement,” Neji says. “He won’t say what he intends to do about Sasuke.”

“I would have expected nothing else.”

And Neji, it remains unsaid, was sent as an empty gesture. He doesn’t know Orochimaru well enough to read between the lines.

He steps back into the room to find someone who could, only of course there’s no sending Kakashi Hatake to Orochimaru now.

“Ah, Neji.” Kakashi offers a lazy wave, wiggling his fingers. Neji bows politely, to this odd man who’s never let himself be known to Neji, this man who finally took Sasuke away only to hand him
over to someone else.

This man, frankly, who might become his brother, because Uncle Hiashi is quite keen on arranging a
marriage. Hinata would never dare to disobey, and Hanabi’s always been a pragmatist: it’s Kakashi
who’s never quite said yes or no.

Currently he’s flirting outrageously with Hinata, which is no matter because if he did accept a
Hyuuga bride it would obviously have to be Hanabi. Kakashi’s always been drawn to strong people,
has only scorn to spare for anyone he perceives as weak, including Neji. Kakashi, under the
deceptive scarecrow smile, is a predator born and bred.

And Kakashi never tried to hide his involvement with Sasuke, but clearly that’s over now, and while
Hanabi’s rather younger than Kakashi – well, so is Sasuke.

If he did marry her, she’d be adopted into the Hatake clan. Which would mean Neji would be
offered Hinata, so he could inherit Hyuuga without the main line being disgraced.

It’s so beneath him, so shallow and so pathetic, to wish his little cousin wed off in order to secure his
own inheritance, his own belonging.

But in the end people’s happiness is always paid for with other people’s. Everyone understands this,
Orochimaru told him once, and Neji could only agree. We have all read our Leviticus. Orochimaru’s
long square fingers touched Sasuke’s forehead, like Fugaku’s had that once, that only once, just
before Sasuke was given away. Even Itachi, the greatest crusader who has ever lived or likely ever
shall, was appointed his task and must carry out his sacrifice.

Even at age ten, Neji had been vaguely insulted by the extreme lack of subtlety. He had indeed read
his Leviticus. He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the
wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites – all their sins – and put them on the goat’s head. He shall
send the goat away into the wilderness in the care of someone appointed for the task. The goat will
carry on itself all their sins to a remote place; and the man shall release it in the wilderness.

Only the place Sasuke was brought wasn’t so very far, and certainly he wasn’t set free into the
wilderness.

Neji cannot condemn it. Sasuke alone cannot be worth more than the millions who would have fallen
to slaughter if negotiations fell through. The one thing that would make him worth more – Uriel –
has not been taken away from the world, though certainly nobody anticipated that Orochimaru
would seal him.

Once upon a time Neji assumed that was why Itachi had consented: because without the seal, Sasuke
must have been supposed to kill Orochimaru years ago, would surely have gone nova before he was
broken in.

But Neji has long since ceased the futile endeavour of trying to understand Itachi.

Kakashi, who might actually have a shot at it, never seems to try. He smiles at Neji now, a smile
wider than but just as meaningless as Mikoto Uchiha’s, before making his excuses. Hinata scurries
after him, and Hanabi gets up from the coach, coming to stand in front of the window. It’s storming
outside, which she’s always liked.

Neji’s ashamed to ask her, but also curious. Hanabi’s always been ineffable as clear water, somehow
out of reach, but right now she seems approachable: a girl tying her heavy dark hair into a ponytail.
She’s in that awkward stage where her sharp, spine-freezing eyes sit incongruous in her pudgy face.
“You’d really marry him, wouldn’t you?” Neji says. Hanabi has always had the luxury of speaking her mind, and tends not to respect people who don’t.

She gives him a rather cynical look. “I’d want to know him better before I decided. But I’m not principally opposed.”

“He’s quite heavily involved with the shifters.”

“I don’t mind that. Our purpose, what matters, is the demons. Shifters are irrelevant. They’re the humans’ problem.”

“I should think this issue with Sasuke,” Neji says, so dryly his voice almost rasps, “has shown them to be also our problem.”

“Tch. Could you wipe a shifter?”

“Obviously.”

“There you go. Sasuke’s far stronger than you.”

“That’s a matter of opinion.”

She lifts an eyebrow. “He cleansed the north.” The that was hot is almost as heavily implied as the I could’ve done that.

Neji lifts an eyebrow of his own. “I suppose if you’re into Sasuke, that’d at least give you and Kakashi something to bond over.”

She snorts at him, disappointingly unprovoked. “I’ve never met anymore more obviously gay than Sasuke. Except possibly you.”

Neji freezes.

Hanabi blinks. “I don’t care. I’m not going to tell.”

Neji forces himself to grit out, “You’re perfectly entitled to tell anyone you please.”

This is how it is. Hanabi was born to the elder brother, and so Hanabi is the princess, able to destroy him or to forcefeed him mercy. If Neji hadn’t been the younger brother’s son – if, if, if…

He’d thought he’d made his peace.

Hanabi turns around, leaning her back against the glass. In the half-dusk, the image is of her suspended against the storming sky.

Once, years ago, he’d have been tempted to push her, break the glass until she fell.

Of course, if she did, Michael’s wings would carry her.

“You shouldn’t have to bow and scrape,” she says. “I don’t understand why you do. You’re strong. God knows you could take Fugaku Uchiha.”

He looks past her shoulder. “Fugaku’s a figurehead.”

She shrugs agreement. “For the record, you could probably have a good go against Mikoto, too.”
He smirks. Speaks treason now, to this girl who already has enough dirt, enough sin on him that a little more doesn’t matter. “Not your father?”

She smiles, a hungry smile, the smile of the archangel who commands the armies of God. “Time will tell.”

xxxxx

Naruto wakes up in the morning with an armful of Sasuke, looks down at him and feels like his entire chest is filled with a star expanding and expanding, ready to erupt in a blaze fit to light the whole universe. Sasuke grumbles, sleepy, but Sasuke always grumbles in the morning, and he doesn’t roll away. The room is cold, outside the shield of the double duvet, and Sasuke’s icy fingers curl under Naruto’s chin. “About maybe sealing the beastmad shifters,” Sasuke says thoughtfully, looking interested. Naruto feels like dying, actually dying, unable to contain the enormity of his feeling. “Kabuto has some research on that.”

“Yeah?”

“You have to know he’s been experimenting on shifters.”

“ Heard Orochimaru wants to live forever,” Naruto agrees, breath hitching as Sasuke stretches. “But really, he’s doing full on human experiments? I mean, I know he’s made a few shifters disappear, but…”

“He wants the healing,” Sasuke says.

“Oh. Um. Mmh.”

“Tch.” And then Sasuke’s leg over his, Sasuke sitting up still wrapped in the duvet, straddling Naruto’s thighs. “Pay attention.”

He’s shocked at his own voice, which comes gravelly and strange. “You’re the only thing I can pay attention to.”

“Really?” Sasuke’s voice so light. He leans forward just a finger’s breadth. “You can’t pay attention to your,” and his mouth twists around the word, “pack being used a guinea pigs? You’d rather…”

“Yes,” Naruto says, sitting up. Tipping Sasuke forward, so he’ straddling Naruto’s hips instead, Naruto’s knees going up behind him. “Yes, yes.”

“Great priorities for a leader,” Sasuke tells him. Dry still, but responsive to Naruto’s fingers dragging softly up his arms.

Naruto swallows. Breathes in Sasuke’s air, tries to match his pulse with Sasuke’s, calm it down. “I don’t like it, that you’re more important. Nobody likes it, I guess, it’s – it’s maybe not how it should be. But there’s no use pretending. You come first.”

Sasuke lifts an eyebrow.

“Don’t say it!”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You didn’t have to! I know I’ve been – uh, quick. But I have – I will have great stamina. I just need…practice. Then you can come first.”
“Unlikely.”

“Uh huh,” Naruto insists. “I never go back on my word.”

Lies, lies, because he promised, *I will save you*, which was really just another way of saying, *I will save us*, because he can’t do without Sasuke, can’t live without Sasuke, he never could.

He touches Sasuke’s jaw, his chin. Sasuke’s hands find Naruto’s spine, stroking down his back.

He hasn’t even kissed Sasuke – isn’t going to kiss Sasuke until Sasuke wants him to – and already it’s like a tornado in his ears. His cock pulsates between them. And Sasuke’s – it might just be that it’s morning, and it’s not on anything like the same level of arousal as Naruto, but Sasuke’s kind of hard too. His hands mould against Naruto’s shoulder blades, and Naruto’s coming out of his skin. Kisses the side of Sasuke’s mouth, under his lower lip, kisses around his mouth until it opens for him.

He’s edging closer to it, he’s so close when the door opens.

“Good morning,” Shino says. His high collar hides his mouth, but there’s no mistaking the smirk. Just behind him, Temari rolls her eyes.

Sasuke twists around, face impassive now. He’s been walked in on so many times, he’s far past embarrassment. Not so far past annoyance.

Suddenly, Naruto’s quite happy that they’re still dressed. “Shino.”

“Getting in some morning gymnastics, I see.”

“Fuck off,” Sasuke tells him, completely level. It’s a voice for giving orders, a voice not permitting disobedience.

Shino blinks.

“Let’s all,” Temari starts.

Naruto puts a quick hand on Sasuke’s arm. Sasuke’s expression makes him squeeze, before taking it away.

Shino starts to say something, but Shino is no longer relevant.

“Why are we pretending,” Sasuke says, “that they have any say in this?”

Shino says, “Excuse me?”

But Sasuke’s speaking to Naruto. “I played nice yesterday, I’m still not sure why. They have no choice in this, they’ll obey or they’ll die. This ridiculous farce – we all know I can make them. You could make them yourself, Kyuubi would eat him alive.”

Without interference, sooner or later Rock will die on its own, either from the demons or from the humans. But that’d be a waste, Rock has a lot of strong fighters, a lot of useful people.

“I want them to want to follow me,” Naruto says. “It’s better if they come willing.”

“Jesus,” Temari mutters.

“Why? It’s better to be feared than to be loved.” His mouth twists into this strange, sweetsour shape. “For love is held by the tie of obligation, which, because men are a sorry breed, is broken on every
whisper of private interest; but fear is bound by the apprehension of punishment which never relaxes its grasp.

“I’m not into the whole divide and conquer approach, you know that. And Shino’s doing well with Rock, they love him. So that’s good. We’ll work with him. Right, Shino?”

Sasuke rests his arms on his knees, looking cruel and speculative. “Or we could just make an example of him. Make it clear who’s in charge.”

“We’ve got our hands full with Orochimaru, we don’t need a shifter insurrection on top of it. Don’t be fucking stupid.”

“A Prince,” Sasuke says, and he’s smiling at Shino the way Orochimaru will have smiled at Sasuke, when he made Sasuke memorise this, “should disregard the reproach of being thought cruel where it enables him to keep his subjects united and obedient. For he who quells disorder by a very few signal examples will in the end be more merciful than he who from too great leniency permits things to take their course and so to result in rapine and bloodshed; for these hurt the whole State, whereas the severities of the Prince injure individuals only.”

“I asked you yesterday,” Shino says, “can you control him?”

He understands now, smells strongly of the understanding, that if Naruto can’t, then Shino’s done for.

Sasuke’s curled up in bed in his pyjamas, and he’s terrifying as a force of nature. “You killed an exorcist,” he says. “You know the penalties.”

Shino looks to Naruto. Yesterday, this was because he believed Naruto was in charge of Sasuke. Today, it’s because he understands that what he says won’t matter to Sasuke, that he’s not even human to Sasuke. “She wasn’t even any good.”

“She was a worthless fighter,” Sasuke agrees. “But she was good at shielding. Otherwise your village would have been long gone. Shielding like that, as you very well know, is what keeps demons from constantly appearing in populated areas. She was worth hundreds of thousands of lives.”

“Yeah,” Naruto cuts in. “That’s true. But she’s gone and she’s not coming back. No point wasting more people.” A pause, stretched to breaking point. “Sasuke, enough.”

This time it’s Naruto speaking without allowing the possibility of dissent, and in the end Rock means more to him, by far, than it does to Sasuke. This is a big part of why Sasuke played nice yesterday, and it makes him subside now: Sasuke has no strong feelings about Rock one way or the other, and so the bond fills him with Naruto’s convictions on the matter. Sasuke fucking Shino over would be Sasuke cutting off his nose to spite his face, because Naruto’s outrage and distress, even the echo of them, will be stronger than Sasuke’s satisfaction.

Sasuke always has been one to cut off his nose to spite his face, though, and he’s been manipulated too much.

“This is important to me,” Naruto says. “It doesn’t matter to you. So give me this, you bastard.”

“Fine.” In the blink of an eye, Shino’s suddenly steady again, because Sasuke again projects submission. It’s a little bit like Kyuubi trying to wear a human face, the berserker beast shining through. Still, he lets Naruto be in charge of him for this little while, and so Naruto squeezes his shoulder and then slips out of bed to make nice with Shino over breakfast.
Temari stares at them with flat hungry eyes. This is her life, this has always been her life: being sensible, reining in the boys who will be boys, and who will ultimately only really listen to each other.

There’s the knowledge that she told Sasuke the truth, that time with Shikamaru and Sakura: Naruto’s it, he’s the only possible option. And the knowledge, sharp now like a claw in her intestines, that they’ll never, never be free from under the exorcists’ heel.

If anyone could have managed, it would have to be Naruto, and now that’ll never happen.

Naruto’s strong, maybe the strongest of them all, and with a direct link to Sasuke mind – with her and Shino, they could’ve taken him, if he’d really stepped out of line.

But she knows, cannot deny that she knows, that if it came down to it – Naruto might fight with Sasuke, might fight him viciously and brutally, but the second she or Shino turned on Sasuke, Naruto would be absolutely on his side.

She had to give up on her dreams a long time ago. She hadn’t realised she hadn’t given up on Naruto’s.

xxxxx

“I’d like to see you,” Hanabi Hyuuga’s crisp no-nonsense voice tells him over the phone. It’s hours since Kakashi kissed the back of Hinata’s hand in a parody of chivalry, since he returned from the conventional splendour of the Hyuuga stronghold to his own shitty flat.

Sasuke’s things are everywhere.

Sasuke still has a bloody key, though Kakashi can’t expect him to ever use it again.

Hanabi continues. She really never has been one to wait for someone else. “Neji deserves an answer if he’s getting Hyuuga or not. Which depends on how I like you.”

Kakashi chuckles, charmed despite himself. It’s condescending in the extreme to be charmed by her as though by a kitten that’s clawed your finger bloody, but then Kakashi’s looked down his nose at humanity as a whole since he was three years old. “Not on how I like you?”

Her voice remains perfectly matter of fact as she points out, “I’m the best you could get.”

“Maa,” Kakashi drawls, discovering Sasuke’s shirt in the laundry basket and standing stupidly in the middle of the room, dirty cotton in hand. “The heart wants what it wants.”

“Yes. But you can’t have that. And I’m certainly what your head wants.” He gets the impression she shrugs. “If you’re not interested, that’s fine. I’d like to let Neji know either way.”

Hanabi, he knows, is privileged enough by the system to criticise it. To find the clan structures archaic, to favour an absolute meritocracy. A world where Fugaku would never dare dream of ordering Neji anywhere, where crusaders would rule absolutely and efficiently over their domain.

He could point out that the Council knows better these days than to risk giving an order that might not be obeyed: that they would never attempt to force Itachi or Hanabi or indeed Kakashi himself anywhere against their wishes.

Certainly they never sanctioned any of the exorcisms he performed for Minato.
“The only thing I’m in the market for right now is a rebound.”

“Fair enough,” Hanabi says lightly.

It is fair enough, but it’s not true. A rebound is a step towards getting over someone, and he won’t get over Sasuke, any more than he ever got over Minato. He supposes that’s how he is: someone who doesn’t get over the big things.

Someone, more significantly – more alarmingly, more pathetically, more amusingly – for whom unrequited loves are the big things.

“Aren’t you at all tempted by Neji?” he drawls. “He’d be convenient.”

Hanabi snorts. “Even the humans have understood that a man who’s not prepared to die for anything isn’t fit to live.”

“Ah,” Kakashi says, ending the call. He hasn’t done the dishes: drinks from a glass still greasy with the imprint of Sasuke’s lips.

He’s still in the kitchen, slouched once more in the stuffed chair he’s using with the table – which Sasuke always gave him crap for, snobby little bitch that he was – when his phone rings again, Minato’s name splayed over the screen.

“Hmm?”

His voice comes honeyed, slow and thick and rather sweet, but the imminent risk of him terminating the call must be obvious, because Minato for once cuts to the chase, “I’m not calling for myself, Kakashi. I’m calling for Sasuke.”

“Sasuke has my number.”

Minato does the smart thing in ignoring this statement. “There are issues with the seal. To the point I’m contemplating if we should just cut it off and bank on Kyuubi being able to heal him.”

“Are you attempting to threaten me? That never was your strong suit.”

A silence, either confused or pretending to be confused. “I’ve no interest in harming Sasuke. On the contrary, given his bond with Naruto. But the seal is causing considerable damage, which makes me consider…”

“It’s pointless,” Kakashi says. Minato should know this already, because Naruto will: if Sasuke hadn’t, he’d have mutilated himself years ago. “The seal is burnt into his soul. The physical mark’s just a manifestation. If you remove it and Kyuubi heals him, it’ll reappear.”

“That’s unfortunate,” Minato remarks. “He won’t let Tsunade examine it, but…”

“He won’t let me near it either.”

“Still,” Minato says, and it’s not a question, “you’d be willing to have a look.”

Kakashi drops the phone without bothering to end the call.

Slouched in the stuffed chair, he has that freefall feeling, like when you’re about to fall asleep but come abruptly awake because you feel you’re going over an edge.

He falls so long and so hard that he startles when the phone rings again. For some stupid reason he
picks it up.

Itachi briefs him on an upcoming mission. It’s not the first time Itachi’s declined a mission because he prefers another one, and then expects Kakashi to pick up what he’s discarded. Kakashi no longer minds.

“Did you know?” Itachi asks then, in a voice he doesn’t use about work. Kakashi’s come to think of it as that, as work, rather than as a holy calling. “About Sasuke. That he commanded that level of power.”

“I assumed.”

A silence.

“Why?” Kakashi drawls. “Did you make a bad bargain, trading him in to Orochimaru?”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“No matter. I reckon he’ll inherit Oto, once he’s killed Orochimaru.”

“Oh? And then will he inherit Hatake, when he kills you?”

Kakashi shrugs. “He can have it if he wants.”

“I thought you were going to let Hanabi Hyuuga make an honest man out of you.”

Kakashi shrugs again. It’s a habit he’s picked up from Sasuke. “I suppose I couldn’t leave Hatake in better hands than hers.” She’d revitalise the clan, reclaim its importance, its power. “I’d have to say she’s a little young for me.”

“Fourteen, isn’t she? Sasuke wasn’t any older when you involved yourself with him.”

“Sasuke wasn’t a child. You’d seen to that.”

“We’ll have to agree to disagree.”

“Goodbye, Itachi.”

Sasuke was of course unforgivably young, but Kakashi’s committed so many unforgivable acts, statutory rape doesn’t merit much consideration.

He’s lost in a labyrinth of his own making, faulty decision after faulty decision caging him in. None too eager to find the heart, because it will be blackened, putrefied. He will need to cleanse it, and won’t be able to. His head lolls back, he stares numbly at the ceiling. Perhaps that’s what he needs to do: do an Itachi, cleanse himself of these impure human emotions.

He’s lost Sasuke, like he lost Minato. This time too, he did it to himself.

xxxxx

Two days later he brushes wind-swept hair out of his face. He’s completed Itachi’s hand-me-down mission, and stares into the distance: at the skyline of Mist Town, just at the edge of his vision.

Sasuke was nine during Mist Town Massacre. He was tiny for a nine year old, could have been mistaken for seven or even six, particularly with Orochimaru’s large hands all over him. Ruffling his hair, stroking under his chin, closing around his shoulder. Sasuke still knew, then, still knew it
physically and instinctively, that those touches were wrong. Stood basically trembling with desire to
get away, every muscle in his body locked against squirming.

Until suddenly the demons were close enough, and the seal opened. Orochimaru lifted his touch
away with extreme haste as the light enveloped Sasuke, whose eyes were spinning red and feral.
There could be no doubt, not the slightest hint of it, that Sasuke would go nova before he allowed
Orochimaru to lay another finger on him, would burn them both out of existence if Orochimaru tried.

Afterwards, when the demons were gone and the bloodbath done with, when Orochimaru had had
his stupid duel with Jiraiya and Jiraiya had been crippled – after all this, when Sasuke was small
again and alone, no longer a punishing archangel but a little boy with dirt under his fingernails and
his eyelids heavy with sleep, Kakashi picked him up. Sasuke’s eyes were still spinning, the redness
bleeding out gradually. For some stupid reason he remembered Sasuke as he’d first seen him, in the
hospital bed after a failed mission, and then running after Itachi through a summer garden. Sasuke
always did have killer instinct, but for a long time it was unhatched. It had broken through its egg
shell now, broken out into the world so that Sasuke was brimming with it, burning with it almost to
the exclusion of everything else, in love with his calling, with the mission, which was the only thing
left, and – Kakashi was looking at himself.

Sasuke still trusted him, at that point. Sasuke was a little fool, and Kakashi was a big one. Because
Sasuke for a long time had that unearned trust in him, looked at him with his eyes full of this
completely unmerited belief.

In the end of course it was untenable, like Sasuke’s refusal to succumb to Orochimaru was ultimately
untenable. After all, Kakashi tells himself, there’s no such thing as someone who doesn’t break under
torture, it’s just a question of how long, how much, before it happens. And Sasuke held out for a
long time. It was after Naruto was gone, going on four years after Sasuke was left to Orochimaru’s
tender mercies, that he caved.

At twelve, Kakashi surmises, he still knew Orochimaru’s touch was wrong, but the knowledge was
intellectual, a matter of principle and pride. The emotional instinct to shrug away had been eroded.
Orochimaru still dragged his fingers under Sasuke’s chin, and Sasuke now could snort and step away
from him easily, hurt and humiliated but also eased by the touch. Orochimaru laughed, no longer
threatened by physical distance, because he’d finally made Sasuke his, seeped into his bones and his
thoughts. His praise – his real praise, hard-earned and harsh, far from the extravagant, omnipresent
flattery – made Sasuke glow as well as glower.

There was even – Kakashi had seen Orochimaru kiss a very small Sasuke, who bit and screamed and
struggled. Tears slipping down his face, from eyes absolutely crazed with hatred. But eventually
Sasuke stopped struggling all the time, and decided to survive. Eventually, perhaps, it started to mean
that at least someone wanted him, at least for something.

He’s seen Sasuke – later on, after they were involved with each other – he’s seen Sasuke kiss
Orochimaru. To shut him up, certainly, but with every appearance of enjoying himself. Has,
generally, seen Sasuke speak to and even touch Orochimaru quite naturally, in the way of people
who are deeply familiar with each other, who dominate each other’s worlds. Perhaps, if he’s playing
shrink, Sasuke did this in order to exercise power over Orochimaru in the only way he could.
Perhaps he did it in order to punish himself. Kakashi never asked, and Sasuke never told him.

But yes, Kakashi decides, now that it no longer matters: Orochimaru was the ground Sasuke stood
on, for all it was riddled with earth quakes, sudden sink holes.

Once, when Sasuke was in his bath tub, Kakashi had sort of brought this up. He’d come home to
find Sasuke sitting in the bath, looking rather like a mythical figure out of some heroic legend
improbably transported into everyday life.

“Have we been watching *The Little Mermaid* again?” he drawled, dragging a fingertip up Sasuke’s arm, chasing goose bumps over the damp skin.

“Hn.” Sasuke’s thick, heavy hair was tame for once, slicked to his face. Kakashi saw Sasuke all the time, saw him so often that his beauty hardly registered anymore, but it dawned on him new and sharp in that moment.

He traced the deep bruising around the seal. “Do you still mean to kill him?”

Sasuke frowned. “Obviously.”

Kakashi shrugged. Tilted Sasuke’s chin up for a kiss, because Sasuke would probably leave soon if Kakashi didn’t manage to shut himself up. “I meant you seemed less overtly hostile to him lately.”

Sasuke had already been stiff and unresponsive under his touch, and this didn’t change. When Kakashi released him he sighed, looked past him.

Kakashi reminded himself that he’d already come to grips with the fact that he wasn’t important enough for Sasuke to fight with, so there was no reason to be cut by it now. “I suppose,” he said lightly, “it’s like that story says.”

Sasuke lifted an eyebrow. “Your old favourite?”

Kakashi hummed non-committally, stroking Sasuke’s throat until Sasuke shrugged him off.

“You can love a rabid dog,” Sasuke intoned, “and still understand that it needs to be put down?”

“Mmh.” It was from a story that had touched him, back before Kakashi built his walls too high to allow that. Before he learnt to live life lightly, breeze through things so they couldn’t touch him.

That’s something Itachi told him, probably quoting too because God knows Itachi has never managed a native or original understanding of the human condition: *Isn’t that what you’re trying to do? Living life so lightly as to barely allow the possibility of a human touch.*

“Ah,” said Sasuke, an eyebrow and a corner of his mouth titled up. “I suppose each man must kill the thing he loves. But weren’t you talking about Itachi when you said that?”

“Ah,” Kakashi echoed, sinking down on the floor and leaning his head against the edge of the tub. “I suppose I was.”

Understanding that something needs to be done and being able to do it are not synonymous. Kakashi understands perfectly and has for years that he needs to kill Orochimaru, kill Itachi, and take Sasuke far away from them.

He turns his back on Mist Town and memories and walks away. This is all – what is it they say? A feeling that can never go anywhere. This is all a feeling that can never go anywhere, will never amount to anything, never do anyone any good.
“I don’t know what I was supposed to have done,” Kakashi says. “Obviously I should’ve done something, but I honestly couldn’t tell you what. If I’d taken him away – a few weeks on the run, then he’s back where he was and I’m going nova. I don’t see how that would’ve made anything better.”

Hanabi looks at him steadily. “Shouldn’t you have killed Orochimaru?”

Kakashi hmms. “Maa, I doubt I would’ve succeeded.” He smirks, an empty expression, like the smile of a scarecrow. “I doubt even you would succeed, and you’re far stronger than I’ve ever been.”

“It’s not impossible.”

“That’s a low bar,” Kakashi remarks, stretching his arms languidly over the back of the coach. “And it’s certainly improbable. I’d probably have just ended up going nova over it. Or if I’d succeeded, hello civil war. Sasuke would still have been sealed, too. Fugaku might’ve actually strangled him.”

Hanabi gives him a rather cynical look. “Do you imagine you rescued him?”

“If Naruto had managed to get him out, the result would be exactly the same. Naruto would’ve – people would think he’d rescued him.”

“I suppose they would.” She smiles a hyena smile. It’s his favourite. “And Naruto wouldn’t even have sacrificed him in the process. He’d have kept the spoils.”

“Mmh. Though I suppose they are sacrificing, in a sense.” He saw Kushina and Tsunade just after the bombing. Strangely, he’s always got along with Kushina. It was Yui he couldn’t stand, because it was Yui who’d been chosen. Kushina’s earned everything she’s got, and Kakashi had never even dreamt, never even fantasised – he wasn’t Minato’s mate, of course he wasn’t, and he was even something approaching all right with that because he was an exorcist and could never want not to be, could never conceive of himself as anything else, and so the very idea would be a fool’s game, a statistical anomaly. “Anyway if I hadn’t done it, Naruto would’ve died. God knows Sasuke would never forgive me for that.”

“It didn’t have to be you handing him over.”

Kakashi shrugs, that Sasuke shrug he’s picked up somewhere over the years. “If they’d just taken him, it’d be open war. There’s no exorcist would stand by for that.”

“Ah. And yet here you are, alone and palely loitering.”

“Well, maybe it makes sense. Maybe I sinned.”

“Is this a confession?”

He smiles back, the empty smile. “Don’t forgive me, for I have sinned.”

“Isn’t it Sasuke you should ask forgiveness? Or at least Naruto, he might give it.”

“Hasn’t he already had his vengeance, already won? He’s got everything I ever wanted.”

“The courage of his convictions?”
“Can’t say that’s something I’ve been hankering after. Maybe I should’ve.” And now too the truth bleeds out, he’s been cut too deeply to keep it inside. “They both love him. Sasuke. Minato.”

“Minato, really? You could do better.”

Kakashi waves this away. “You never met him when he was who he was supposed to be. He burnt so brightly.”

“Before Yui.”

“Mmh. Well, it was the last nail in the coffin. So I suppose, yes, until I ruined him.”

Hanabi lifts her eyebrows in apparent surprise. “I always thought it was Tsunade who arranged to have her disposed of, once she’d been taken.”

“It was. She arranged for it. But you see, that’s why Naruto could never forgive me. Not that I think I need his forgiveness, but. I did kill his mother.”

Slit her throat with an angel blade.

There had, at that point, not been much left of Yui. She had, in fact, asked him to kill her. It didn’t matter, because he would’ve done it regardless.

That’s what Tsunade called him in for, no matter what Minato chooses to believe.

“That seems stupid? You must’ve known what it would do to Minato.”

Kakashi shrugs. “I’d lost him. He was losing himself. I had to have a clean break.”

He remembers Naruto screaming, during the divorce, when Naruto’s world was being torn apart: If you love someone, you don’t just stop. That’s not how it works. Love is forever or it isn’t love!

Kakashi had been horrified to recognise the truth of it.

There’s no breaking away from it at all. Still, you have to try. And the Minato that Kakashi loved, the Minato that Minato was supposed to be, Kakashi has killed.

“Well,” Hanabi says. “I need to catch my flight.”

“Mission?”

“Yes. I’ll speak to you later.”

In her absence he sighs, leaning back. Picks up an old paperback, not sure why he’s retuned to it. Never love a wild thing… You can’t give your heart to a wild thing. The more you do, the stronger they get. Until they’re strong enough to fly into a tree. Then a taller tree. Then the sky. That’s how you’ll end up, if you let yourself love a wild thing. You’ll end up looking at the sky.

Kakashi’s looking at the ceiling, but he supposes that’s close enough.

Never love a wild thing, except that would mean never love, because what else is there that you could possibly give your heart to?

It was… he supposes they started out on fairly equal footing, emotionally, Sasuke and he. But somehow Kakashi lost so much ground, because he wanted Sasuke far less conditionally than Sasuke wanted him. It was Kakashi who rearranged his life around Sasuke, who still bloody owes
Neji for trading missions so he could make himself available.

Maybe that’s what love is, always wanting more. Except that would mean love means never getting what you want.

Which sounds about right, actually.

Tipsy and tried, it’s easy to imagine Sasuke here with him on the couch, where he’s been a hundred times. He’d sit at the very edge of it, legs drawn up, forming a bridge over Kakashi’s sprawling shins. His little snorts and half-smirks, his sharp poking at Kakashi’s knee.

It’s even easier to imagine Minato – easier because less painful, because Minato’s never been here. It was in Minato’s office that Kakashi could curl up, a careful distance away from him. Then it was Minato reaching out, long legs nudging Kakashi and sometimes, on the days that Kakashi could be touched, lying across his lap, trapping him.

Minato’s the only one who’s ever touched him playfully, with this easy, thoughtless kindness.

He remembers being little, after the first and only time Minato had tickled him, being breathless and clutching Minato’s shirt. His own small hand, impotently trying and failing to fist around the beat of Minato’s heart. If it stopped, Kakashi would die.

Minato gave no indication of noticing.

That’s how it was. This meant nothing to Minato, he was giving Kakashi a miracle like throwing change at a beggar.

Itachi had of course pointed it out, how very convenient Kakashi’s tragedy had been for Minato. How being kind to Kakashi when he was little and lost was the best investment Minato ever made. Kakashi understood, even then, that Minato had been able to become Hokage in no small part thanks to commanding a pet exorcist. Minato was of the right bloodline, certainly, but unmated despite being well of age and carrying on with a human woman – without Kakashi, things might have turned out very differently.

Kakashi had known all of this, and hadn’t cared. He’d put it to Itachi as doing the world a favour: nobody wants an extremist Hokage, and if not Minato, then it would be a Sabaku.

But really, that hadn’t mattered to him. Maybe Minato had been kind to him because he wanted to use him. Maybe Minato had been kind to him because he just wanted to, because he was a kind person or Kakashi had somehow appealed to him, or maybe he felt guilty about Kakashi’s parents. Whatever it was, it didn’t change how Kakashi loved him.

All the weeks everyone at school spent pulling each other into wardrobes after they’d read Narnia, and how Kakashi wouldn’t touch the wall because the failure of the doorway to materialise would be unbearable – and then alone, at home, banging senselessly on the walls, and there was no door, and it was unbearable — and then suddenly the door was here, opening inside him. Minato had opened it.

There wasn’t anything he wouldn’t have done for Minato, nothing he wouldn’t have given him.

But glory fades. Minato faded, worn down by an inglorious world. Being Hokage wasn’t like being the king in a fairytale, it was all about compromise and dirty deals and just trying not to let the world go to pieces. And Kakashi always did look down on him for loving Yui, because it wasn’t a love that could change the world, wasn’t a love that would burn the world before it was denied.

A Minato who would stand by and allow a child to pay for peace, who looked away from Sasuke’s
hungry broken face, that wasn’t the Minato that Kakashi had looked up to and loved as the sun.

Certainly Kakashi too had stood by, but that was different, that was the whole difference – Minato was supposed to be better than that.


“Maybe,” Naruto says, biting through a mint because he’s never had the patience to just suck them. “Maybe we should cut it off.”

They’re on a plane, cramped enough that’s Sasuke’s consented to stretch his legs out across Naruto’s lap. Naruto’s stroking his shins, slowing thoughtfully on the prosthesis, navy sweatpants bunching up under his palm.

“What.”

“Kyuubi could probably grow you an actual foot.”

“Probably,” Sasuke repeats dryly.

“He managed my hand, he should be able to do a foot.”

“No.”

“Hmm, but…”

“If you attempt anything of the kind, I will consider it an attack and respond accordingly.”

Naruto grins, showing off his canines. “I can take you.”

Sasuke’s haughty expression doesn’t change. “I allowed you to regrow your hand. Should I decide that you can’t be trusted with it, I might revisit that decision.” And there’s nothing joking about this, nothing negotiable.

“Sasuke…”

“No now.”

“Ah,” Naruto agrees, because this is obviously turning into a private conversation.

He picks it up again once they’ve landed, and are alone, after Naruto’s settled who’s going to stay up north and who’s going to return to the capital. Sasuke doesn’t have anything to pack, and neither really does Naruto, so he’s taken the opportunity to sneak up to Sasuke’s room, deciding that they’ll remain here overnight and get everything organised, before leaving early in the morning.

Just a gesture towards Sasuke’s leg, and Sasuke’s on the same page immediately.

He says with some impatience, “You can’t fix me, Naruto.”

“I’m not trying to. You don’t need fixing. It’s just – it’s just a waste, it’s not like you wanted him to take it, and now you can have it back!”

“No, I can’t. There’s no having it back.”

“But I could –”
“It’s in a jar in Kabuto’s office, it’s dead, I’ve outgrown it. It’s done.” He breathes out deeply, through his nose. “This is none of your business. You don’t have a say what I do with my body.”

“I feel what you do with it,” Naruto says. Standing close but not touching, drugged on the warmth from Sasuke’s body. “I care what you do with it. But I don’t decide, I get that. I’d just,” and he leans his forehead against the back of Sasuke’s neck, “like to do something. I couldn’t, when he did it, I just watched, and then all the time I was gone, and I never managed to fucking do anything, and I – I just need to.”

“I chose to run away,” Sasuke says, turning around. “You didn’t make me. I knew what the stakes were.”

Naruto nods. “I just – I just really hate it.”

He just visited Genma, and Tsunade’s seen to him by now, the evaluation is finalised – Genma’s crippled for life, because Sasuke was in a bad mood.

Still all Naruto wants is to step closer, to have more of Sasuke. He’s inside Sasuke’s actual soul and he still wants more, he will never be sated.

Basic self-respect, he thinks, common decency. They’re nothing, weighed against Sasuke.

There’s the constant nightmare of being away from him, of Sasuke outside his reach: of Naruto useless and worthless, another bystander as Sasuke’s life is torn to shreds. You can’t help me, Naruto. You can’t even help yourself.

His hands grow steady when he puts them on Sasuke’s hips, over the low waistband of his sweatpants. Naruto’s sweatpants, actually, since nobody’s got around to getting Sasuke any clothes of his own.

He swallows as Sasuke gives him a considering look, putting his hand on Naruto’s chest. Naruto’s heart jumps towards it, and Sasuke smirks, giving him a push. Naruto goes willingly, letting his knees buckle against the edge of Sasuke’s bed.

Sasuke does like him like this, Sasuke’s always got off on Naruto’s obsession with him – if he stepped forward now, in between Naruto’s knees, he wouldn’t be resigned. He wouldn’t have ulterior motives.

But he stays where he is. “My foot’s gone. Having Kyuubi’s replacement wouldn’t be any better than having Orochimaru’s.”

Because Kyuubi, to Sasuke’s mind, isn’t any more dependable than Orochimaru.

Orochimaru was there, when Naruto wasn’t.

“Mmh,” Naruto manages to say. “I guess, to be fair – if Kyuubi did grow you a leg, a flesh and blood foot, you’d break it anyway. If you, if you used it like you use the prosthesis, it’d be gone very quickly.”

Sasuke can’t disagree with him, but clearly isn’t prepared to agree either.


The incident with Mami already made it clear that Sasuke’s eager to test out Kyuubi’s abilities. A playmatch or two with Naruto will be a great opportunity.
And Naruto would love it so, so much: beyond the desire to fight and share, he wants to see it confirmed, have it confirmed for both of them, that Sasuke heals now, that it wouldn’t even matter if he lost his other leg because he’d have a new one at once.

They sneak down to the basement training facilities, and it’s unbelievably brutal.

The show matches in Rock were so much about holding back, about winning without breaking anyone. Bonding with Sasuke easily doubled his magic, and there hasn’t been much time to get used to it, he’s had to focus so much on holding it in. Sasuke leaves no room for such considerations.

There’s some mutual hesitation at first, because Sasuke isn’t used to anyone healing from what he considers death wounds and Naruto isn’t used to Sasuke healing from them, but it evaporates very quickly.

Sasuke’s visibly unfamiliar with Kyuubi’s strength, a strength that could power through concrete and steel, could lift lorries and throw them, but speed has always come naturally to him. Most shifters have a maximum speed dictated less by how fast their body can actually move, and more by how fast their brain can process input. In Sasuke’s case, this turns out be very, very fast.

Naruto gives up on keeping track of him visually, switching over to rely on sound and smell.

This becomes much trickier when Sasuke goes from using himself as a projectile to firing energy. Naruto rolls out of the way and breaks through a wall, Kyuubi’s power turned traitor, bent to Sasuke’s will: condensed into bullets and hunting Naruto across the floor.

It’s a different way of thinking about energy. Naruto visualises it as part of himself, coating his skin, turning into tails and ears attached to his physical body. Sasuke thinks of energy as incorporeal, as something he channels into the world.

He gets up behind Sasuke, sweeps a tail over Sasuke, letting it materialise, become physical, when it’s already bisecting Sasuke’s stomach.

But pain doesn’t stop Sasuke, it never has. He moves closer, impaling himself further, and kicks Naruto away, splintering bones and organs.

Naruto rolls to his feet and rushes him.

He loses track of how long they keep going. If they’d been human, they would’ve died, what – twenty times? Thirty? Naruto’s panting now and aching, Kyuubi’s energy focussed on attacking and healing critical wounds, with nothing to spare for numbing the pain.

Sasuke’s too fast, Naruto needs to get in closer, swoop in from a better angle – if he could just get in over him, if he – maybe he could.

He pulls at Sasuke’s power, and with the bond so strong now and the seal across his stomach, it’s child’s play to coat the soles of his feet in it. They burn, a bit, but they carry him into the air.

He runs four metres through pure air, and then drops himself like a bomb on top of Sasuke.

“I win.”

Sasuke glares up at him without responding, but he’s not getting anywhere. Naruto’s sitting across his thighs, keeping him from kicking or rolling, locking Sasuke’s arms above his head.

Eventually, as their panting eases, he responds to Naruto’s grin, a corner of his mouth twitching
upward. He moves his arm a bit, not struggling anymore but signalling for Naruto to let go.

He doesn’t use his released arm to force Naruto off, though. He liberates a knife from somewhere under his shirt, and cuts a thin line from Naruto’s elbow to his palm. Kyuubi’s too spent to heal it, so the shallow cut remains, bleeding all over them. Until Sasuke puts his hand on Naruto arm, drags his finger along the cut, and it closes under his touch.

Naruto’s stare at him is apparently a question, because Sasuke’s scoff turns into a slow, dark smirk. He tilts his head back a little, neck stretched. “To the victor go the spoils.”

Sasuke does like that Naruto’s sturdy, that he won’t be taken away by a careless injury. He could never have respected Naruto if Naruto had never been able to come out on top. Naruto’s fangs ache, and still he ruins the mood. “Do you like it more,” he whispers, a little hoarse, “that you can hurt me or that you can heal me?”

Sasuke looks away without answering. Only now does Naruto realise that they’re not alone anymore, that people have been watching.

Rationally that’s probably a good thing, Sasuke thinks of it as a good thing – shifters seeing Naruto vastly improved by the bond, and seeing Sasuke being useful too. Seeing, most importantly of all, Naruto winning, even if it’s only a play fight. Emotionally, their presence is more of an intrusion.

Still he stands up with a grin bright as victory, reaching down to pull Sasuke to his feet.

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Sasuke was tender with him once, in the sharp and stunted way of a child who’s never been shown tenderness untainted by violence. It had, to be honest, taken Kakashi some time to understand that tenderness was what it was.

The cliché things – how Sasuke slept curled tight in his arms, his habit of hiding his face in Kakashi’s chest, the consistent stealing of Kakashi’s shirts and subtly angling himself to lean in Kakashi’s direction – were not tenderness. They were learnt behaviours, a sort of subconsciously made emotional payment for renting someone’s attention and care. Sasuke’s confused and bad-tempered attempts to be close to him in a more honest way, that was tenderness. Leaving his school things around, bringing painkillers once when Kakashi had a fever. The way he’d stay sometimes, antsy in stillness, when all the words had run out and he didn’t want to leave.

Sometimes his fingers would stiffen on Kakashi’s skin, caught in some breathless intensity.

It ceased a long time, what feels like a long time, before Kakashi traded him away to settle his depts. It was a gradual thing, really: Sasuke never expected Kakashi to stand up for him, to be any kind of hero, and so there was never even a clearcut betrayal to look to as an explanation, an excuse. Kakashi just wasn’t good enough. Well, that’s life. He wasn’t good enough for his parents, wasn’t good enough for Minato, and he’s not good enough for Sasuke.

He rolls over in bed, restless and heavy with insomnia. Still always thinks too much at night. Scrolls through his messages, and Orochimaru’s sent him something.

The cliché things that weren’t tenderness, Kakashi doesn’t think Sasuke did them consciously – doesn’t think Sasuke could do them consciously – and so blinks now, his chest full of ashes, at a photo from what must be Rock. Naruto’s hand possessive around the nape of Sasuke’s neck, and it’s not a particularly large hand but its weight is palpable. This is how Sasuke could look around Orochimaru, how Orochimaru made him look in public settings, if Kakashi ever saw it.
He bet the most valuable thing he had, and he lost.

*Is this what you dreamt for him?* Orochimaru writes.

Kakashi doesn’t bother replying. He’s never dreamt for Sasuke, who can dream for himself, and dreams darker than… Kakashi still carries the memory in his hands of Sasuke small and soaked and snippy, clinging to him in that lake outside the Uchiha summer residence, which he realises sometimes pollutes his perception. Perhaps all this time he was just looking for something underneath all the hatred and darkness, something innocent and wounded, something that wanted safety, love, happiness.

Looking for weaknesses, in other words. It’s what he’s trained himself to do.

He was doing it the year Sasuke turned fourteen, idling away an evening at a peace celebration in honour of the armistice agreements that had ended with Sasuke given away.

He realised he couldn’t be entirely sober, because Sasuke apparently noticed him looking. He also realised Sasuke couldn’t be entirely sober, because Sasuke reacted by walking over and sitting down next to him.

He’s forgotten what they said, this strange evening when Sasuke was – was he fourteen? He might actually still have been thirteen – and smirking up at him with the full cheeks of someone younger and the hollow eyes of someone much older. But they must have said something, because shortly afterwards they were outside. Kakashi’s coat was open, stretched around the both of them. Again he remembered that summer day, after the boat tipped over, when Sasuke climbed up his side.

Sasuke said something about Kakashi looking at him like – and Kakashi had frozen there, because he knew whom he’d been comparing himself to, ogling a fucking child – but Sasuke didn’t say Orochimaru. Sasuke said, like Neji. And he’d breathed out, he could breathe again, because Neji wasn’t sick, Neji was just a repressed kid staring longingly at another kid.

He thought how at least Mikoto and Fugaku weren’t concerned with the Old Testament laws. Neji on the other hand had better learn to be subtle about yearning for other boys, because Hiashi Hyuuga most certainly was.

He dragged a fingertip along the slope of Sasuke’s nose. “You’re cold.”

“We could go inside.”

“Maa.” He looked up at the sky, dirty clouds and light pollution, because looking at Sasuke was inadvisable. “I don’t know that I can stomach another speech.”

Sasuke placed his hand on Kakashi’s ribs. “I meant we could go upstairs.”

And Kakashi did look at him then, which was a mistake. The moment sat heavy and silent on his shoulders, everything frozen around the warmth of Sasuke’s hand.

Sasuke lifted an eyebrow, his mouth curling into a strange shape. “It’s not like I’m a virgin. You know.”

And so they could talk about that now, acknowledge it as simple reality, and it felt like a kind of forgiveness.

His own eyebrows quirked upwards, in question. He tilted Sasuke’s face up, and couldn’t read his expression. Kissed him, also in question, or it began as a question, and it was – it was a thin,
smirking mouth with a lot of teeth, and it was everything he’d ever dreamt.

Sasuke kept his eyes open, staring at him, and there was still that trust, that impossible belief in him. A reflection of himself that he could stand to look at, for the first time in what felt like forever.

“Upstairs, you said?”

That was no excuse, but where else would Sasuke go? He was no longer the kind of boy who could be taken home safely.

So they sneaked up the stairs, past Itachi and Orochimaru and Sasuke’s parents, who’d failed perhaps worse than Kakashi’s own. It didn’t matter, for these few moments it didn’t matter, because he felt young and made new with this sudden return of hope.

His room was nothing remarkable, a fancy hotel room like any other, but it became different and special when Sasuke locked the door behind them.

In retrospect this isn’t a good memory, because in retrospect Kakashi can tell how businesslike Sasuke was about undressing. His shirt was off in a matter of seconds, and even so he made sure to catch the light, showed himself off from the most flattering angles.

In the moment he was mostly grateful that while Sasuke was still so short he could hardly put his arms around Kakashi’s neck without standing on tiptoe, he clearly knew what he was doing. Indeed, was possibly more sexually experienced than Kakashi himself. And God, he was beautiful.

He dropped to his knees like it was nothing, his hands a hovering heat against Kakashi’s zipper. This too was undone fast, trousers and underwear pulled down, and Sasuke started sucking him off right there on the floor. Clearly did know what he was doing, trying out an astonishing number of different approaches within the first thirty seconds to evaluate what Kakashi liked. How much teeth he should use, where to put his tongue, what sorts of sounds to make – moaning, slurping, breathy little sighs. He focussed on the tip, hands working the rest of Kakashi’s length, brushing against his balls before apparently realising Kakashi didn’t particularly like that. Then he was deep in Sasuke’s throat, grabbing for something – for Sasuke – to steady himself. Not much later, Sasuke swallowed without missing a beat, unperturbed by Kakashi’s fingers in his hair.

He pulled Sasuke to his feet after the most efficient blowjob of his life, and Sasuke’s thin lips were swollen now, wet and pink. They parted easily for Kakashi’s tongue, and Sasuke smirked up at him. “Not done yet?”

“No,” Kakashi said, tugging Sasuke closer and towards the bed. “Stay.”

Sasuke relaxed into him then, face pressed hidden against Kakashi’s chest, arms tight around his waist, sneaking up under his shirt.

“Hey.” Kakashi picked him up, chest tight with this desperate warmth that came when Sasuke placed his hand on it and then didn’t dissipate. Carried him the few stumbling steps necessary to sit him down on the bed. Sunk to his knees on the floor, pulling the sheet up around Sasuke. “Okay?”

Sasuke snorted impatiently. “You’re overreacting.”

“You don’t have to do anything,” Kakashi said, trying to coordinate fingering Sasuke’s hair behind his ear and pulling up his own trousers. “You’ve slept over before. It’s fine. Just stay with me.”

“You’re being ridiculous,” Sasuke told him, dry now and composed. “Was I such a disappointment?”
Kakashi lifted an eyebrow, touched Sasuke’s face. “Disappointingly quick, possibly.”

“Then come to bed.”

“Hmm.” He stepped out of his shoes and dress pants, and then decided to get rid off the shirt too because he looked ridiculous standing around in boxers and a fancy button down. Finally he crawled into bed next to Sasuke, and now that he’d been allowed to touch again it seemed so natural to put his arm around him, he didn’t think before he did it. Dragged his hand up and down Sasuke’s back, fingertips skimming across his spine.

Sasuke reached out, traced the scar that wound itself around the lower half of Kakashi’s face and under his jaw. Most people didn’t. He’d been told it looked painful, this simmering presence of actual evil caught just under his skin.

He leaned over and kissed Sasuke. It was a simple movement but it uncurled something inside him, unleashed it.

“Let me,” he said, and Sasuke did. It was with a sort of dumb wonder that he kept touching, wanting to touch everywhere, reach every part of Sasuke.

It was impossible to say if he’d never expected to or on the contrary had always expected to eventually go to bed with Sasuke – Itachi’s baby brother, off limits in every possible way and a million miles away from anyone else he’d ever touched. Sasuke was nothing like convenient acquaintances or smiling strangers, even less like the prostitutes that Kakashi tended to prefer. It was more honest with them. You pay money, renting a body to masturbate in: you don’t put yourself up for the bet that someone might care for you.

They were naked and grinding by the time he nudged Sasuke, suggesting they roll over, roll Sasuke on top.

Sasuke shook his head. “This is fine. This is good.”

He sort of stiffened just as Kakashi pushed in. And maybe it meant he didn’t want it, but it didn’t have to mean that. It wasn’t like Kakashi had never got fucked, wasn’t as if Kakashi didn’t know it could take a little getting used to. And Sasuke did get into it as they kept moving. He was essentially facing Kakashi’s chest, Kakashi had to bend like a hunchback to be able to kiss him, but God it was good, it was – everything he’d ever dreamt.

Everything he’d never dared to dream, with Sasuke curled into him afterwards.

Kakashi said things then, things he had no right to say. “I did know, I didn’t let myself think about it but of course I knew, I would’ve known if I’d let myself. I didn’t want to believe Itachi would do it, but of course I understood really…”

Blankness crept like hoar frost over Sasuke’s face. He maybe tried to get up but couldn’t, fell back onto the pillows and Kakashi’s arm, and so had to stay. Maybe had to stay. He might not – Kakashi couldn’t be certain that he’d meant to leave. “You followed orders,” he said evenly.

“I did,” Kakashi whispered, and could not stop himself, words bleeding out as though from a death wound. Truth was such an alien concept, but it was here now and unstoppable, and he understood it couldn’t set him free but he couldn’t cage it anymore. “I chose the mission, I chose the mission over you, I have no excuses…”

“No need for excuses.”
“I was wrong, I will never do that again.”

“Who made the call?”

Only now there was silence. Now, he couldn’t speak.

“You chose the mission over me and now you choose them over me.”

“What does it matter?” Kakashi said desperately, because he couldn’t tell Sasuke this. “It’s complicated. It’s – it won’t make anything better.”

“We said no excuses.”

“Yes,” he said, right into Sasuke’s shoulder. “It wasn’t me. You already know who was involved. Your parents. Itachi.”

“Oh,” Sasuke said, and so maybe Kakashi had told him after all. “Itachi too.”

Then in the morning, Sasuke pushing away the blankets, small and scrawny in the pale light. He was already dressed, already leaving, when he said, “This never happened.”

Kakashi remained lounging in the bed. “Obviously.”

For the first time since that horrifying midnight conversation Sasuke looked something other than blank. He looked like he’d been slapped.

That was when Kakashi knew Sasuke still believed in him in spite of everything, and so of course after that he could never stay away.

He could remember, dimly, a time when Sasuke was still nothing more than a little boy just like a hundred thousand other little boys, and Kakashi had no need of him. When Kakashi had been nothing more to Sasuke than an adult like a hundred thousand other adults, and Sasuke had no need of him.

But, as he’d read aloud to Naruto those many years ago, from one of the stories Naruto didn’t actually much like, once you tame someone, then you need each other. Then Sasuke was unique to him in all the world.

Kakashi had been very patient. He had sat down a little distance away, and looked at Sasuke out of the corner of his eye, and he had said nothing. Words, after all, are the source of misunderstandings. But he had sat a little closer, every day…

Now he sits alone looking at the ceiling, because Sasuke was never as tame as anyone supposed.
This is a strange thought, but it’s sort of for the best that Sasuke isn’t here, because Naruto’s taking a call from Dad.

Dad’s started calling him much more often, lately. It can’t be just because of Rock or the bombing, because he didn’t do this when Naruto was up north fighting a war, or when BEAST attacked the Sabaku stronghold. Sasuke finds it funny, in a predictable way: Naruto’s got the attention he always wanted, now that he doesn’t want it anymore.

Naruto can feel a certain black humour about it sometimes, but he always knows it’s not his black humour really, so it doesn’t count.

“Naruto,” Dad says, calling for attention. He didn’t use to have to do that.

“I know,” Naruto snaps. “We took care of Rock, just like I said. I’ll leave Temari here to make sure there aren’t any snags. No, she’s – how you ensure someone’s loyalty, you do that by trusting them. I’m trusting her. That’s final.”

“You’re overreacting.”

“No,” Naruto says. “Or, yeah, I’m upset, but I’m not – it’s not an overreaction. I know you think I shouldn’t be, but I’m – so pissed off and disappointed. You betrayed me. You betrayed who I thought you were.” Dad starts to reply, but Naruto talks over him, which is also new, “Also Sasuke hates your guts, and I can feel him hating you and – it’s hard.”

Dad sighs, “Surely you can’t blame me for looking out for my family, either of you.”

“We don’t? What you did wrong, you did seven years ago.”

“So you’re angry with me because you think I wronged him, and he’s angry with me because he’s angry at the entire world.”

“Yeah. Yeah, pretty much.” His eyes are burning a little, like he could cry. He doesn’t want to hate Dad.

“Well, that’s too bad. We’ll have to speak again later,” Dad says. “I have certain matters to attend to.”

So they’re back to stock phrases. The conversation’s limp, a dead body between them.

“Yeah,” Naruto breathes. “Yeah, sure, we’ll do that.”

Dad’s hung up before all the words are out.

There’s no point going directly to Sasuke, despite how he wants to. Sasuke isn’t sympathetic about Dad, and it’s unfair to fight with him about it. Naruto caught him thinking, once, that Minato doesn’t yet understand that even if Naruto were to forgive him, which is a doubtful but not impossible proposition, it still wouldn’t be the same. Naruto would no longer see the world with the eyes of a child, with a child’s unquestioning trust in his parents.

Naruto hasn’t had that for a long time, though.

But Dad, damn him, did bring up some salient points, which means Naruto does need to speak to
Sasuke after all.

Stepping into the corridor, he can hear Sasuke ordering people around downstairs, and smiles.

“Naruto.”

“Hmm? Shikamaru, hi.”

“I’m going with you. Back to the capital.”

“But Temari’s staying here to deal with Rock.”

Shikamaru shrugs. “She’s an efficient girl, it won’t take her long. She’ll be better off without me.”

“She needs you around,” Naruto points out. “If she needs extra energy, if she gets hurt.”

“Naruto. I’m a liability. She needs me out of the way to be able to do her job.”

“Things have settled,” Naruto argues. “Even Sasuke was fine, and Rock bloody hates him.”

Shikamaru sighs with some impatience. “Sasuke was fine because Rock was never a threat to him. You might remember that they did attack him. As they would attack me, test the boundaries. And that’s fine when it’s Sasuke, because he can take care of himself, but we both know that I can’t.”

The idea of bringing Sasuke to Rock sealed, a Sasuke who could not defend himself – Naruto cringes with the horror of it. He could’ve never let Sasuke out of his sight or even his arms, he would’ve had to burn Rock to the ground to protect him. And even sealed, Sasuke’s a good deal deadlier than Shikamaru’s ever been. “All right. Gotcha.”

Shikamaru nods, looking down over the banister rather speculatively. Towards Sasuke, actually.

“Look,” Naruto says, pausing mid-step. “I know you’re trying to get a handle on him or whatever, but if you bring up Kakashi to him, you won’t have to worry about his reactions, because I’ll wring your neck myself. Okay?”

“I hear you.”

Naruto rewards him with a big grin. “Great.”

Sasuke’s moved from the atrium to one of the conference rooms, and Naruto quickens his step as he discovers Genma outside it, staring in. Genma can move a little now, in the wheelchair. He still doesn’t look entirely like Genma, and probably never will again.

Sasuke apparently notices him, looking up with a rather sardonic smirk. “Was there something you wanted to say to me?”

“No,” Genma says. “No, I don’t seem to be having much luck talking to you.”

“That’s true,” Sasuke agrees. Still Genma remains, and finally Sasuke adds, “I don’t regret it, if that’s what you’re wondering. If you step out of line, I won’t hesitate to finish what I started.” Genma’s mouth moves, and Naruto’s really close now, he should have time to clamp his hand over it before Genma can say anything – but again Sasuke speaks first. “I understand you have a mate. Think about if this is really how you want them to die before you respond to that.”

“Thank you,” Genma says stiffly, and rolls away. Naruto will have to talk to him later, but Sasuke’s a more pressing concern.
“Hey,” he says, stepping into the conference room and shutting the door behind him. “Done terrorising the minions? Isn’t that a little beneath you?”

“Hn.”

“Yeah, anyway.” He rubs at the back of his head, where his hair’s already a mess. “Are you okay going back?”

Sasuke looks up from whatever papers he’s going through. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“With, you know. With everything. With Orochimaru, and everyone. He’ll be around. He’ll want to see you.”

“Obviously.”

“I just meant – given everything you told me in Rock, that –”

“That never happened.”

“Of course it bloody happened!” He stares at Sasuke in honest confusion, and Sasuke’s staring back – wary, confused too, and Naruto tries to explain how Sasuke is the centre of his world, the axis on which his world turns. There’s no possibility of overlooking anything to do with him, or forgetting it: Sasuke’s the realest part of his life.

“How weak do you think I am?” Sasuke hasn’t been this angry with him in a good long while, his seal visibly writhing and crackling. The incredulous, somehow hurt anger blisters against the inside of Naruto’s skin, makes the brand on his stomach burn. “I’ve handled Orochimaru for years. You were gone and safe, I was still there!”

“I know! That’s why I’m – it’s all a mess. I don’t, I want things to be better!”

“I’m not some helpless little victim,” Sasuke sneers at him.

“I know that!”

“Then what the fuck?”

“That’s not what I meant! But you’re all fucked up in the head about him, and it’d be strange if you weren’t, but – it’s gonna be hard and it’s gonna hurt, and I – I wanted to do better. To be better. For you.” The lights overhead crack and blink, disturbed by surging energy. Kyuubi responds to the threat of Sasuke’s upset, rising through Naruto’s skin

“You’re delusional.”

“What?”

“I should’ve never told you anything.” It looks like he just rests his hand against the table, but the table splinters under his touch, catches fire. The sort of fire that burns so hot, there’s not even any ash. “I spent years keeping you safe from him, where the fuck do you get this ridiculous idea that you could ever save me?” This is a cold fury, wielded like a weapon. “You’re not my saviour, and I’m not your fucking damsel. I don’t need saving!”

The glass lining the walls, fake windows all around the room, shatters. Naruto’s jaw is clenched so tight, the bone in it breaks, a sharp crack and then Kyuubi filling his mouth, mending the bone and sharpening his canines.
“I know that!” Naruto screams at him, but subdued now. Because he does know. He tried and tried, and it was never any use. He couldn’t even save Sasuke from having to save him. “I do – I do want to swoop in and save you and make everything okay. But that’s – selfish, stupid. That’s me wanting to redeem myself. That’s not… When I say we’re a team, that’s not just code for wanting you to exorcise for me. It means we get through shit together.” He breathes in, in, in. Trying to reach for Sasuke, and Sasuke smacks his hand away. “When Mum died, you were there. You even, you even came to the funeral. You knew they’d beat the shit out of you if you did, and you came anyway. Because I wanted you there.”

Sasuke frowns at him. “Do you think it made me feel better to have you there watching?”

Sasuke’s foot taken away. Naruto inside that cage, and Orochimaru reaching for Sasuke.

Sasuke did protect him, when Naruto stepped over the lines of Dad’s protection. Naruto kind of brought this up with Sasuke once, on a painfully hot day when he could blame teary eyes on the sun, white-knuckled fists on an earlier scuffle with Gaara. It cost Sasuke, to have Naruto insert himself into Sasuke’s life.

Sasuke had started at him, unable perhaps to speak. Finally he said, I never asked you to.

Which wasn’t telling Naruto to stop, and so had to mean that it was worth it, that he paid the price for Naruto’s presence and it was worth it. Otherwise, presumably, he’d stop protecting him, and let Naruto reap what he’d sown.

That would be the only alternative, because no matter how Sasuke felt about it, Naruto wouldn’t be able to leave him alone. Naruto taking a step back was never a possibility: Sasuke’s only choice was protecting him or watching him die.

Only Sasuke never acted like there was any choice, even though Naruto knows full well that Sasuke’s let thousands of people die without a second thought.

In the present he demands, “Didn’t it? Wasn’t it better, to have someone there who was on your side?” It has to have been, his hands are fisted tight and the arteries along his fingers bursting open with how much it has to have been better.

“It’s not like that,” Sasuke says. Less angry now, but no more approachable. “It didn’t help me, having you there when he –”

“It should – I mean. If someone doesn’t help you because they can’t, they try and try but they can’t – that has to be different than if someone just chooses not to.”

“The result is the same,” Sasuke says.

“Then –”

“Of course it fucking matters!”


“Look,” Sasuke says. “You got the boyfriend experience in Rock, but that’s not – I don’t give a fuck about shifters one way or the other, so whatever. But how I handle the exorcists, that’s my business. You’ll follow my lead or stay out of my way.”

“I don’t want to go against my people.”
“I don’t care.”

“That’s —”

“No. The exorcists are my concern. I will deal with them as I see fit.”

“Right. Yeah. Okay.” His mouth spasm into a kind of smile. “Thanks for being straightforward with me.”

“Tch. Like there’s any other way to get through to you.”

“Mnh. Heh.” He steps a little closer, until he can kid himself that he could reach for Sasuke and catch him. “I’m your best friend.”

Sasuke lifts an eyebrow. “Yeah. And how proud you must be, what with the murderous competition for that title.”

“Tch,” Naruto echoes. “I’d still be your best friend even if everyone else wasn’t an arsehole.”

“Unlike you?”

“Unlike me,” Naruto agrees. “I hope unlike me.”

On the plane, during the night, Sasuke sleeps in the seat next to Naruto’s. Naruto keeps staring at him like a creep: they’re not on good enough terms for Naruto to touch his face, brush his hair away, without Sasuke snapping away. Naruto’s concern insults Sasuke.

“Stupid bastard,” Naruto mutters, disgusted to hear his own voice come strange and soft. Sasuke always sleeps like a little kid, curled tightly in on himself. His fringe falls heavy and dark across his forehead, matched by those thick lashes that seem to be the only thing keeping his eyelids down over rapidly moving eyes.

Kyuubi strains heavily inside him, trying to tug him down over Sasuke.

Naruto shakes his head, curling up in his seat, right next to Sasuke. He leans his head on Sasuke’s shoulder, letting it be a pillow for Sasuke’s own head. This sort of touch, more pragmatic and so less intimate, Sasuke sleeps through. Naruto sighs, letting himself be lulled by the rhythm of Sasuke’s pulse, and the flickering beneath it: the rhythm of Sasuke’s dreams.

And Sasuke, Naruto discovers, dreams about Orochimaru. And however angry Sasuke got about it, Naruto was right: Sasuke is all fucked up in the head about him.

Drawn into Sasuke’s dream, Naruto watches him sit at a kitchen table with what looks like some sort of homework. Piles of books, though older and thicker than textbooks. One of them open in front of him, and Sasuke frowning at the writing. Naruto doesn’t recognise the language, or even the letters.

And then Orochimaru leaning over him, Orochimaru’s hand covering Sasuke’s shoulder, Orochimaru’s hair falling into his face.

“What’s this?” he mumbles, and his voice comes raspy and creepy but also indulgent, rather teasing. “Don’t tell me you’re not old enough to know how to read, Shinigami-chan.”

Sasuke scowls at him, mute and mutinous but not moving.
And it’s so strange – Naruto sees threat in Orochimaru’s fingers closed around Sasuke’s shoulder, violence in the brush against Sasuke’s clavicle. Sees sexual innuendo in Orochimaru leaning over him. But if he’d just happened upon the scene, hadn’t known…then he might have just seen a grandfather or someone, pulling out a chair now and teaching Sasuke to read whatever language the book’s written in.

He does know that it was Orochimaru who finally broke Sasuke of his Japanese accent, who pulled perfect RP English out of him at last, although when he’s tired or upset or talking fast some extra vowels still slip back in.

Sakura had said something about Sasuke maybe wanting to keep the Japanese private, but Orochimaru speaks Japanese too, so that would’ve been pointless. Pointless!, Naruto screamed at her, blowing up completely, utterly out of line. Iruka – he’d stayed with them so much, at that point, that he’d started thinking of Sakura’s dad as Iruka rather than as just Sakura’s dad – had had to step in. They hadn’t thrown him out though, even though he’d probably deserved it.

In the present Sasuke keeps dreaming, and Naruto’s dreaming along with him.

Sasuke in a hospital bed, too injured to move as Orochimaru enters the room. Maybe it was Orochimaru who did this to him, hurt him so badly he can barely breathe, but he comes in now and sits on the bedside. Strokes Sasuke’s hair out of his eyes and kisses his forehead. There’s nothing weird in it, nothing painful or sexual. There’s – this tenderness. He stays there on the bedside until Sasuke falls asleep, stroking his hair.

Naruto – doesn’t know what to do with that, and is relived, so foolishly relived, when the dream moves on.

Moves on to a Sunday evening, which is to say a jenga evening on the pale purple carpet in Orochimaru’s office. Sometimes Kimimaro joins the ritual, sometimes Kabuto, but usually, like tonight, it’s only Sasuke and Orochimaru. These weekly Sabbath hours, between eight and eleven, are a breathing space: something normal.

Sasuke’s not punished for not playing, and not rewarded for doing it.

He’s sitting now in front of an impressive tower, unmoving. He’s just barely twelve years old and this is when he gives up.

He’s struggled every moment of every hour of every day for a long time. Now there’s nothing left: he’s hollow, drained, empty. He doesn’t have any more fight in him.

Naruto’s been gone for months, and slowly, with the inevitable slowness of a glacier, Sasuke lies down on his back on the carpet. He does this meeting Orochimaru’s eyes, in clear invitation: make me feel.

He remembers Sakura reading to him, long ago, He had hated and he had loved, he had hoped and he had ceased to care, and it was all so far away.

Orochimaru kneels over him, touches the base of his throat. It’s awful, obviously, Sasuke’s still with dread and with this grey emptiness, but he’s also waiting with a sort of sick anticipation.

Orochimaru runs his hands through Sasuke’s hair, soft comforting strokes interrupted by sudden sharp tugs. Kisses him, holding his jaw open even though Sasuke’s not trying to bite anymore.

Still kissing Sasuke, he undoes his belt. It’s a rather thick leather belt, the same one he once closed around Sasuke’s neck and pulled him to the floor with. Dragged and strangled until Sasuke was
forced to crawl across the floor after him like a dog, gagging on outrage and the desperate lack of air. It was a relief when he finally whipped him with it instead.

None of that matters anymore.

In the end Orochimaru does that thing he likes, pushing in only to pull out completely. Entering again and again and again, just as Sasuke’s body clenches tight shut. Driving home the fact that Sasuke can’t keep him out.

He’s not trying to lock him out now. He’s denied and raged and bargained: there’s nothing more to be done, this is his life. Orochimaru tilts his hips, forcing Sasuke’s legs wider. Sasuke doesn’t fight him, knowing: this is his home, this is his family, this is his life.

And Naruto cringes away, sits up straight and awake in his seat. His heart beats so it hurts. Sasuke!

His most important, most precious person in the world, who doesn’t even think of this as a bad memory.

Naruto sniffs, tries to unclench his hand and can’t, so wipes the snot with his fist.

Tries to digest the fact that Sasuke really doesn’t think this was so horrible: thinks of it, rather, as learning to reclaim sex as something he could decide to have, rather than as something uncontrollable that was done to him.

Naruto blows his nose in his sleeve.

Sasuke wouldn’t thank him for waking him up now.

“Hey,” Naruto tells him, in this low rusty voice shredded by Kyuubi’s fangs. “I need you, okay?” He closes his hand around Sasuke’s wrist, and it’s Kyuubi’s huge hand brimming with energy. Sasuke’s lashes flutter, his nose scrunching up, but he doesn’t wake. “Okay,” Naruto says, putting his head back on Sasuke’s shoulder. “I’ve got you.”

And he could never stay away from Sasuke, so it’s a given that he slips back into the dream. The dream in which Sasuke’s now in a night-time kitchen, fumbling with a glass. Whether it’s alcohol or pain meds affecting him, he can’t be entirely sober, because he drops it and curses. Moves to pick it up, and steps on broken glass.

Sharp fluorescent light suddenly hits his eyes, leaves him squinting at Orochimaru in the doorway. Orochimaru shakes his head, stepping into a pair of slippers before entering the room. “Hop up,” he says, and Sasuke levers himself up on the counter. He’s finally stopped squinting at the light and is giving Orochimaru a bad-tempered look through his lashes. “Hmm.” Orochimaru brushes the glass away before kneeling on the floor, taking Sasuke’s bleeding foot – Sasuke’s human foot – in his hand.

Naruto cannot stand this. Steps in, forces himself more solidly into the dream, until he takes Orochimaru’s place. Until it’s Naruto kneeling on the floor holding Sasuke’s foot, acting out Orochimaru’s role.

He strokes the sole of Sasuke’s foot, along the grainy patch of his heel, along the subtle curve of bone and under his toes. Sasuke stares at him as he takes hold of the glass shard, pulling it out sharply. Cutting Sasuke’s foot more open in the process, provoking a hiss from Sasuke. Still meeting his eyes, Naruto leans forward and licks along the cut, until the bleeding stops.

Sasuke never looks away from him, leaning back now on his hands. His knees are open and he
wants him.

Naruto stands up between his legs and pulls him quickly off the counter. Sasuke hisses again, the cut reopening as he puts weight on it and Naruto grabbing his hips, turning him roughly around and bending him over the sink. Naruto crowds him, biting the nape of his neck even as he pulls down his trousers, exposing his arse, the tops of his thighs. Gets his own trousers down too, grinding against him.

Sasuke leans on his elbows, panting into the sink.

Naruto reaches around, pinching his nipple through his shirt.

“Do you want this?”

Sasuke doesn’t answer.

Naruto slaps his buttocks. “Such bad manners.” Another slap, Sasuke’s skin flushing red. “You will speak when spoken to.” He grinds harder, then lets up in order to beat him. “I suppose you’ll have to be punished. Maybe that’s what you really want, hmm?” He grinds again, letting his cock drag against the cleft of Sasuke’s buttocks, then pulls back to hit them, then rubs again, hits again, rubs, hits, until he ejaculates all over Sasuke’s arse and thighs.

Sasuke stares at him over his shoulder, eyes half closed, mouth half open. Naruto’s sperm glistens white in the sharp light, dripping down the curve of his arse.

Naruto reaches forward, pinches his buttock, smearing his seed against Sasuke’s entrance. “Wet for me, hmm?”

Already he’s getting hard again, and Sasuke still is.

“Go up to your room,” Naruto orders him. “Wait for me. Don’t wash.”

Chest shuddering with his panting, Sasuke steps out of his clothes and walks past him out of the room, tracking bloody footprints.

When Naruto’s followed him up the stairs and into his room, Sasuke’s on all fours on the bed.

“Ah,” Naruto sighs, sitting down just behind him. Stroking proprietary hands over Sasuke’s hips and arse and thighs, touching flaking sperm and inflamed skin, his own handprints clearly visible. He leans forward more. “I’d better clean you up, hadn’t I? Such a dirty boy.” And he starts licking, long intrusive strokes of his tongue, sucking his own spent pleasure from Sasuke’s skin.

By the time Sasuke’s clean, Naruto’s aching with how hard he is, and Sasuke’s moaning faintly, unable to keep entirely still.

“Such a dirty little boy,” he repeats, positively purring. “Tell me now, do you want it?”

Sasuke still doesn’t answer, but Naruto can’t wait anymore. Loses that contest of wills, and it only makes him harder, makes him get up on his knees behind Sasuke, grabbing Sasuke’s hips to pull him back onto his cock. There’s little need: Sasuke’s body welcomes him, open and hot and slick.

“Scream for me,” he whispers, slamming into Sasuke’s willing body. Sasuke disobeys, but he does choke on his climax, which hits him like a bullet train. “My, my, my,” Naruto mumbles, watching his dick fill Sasuke’s impossibly tiny hole, the overwrought, wretched expression of Sasuke’s face, knowing he has taken possession of this, and –
He sits up in an airplane seat with cold sweat soaking through his clothes, caught by Sasuke’s wide-awake eyes.

“What the hell, Naruto.”

He keeps swallowing. “I’m so sorry.”

Sasuke punches him in the face, hard enough that Naruto’s on the floor before he’s fully registered what’s happening. He’s barely up on his elbows before Sasuke descends on him. Sits heavy on his chest, one hand locked strangling around his throat, the other punching his face again and again.

Naruto’s skull has fractured and healed half a dozen times when finally he manages to get his legs under him, buck up and roll.

But he’s lost momentum, and can’t regain it. Sasuke beats the shit out of him, again and again.

It must’ve been an hour before Naruto heals and doesn’t immediately get injured again, and can eventually crawl into a sitting position. Sasuke too is sitting, his back against the seat.

“Ouch,” Naruto mumbles, and the corner of Sasuke’s mouth quirks.

Still, this was less about Naruto stepping into the relived memory and more about Naruto suggesting, earlier, that Sasuke might have issues seeing Orochimaru.

Maybe that even makes sense. Naruto’s already seen and second hand-experienced Orochimaru straightforwardly raping him: physically overpowering him, taking him violently and against his stated will. This was… more complicated.

“You – let him, or – wanted – or – would you let me? Do that?”

Sasuke lifts his eyebrow, face tilted sideways in that birdlike way he didn’t have as a child, didn’t have before Orochimaru, but which is integral to him now. “Would you want to?”

Naruto breathes out, looks down at his hands fiddling restlessly before meeting Sasuke’s eyes again. “Part of me does.”

Another impression Sasuke wouldn’t want Naruto to glean: Sasuke lying naked on Orochimaru’s chest, Orochimaru’s pubic hair tickling his leg. Midmorning light across an enormous bed, and they’re talking in teasing tones and touching each other with the relaxed expertise of long-term lovers.

“Of course,” Sasuke drawls.

“Don’t.” It’s said sharply, like prayers are when they count.

Sasuke scoffs at him. “Tell me again how you’re nothing like him.”

“I didn’t groom you for it since you were little!”

“No,” Sasuke agrees. “You’re just happy to reap the benefits of someone else’s dirty work.”

“That’s not true,” Naruto says, miserably but with conviction. “You doing it when you have a choice and you doing it when you don’t have a choice, that’s not the same.”

Sasuke shrugs.
And Naruto should stop now, he should. He hears himself blur, “Did you, um. Did you do stuff like
that with other people? With, like…”

“With Kakashi? No.” Sasuke snorts, looking away briefly. “No, he would’ve been horrified.”

“Oh. I mean – yeah. Of course.”

Sasuke makes an impatient gesture, frowning at Naruto’s confused distress. “That’s not – sex and
violence don’t connect for him. They do for you.”

Naruto tries to keep his face from crumbling. Needing to remember what Kyuubi did the night
Sasuke locked Naruto away inside his own head, and not sure he could live with the memories.

Sasuke shrugs again, a bad-tempered movement. “Stop obsessing about it.”

Kyuubi’s – Naruto’s really – tail whispers against Sasuke’s foot, and Sasuke pretends not to notice.
Naruto manages to smile a little. Feels himself stupidly blushing, overwhelmed by being here with
Sasuke. “That’s, um, not going to happen? I mean, they’re all going to be there. Your whole family.”

“I handle my family a damn sight better than you do yours.”

Naruto pulls his legs up tight against his chest, leans his cheek against his knees. “Mmh.” If by
family Sasuke means parents, and if by handle he means remain untouched by, it’s sort of true.

Naruto’s said some shitty things to him about his mother, and he heard from Sakura that even
Shikamaru kind of did – the sort of talk that Sasuke would’ve never allowed, except that Sakura was
there.

But he hardly reacted when Naruto bitched about his parents, and he clearly wasn’t bothered enough
to immolate Shikamaru after Sakura had left.

Sasuke and his parents learnt to turn their back on each other a long time ago.

“I’m surprised you’re not arguing about that,” Sasuke tells him, his voice soft and sleepy.

Naruto shrugs. “I never really – got them, I guess. I love them, but it’s more like… Mum was more
like Sakura, sort of? You know. Reasonable. And Dad’s how he is. Of course they’re my family and
I love them, but. They’re not my kind the way you are?”

“Reasonable isn’t very you.”

“Reasonable’s overrated.”

“Yeah.”

“Mmh,” Naruto says again, and curls sleepy and close.

xxxxx

The Sabaku stronghold is both sterner and more luxurious than the bombed Hokage building: more
reminiscent of Orochimaru’s compound, or for that matter Sasuke’s family home.

Naruto’s horsing around with his brat brother, and Kushina catches Sasuke’s eye. He lifts an
eyebrow, but why not? Nods absently at Naruto, and follows Kushina up the stairs and into a library.
The walls are covered by the kind of heavy, leather-bound books that wealthy people who don’t
actually read buy in bulk to furnish this type of room.
Kushina sinks into an armchair. Sasuke leans against the wall, arms crossed over his chest.

He’d have believed this woman was Naruto’s mother. She has Naruto’s impatience and Naruto’s intensity, an utterly different species from mousy Yui.

Kakashi’s said once or twice how she never bothered raising Naruto. Looking at her now, Sasuke has to disagree.

“I want to be straight with you,” Kushina says, clearly also sharing Naruto’s sense of tact and subtlety. “I don’t care about you personally, you know that, but you’re family now and that matters to me.”

“You’re not my family.”

She snorts, pulling at thick red curls that seem to have got stuck in the zipper of her fleece jacket. “I’ll take that as a compliment.” She sobers then, gives him what Naruto describes as her stern mum face. “You’re my family, though. I’m not going to lie, you’re not who I would’ve chosen, but it’s my experience that you don’t get to choose these things.”

“Naruto’s not your family.”

“But he is, though. It’s messy and we’re not close, and – I’m certainly not his mother. But we are family. I’ve lived with him as long as I’ve lived with Minato.” She shifts in the chair, finally getting her hair loose. “Anyway our bond’s more open than yours, and you can’t doubt that Minato loves him. It bleeds over.”

“My condolences,” Sasuke says dryly.

“Hmm?”

“That’s horrible.”

She makes a thoughtful face. “Sometimes it is. Usually not. Well, but of course my standards are different.”

“If you’re going to give me a speech –”

“Fine. I’ll give you the speech.” Her mouth purses, in a movement decidedly unlike Naruto. She doesn’t try to hide the ugly, complicated expression, which is very like Naruto. “You know I supported the idea of Naruto and Temari Sabaku. Obviously, everyone knows that. But have you thought about what it means?” Sasuke chooses to interpret this as a rhetorical question, and shortly she continues, “Naruto bonded to Temari would mean Naruto inheriting. A joint Namikaze/Sabaku pair, there’s no way they wouldn’t, no matter who his mother was. In those circumstances, I would’ve supported him inheriting over Konohamaru. It would’ve been in the best interest of my people.”

“Anyone can see Naruto would make a better Hokage than Konohamaru.”

She makes a face but doesn’t deny. Maybe she does love Konohamaru, she at least acts as though she does, but then setting up a weakling for leadership isn’t doing anyone a kindness. “And now, with Naruto bonded to you… Well, there’s nobody in the world who could give Konohamaru a stronger bond than that. The odds of him getting a crusader are astronomically small, and even if he did, he’d just die.” She shrugs. “Maybe Kakashi would take pity on him, come to that, but. What I’m saying is, this is where we are. What I’m trying to say is – are you on his side?”
Sasuke stands up from his slouch, and Kushina makes herself not tense. This is where it counts. Certainly Sasuke’s been responding far better to her than he ever has to Minato – as she keeps saying, you know what usually sounds like the truth, Minato? The truth – but this might blow up in their faces yet.

“I’m sure you heard about Genma,” Sasuke says.

“I did. About the other people you wiped, too. I certainly know about Jiraiya. Well, to be fair – this might be condescending, maybe you did make the call, but looking at it from the outside, the one I blame for Jiraiya is Orochimaru. But the point is – I know. I’m not pleased about it, but these things happen.”

Sasuke tilts his head sideways, in a movement disturbingly reminiscent of Orochimaru. “What must you think of me.”

She tries a grin. “What is it they say? Some men just want to watch the world burn.”

That’s her first mistake, but it only takes one: that’s when she loses him. She certainly wouldn’t have said he was approachable before, but it’s so obvious now how he closes himself off. Maybe he thinks she doesn’t understand him, which is true, or that she doesn’t take him seriously, which unfortunately isn’t.

God, he’s fifteen. It’s impossible to believe that she’s ever been that young.

Naruto quoted that line to him once, when they were kids: Naruto could say it in a certain tone of voice and could make Sasuke laugh. Naruto alone can presumably still say these insane things to him.

“Look,” she says. “My bad. I just wanted to say – this is me. What you see is what you get. You have trust issues or whatever, I suppose we all do, but this is it. No hidden depths.” She tries a smile. “Well, I’d like to clarify I meant there’s nothing hidden about them.”

But Sasuke’s cut himself off from her.

Later, when Naruto finds him, he’s perched on a windowsill in a corridor. One of the private ones, where the cleaning staff isn’t allowed, so there’s dust clinging to his jeans.

“Hey,” Naruto mumbles, climbing up beside him. “You disappeared.”

“You’re such a brat.” He cocks his head sideways, leaning it against the wall. “You could’ve had a mother.”

“I did have a mother.”

“Technically so do I.”

“Do not compare Mum to your freak mother.” He bites his lip, breathes out. “And I don’t want to be an also-run.” He’s never wanted to be embraced because of pity or obligation, or bleedover love, or because he was being favourably compared to Konohamaru. As the saying goes, he did not want to be loved enough. He wanted to be loved overwhelmingly. “I want to be picked first.”

Sasuke snorts. “Unlikely.”

Naruto scrunches up his nose at him. “You’d pick me first.”
Sasuke lifts an eyebrow, his smirk rather quizzical and not without warmth. “I hate you.”

“Yeah,” Naruto admits. “I’m still your favourite person.”

Sasuke’s exhalation is heavy, bordering on being a sigh. He looks across the corridor, through an open door. “Were you aware of that?”

Following his look, Naruto discovers Gaara.

Only it’s not really Gaara at all.

In the blink of a horrified eye, he’s across the corridor and beside Gaara, who sits stiffly in a chair. He smells so strongly of drugs, his scent is barely recognisable. Eyes wide open, with only Shukaku’s impotent rage reflected in them: no understanding, no personality.

Naruto grabs him by the shoulders, shaking, and the contact sizzles through his palms. Gaara is what Sasuke once called a monstrously strong shifter, and Shukaku bristles and burns under his touch.

“What the hell!”

“Naruto. Naruto, calm down, please.” Shizune’s voice, and Shizune’s faintly pained face. “I’m very sorry, but he’s too heavily medicated to respond. Don’t – please. You know he’s been letting Shukaku out a lot. We’re one or two episodes away from him going beastmad.” From losing control permanently, becoming only a host for Shukaku. “We can’t have that. Even his father – his father insisted we take preventive measures, until a more permanent solution could be found.”

“This is not a solution.”

Sasuke behind his shoulder then, a sharp spike of solidity and warmth. “So let’s wake him up.”
Love Is Not a Victory March

He leaves Naruto arguing with Tsunade and her lackey – he doesn’t know why they bother, Naruto’s obviously going to win.

“Sasuke.”

“What?”

Kiba visibly tries to keep his face neutral. “They’re really waking up Gaara?”

“He’s no good to anyone like this.”

“Well, yeah. Just – he was pretty crazy. Really crazy. So I didn’t think you’d…”

Sasuke shrugs. “Naruto can handle him.”

“Yeah,” Kiba says slowly, grinning at him as though they’re suddenly friends. “Yeah, he can. Anyway, I was looking for you because – someone’s here to see you.” He leans out of the room, waving to someone. “He’s in here, guys.”

Sasuke finds himself ambushed by Sakura and her useless father. It’s inexplicable that Ibiki Morino should have sired this bumbling, naïve man – presumably it was a unanimous decision that Iruka stick with his mother’s maiden name. But Mama Umino’s long gone by now, and Iruka must be a few years older than Anko, though he seems much younger.

It’s him speaking now, apparently realising that neither Sasuke nor Sakura is going to. “Hello, Sasuke. It’s good to see you again. We, well. We brought you some things.”

“Yes,” Sakura pipes up, her voice relentlessly bright. “I, um. I figured you hadn’t had much time, and I – I’m always more comfortable when I’ve got my own things. So I thought.”

Sasuke looks for the words and eventually finds them. “That’s kind.”

Her smile becomes a little more genuine. “Yeah? I’m glad. Maybe we could bring them to your room? You can have a look, if you want, see if there’s anything else you need.”

“Sure.”

Iruka hands Sasuke the suitcase he’s been carrying and makes his excuses. Sasuke, who hasn’t bothered checking rooming arrangements, leads Sakura to the guest room Naruto thinks of as his.

The bed’s a single, but that’s fine – Naruto can sleep on the floor.

Sakura puts her bags – his bags, he supposes – down and stands uncertainly, pulling nervously at her own fingertips. Naruto used to tease her about that.

“I’m sorry,” she says abruptly. “I was – I was being self-centred. I was applying my standards to your life, and – and I think they’re good standards, but your life is very different. So that wasn’t fair.”

“Okay.” He puts his hands in his pockets and then, annoyed with himself, takes them out. “I was nasty to you. You don’t deserve that.”

“Okay,” she says, much more softly than he managed. Walks close by him to perch on the bed. “Is,
um. Is Naruto here too? I think I owe him an apology as well. We didn’t really say goodbye.”

“He’s walking up Gaara.”

“Oh. Um, is that… I just mean…”

“Naruto can take him.” He shrugs. “Or I can, obviously. I meant, he’s been obsessed with Naruto since we were kids.”

“You always believed in him.”

“Hmm?”

She smiles, fastening her hair behind her ear. “Naruto. You always – obviously now he’s powerful and everyone counts on him, but even back when he was this little runt. You know, when everyone discarded him because of his mum, and he maybe had a lot of energy but he couldn’t control it so they thought he was useless – you believed in him. How did you always know?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He feels himself frowning, shrugs it off. “He’s Naruto.”

Her smile grows, teasing but brilliant. “Of course he is.”

He shakes his head. “You’re such a little bitch.”

“Shut up!” She punches his arm but then pulls at it until he sits down beside her. “You’re the only one who talks to me like that, you know.”

“Tch. You like it.”

“Yeah, I guess I kind of do.” She jostles against him, close and familiar. “Now be a good boy and open your presents.”


It becomes very quickly very clear that Sakura hasn’t chosen these things for him. The clothes are all his size and his preferred colours and cuts. Sakura could possibly have got that right, could have conceivably managed his toiletries and electronics. Unlikely, but not impossible. But the weapons – his favourite guns, his favourite knives – and the exorcist paraphernalia, there’s no way Sakura could’ve picked out these things.

Sasuke puts the earphones away and closes the suitcase. “You talked to Kakashi.”

“Yes. I’d hoped I could just speak to Neji, but he – doesn’t know you. He was just – that is, did you really, like, have a fling with him?”

“Sure. I’m the – what is it they always say about Ino? The village bicycle. Everyone’s taken a ride.”

“That’s a disgusting thing to say about someone! Also everyone has not taken a – a ride. I for one haven’t. Oh, for God’s sake, don’t look so horrified, it’s not like I want to. I suppose if anything, Naruto would be more my type.”

Sasuke’s eyebrow shoots up. “That’s not what you said when he was pursuing you.”

“Hmm. He was so, you remember, he was so upset about the divorce, so obsessed with reuniting the family. And then his mother had just died. His mother, I might add, who was a mousy human girl. With green eyes.”
“Well, you can’t have him.”

“I know. He’s always been yours.”

“Everyone says that these days.”

“Mmh. Really, what would you have done, if he’d been bonded to someone else?”

He lifts an eyebrow, which never really has any effect on Sakura. “Naruto’s convinced I would’ve killed them.”

“You’re not? Oh, don’t – obviously I don’t think you would’ve. But you’re usually all about killing people.”

“If he needed a medically advised sidepiece, as long as they knew their place…”

Sakura’s mouth quirks. “Wouldn’t you have been the sidepiece?”

“No.”

“Well, no, I suppose you wouldn’t.”

“Whatever.” He falls back on the bed, pulling her along. “So did you finish that Murakami or what?”

Sakura’s long gone by the time Naruto wakes him up by opening the door. Sasuke remains sleepy and curled up beneath the covers until the bed dips under Naruto’s weight and Naruto starts pulling some of the duvet towards himself.

“No,” Sasuke mumbles, much more awake and pushing at Naruto. “Sleep on the floor.”

“This again?” Naruto grumbles. “All right, I’ll – no, wait, actually, not all right.”

Sasuke kicks at his hip.

Naruto grumbles some more and grabs his ankle. “This has been a shitty day and I’m tired and I’m not going to sleep on the bloody floor. I’ve been in the bed with you a dozen times already and you’re hardly traumatised. Scoot over.”

“No. You’ll just touch me and we’ll get stuck in the fucking dreams again.”

“Then we’ll make sure to wake up from them together.” Naruto pulls the duvet over his legs, his head hitting the pillow.

Sasuke sits up, pulls on a discarded fleece jacket, and moves for the door.

“What’re you doing?”

“You sleep in the bed. I’ll find another one.”

“There’s people everywhere. Don’t be absurd. Just come back to bed.”

“Do you actually think there’s anyone here I couldn’t kick out of their room?”

“Fine. Jesus. All right. I’ll sleep on the floor. Just stay.”
“Fine.”

Naruto rolls off the bed none too gracefully, sprawling across the carpet. “Toss me a pillow at least.”

“Hn.” Sasuke kicks the extra blanket off the bed too, and Naruto builds himself a cocoon.

“Gaara wasn’t really there yet,” Naruto says, a low voice in the dark. “I sat with him, but it was mostly just Kyuubi and Shukaku screaming at each other. Gaara wasn’t awake yet.”

“Tch. That might be for the best.”

“No it’s not. But I’m going back tomorrow and we’ll get it sorted out.” He inches closer, dragging against the carpet, closer but not too close. “Sakura was here.”

“Yeah. She says hi.”

Softer now, which isn’t a natural tone for Naruto and so comes out rather rough, “Sasuke… You didn’t betray her.”

“Don’t condescend to me. Of course I betrayed her. I just couldn’t – go back anymore.”

“I know.”

“And I’d do it again. So don’t tell me it’s not a betrayal because it fucking is.”

He lied to her for years and then he stopped lying, and he’s not sure which is the worst betrayal.

“I mean,” Naruto says. “It’s not the same with everyone. You’re different with different people, like – I’m saying this wrong, but. If I acted with you like I do with Kiba, that’d be a betrayal of you. But it’s not a betrayal to be that way with Kiba.”

He’s so earnest, such a shock to listen to sometimes. Sakura said, He’s always belonged to you. Sakura knows nothing, and even she knows that.

It’s always been Naruto’s mantra: people need people, people belong to people.

“She’s been my friend for a long time,” Sasuke says carefully. But it’s a relative friendship: they’ve betrayed each other now like he always knew they would. Sakura can only be his friend if he lies to her.

There’s no going back from that, and going forward afterwards you do it as different people.

Like there’s no going back from how there was Naruto, his whole life was saturated with Naruto, and then suddenly from one day to the next Naruto was gone, and there were months and then years of Naruto being gone.

Now here he is again, and everything is different. Like how he had a foot, all his life he had a foot, and then suddenly it was gone, and when the prosthesis was attached he could walk again but it wasn’t the same.

“We tried to take care of her,” Naruto says. “After I was gone, you still tried to take care of her.”

Sasuke shrugs.

Sasuke smiles thinly. “Kakashi could take care of himself.”

“Yeah,” Naruto agrees. “That’s what he does best.” He falls back, pillowing his head on his arm. “You must’ve had other people. You know, when I wasn’t – around.”

Sasuke shrugs. “I got along with Kimimarou.”

“You were friends with Kimimarou?” Naruto splutters, edging up onto the bed after all but keeping his distance.

“No really.” He sits up, resting his chin on the tops of his knees. “Like I said, Orochimaru took him in, Kimimarou loved him. He never had anyone else.”

Naruto’s toes sneak forward and lock around the hem of Sasuke’s pyjama trousers. “This got depressing fast.”

“You asked.”

“You don’t have to take everything as a criticism, you know.”

Sasuke hmms, unconvinced and prickly but not strictly uncomfortable.

“Shit,” Naruto mumbles. “I’m such a spoilt brat complaining about my parents, huh.”

“At least your mother isn’t absent because she wants to be,” Sasuke says, rather acidly That cuts, he would’ve seen that on Naruto’s face even if he hadn’t been able to feel it, though that wasn’t necessarily how he’d meant it.

Naruto moves up on his knees, moves closer. “Mmh. And I guess both our parents are disappointed in us.” He leans forward, they’re close now. Sasuke’s heart stutters, a wrenching in his chest, and the bond’s as closed as it can be while still allowing Naruto to function, so it’s not just bleedover. “Mum always thought I was so reckless, so careless with people, and Dad thinks I’m soft. God knows what’s wrong with your parents.”

“Yeah.” It’s more breath than word. He reaches out to touch Naruto’s hair.

Naruto arches into his hand for a long time before smiling, “I guess we’re the runts of our litters, huh.”

“Hn.”

Naruto laughs, low and deep, and leans in to nudge his face against Sasuke’s. Sasuke’s fingers catch in his hair, locked tight in it. The kiss is deep, the good kind, it feels like Naruto’s slipping under his skin.

Sasuke needs to leave.

“Don’t freak out,” Naruto mumbles, catching his mouth again and again, until Sasuke grabs his face and keeps him in place, close as they can get. “I never want to be away from you. I always want more of you, I – it’s like I said, I wake up thinking about you and I go to sleep thinking about you and all the time in between I never stop, I couldn’t stop…”

“Naruto,” and he meant it matter of fact but it comes out breathless. “I’ll kill you if you stop.” Naruto looks at him like he’s a miracle, and fuck, Sasuke’s not going anywhere. Naruto’s mouth comes back to his, Naruto climbs into his lap to get closer. Sasuke’s whole body is buzzing, hot and tingling from
I belong to you,” Naruto gasps, and Sasuke’s kissing him and kissing him, lost in it, feels his hair sticking to his skin with sweat and only wants more. He’s lost track of how to control his face: eyes shut, lips open, and all of him feels open, overwhelmed by this sudden emotional excitement.

Naruto does belong to him, he’s Naruto’s whole world and necessary to every beat of Naruto’s heart. Naruto…loves him. It’s fucking up and tainted and messy, but it’s real. It’s who Naruto is.

“God,” Naruto mumbles in between kisses, “I need you so much. You can’t ever leave, I can’t let you ever be away from me.”

“Good,” Sasuke breathes. And what the hell is he saying, but it prompts a sound from Naruto, a sound of unbelievable relief and joy, and any further words Sasuke might have spoken are stuffed back down his throat by Naruto’s tongue.

There’s a hard knock, and next moment light spills through the doorway, illuminating Tsunade’s raised eyebrows. “Naruto. Gaara’s asking for you.”

It’s much like being dosed with ice water, left raw. Sasuke hasn’t been this naked with anyone – emotions acted out and visible – since… since before he had Naruto sent away. But this is not a good time to think about the past.

“Granny,” Naruto groans, still straddling Sasuke’s hips and looking awkwardly over his own shoulder, “could you have worse timing?”

“Could have come ten minutes later,” Tsunade snorts.

“Just go. I’ll be up.”

Tsunade laughs, but she obeys.

Sasuke pushes Naruto off him. He’s fully dressed and people have watched him getting fucked more than once, it’s senseless to feel so exposed.


“Just go.”

Naruto stands up obediently, but lingers. “But really… Oh. This wasn’t – this was different. You were excited because –” Because it was me, because you love the way I love you. Because Naruto’s love is enormous and endless, a love to shatter the sky.

“If you ever want me to be excited again, you will shut up.”

“Okay. What? You being excited again is very important to me!” He steps closer, fingers curling warm and proprietary around Sasuke’s jaw. “Don’t tell me you wanted me to insist.”

Sasuke swallows confused challenges and feels like he’s swallowing retches.

“Why are you,” Naruto hesitates. “Why are you thinking about Kakashi? And – Itachi?”

“Get out of my head.”

“You can’t just –”
“Seriously get out.”

Naruto apparently doesn’t take him seriously, which hurts no one so much as Naruto himself, who takes a quick step back, an incredibly disturbed look on his face.

It breaches the surface, Sasuke’s last memory of emotional nakedness. It’s a memory of being little, of before Orochimaru: of not understanding that taking off your armour means the hits will kill you. Kakashi’s arm around his waist and Itachi’s fingers spilling down his face, tickling his eyebrow. Kakashi mumbling in his ear. Sasuke laughing, breathless like he’s been tickled – a laugh that doesn’t sound like his own, a soft stupid sound – slipping free of Kakashi’s arm and edging forward into Itachi’s lap. What matters is the way his fingers curve greedily, reverently around Itachi’s heartbeat, the weight of Kakashi’s cheek resting against the top of his head.

It has much less impact than he would’ve thought, has lost most of its resonance. It leaves a gritty feeling.

“I get it!” Naruto snaps, cutting the memory off. “Okay, I get it! That’s what you wanted, I’m not. Okay!”

“But I don’t.”

Naruto freezes.

“But you did – and now… I know you didn’t choose me.”

“I could’ve let you die,” he snaps, hears the words brittle and resentful. Minato would’ve killed him then, or given him back to Orochimaru, but Sasuke wouldn’t necessarily have minded dying. He made a choice. Naruto keeps staring and he can’t stand it. “I told you. It could’ve never been anyone else.”

“Sometimes I feel sick at how much I need you,” Naruto says, swallows. “I’m so relived now. But it’s so unfair, I need you too much. You have so much power over me.” Sasuke snorts, reminded of Itachi and Kakashi and Orochimaru, one long row of betrayal and violence and violation. “The power to be unhappy with me, to take yourself away from me. To just not want me. I love you and I want this but – I ...belong to you. I don’t – it’s not right to need someone this much and sometimes I really, really hate it.”

“I know.”

Naruto smiles crookedly, his eyes suspiciously wet. “I know you know. You always know.”

“Tsunade’s going to come back any time.”


He doesn’t look at Sasuke as he takes Sasuke’s hand in his, and because of that Sasuke lets him hold on for a few seconds. Naruto’s is a good hand, with large knuckles and sensitive fingers, the life line like a scar across the palm. It’s the kind of hand you could hold on to hanging over the abyss and feel safe with.

He can’t have these thoughts. These feelings.
“Out.”

Naruto’s eyes widen, clearly hearing the resonance. The resonance that comes of Sasuke drawing on Uriel, cauterising what feels like an open wound of the soul with the brilliant radiance of an inhuman Heaven. Naruto backs out of the room so quickly he stumbles through the doorway, his skin already blistering.

Sasuke pulls more light through the seal, scourging himself clean of any emotion.

xxxxx

Gaara’s eyes are open now, and are finally Gaara’s eyes again.

But Naruto’s barely inside the infirmary before Gaara grabs something off a tray and throws it in Shizune’s face.

The smell of acid and corroding flesh is immediately overwhelming.

“Gaara what the hell!”

They’re both kneeling on the floor then, where Shizune’s fallen. Her beast is weak, so weak the healing isn’t even visible yet. Her face flakes and erupts, flesh melting off it.

Gaara leans forward and licks it up.

Shizune screams.

Naruto punches Gaara off her, curses and struggles to keep Gaara restrained as he moves towards the alarm button on the wall. Shizune needs him to keep Gaara away from her, but she also needs him to call for Tsunade.

He sits on Gaara’s chest, pinning his arms and snarling down at Shukaku, until finally Tsunade comes.

“Right,” she says. “Let’s get him on the bed. We need to restrain him.”

Between them they break his bones and force him down, lock hundreds of kilos worth of reinforced metal over him.

“What the hell?” Naruto demands again when Tsunade’s taken Shizune away, pacing beside Gaara’s bed.

Gaara’s rather blank, annoyed expression doesn’t change. “I was angry. She’d kept me captive. I retaliated.” He turns his head a little, the only part of his body he can move. “She’s weak.”

“She’ll heal,” Naruto says. “She was trying to do what’s best for you.”

“You disagreed with her.”

“Yeah,” Naruto says, stopping now. Staring Gaara down. “I said you were better than that.”

“Hypocrisy is beneath you,” Gaara says flatly. “You’ve got Uchiha’s smell all over you. He would’ve done exactly the same thing.”

“You wanna talk about hypocrisy?” Naruto bends over him, so close Shukaku’s teeth snap shut just short of his face. “I don’t expect shifter loyalty from Sasuke. He’s never held forth on the importance
of pack.”
“A functional pack is about having a few alphas and a lot of followers. People need to know their place.”
“What for? Will that make them happy?”
“It’s not about happiness.”
“Then what’s the point? If I force you to bare your stomach, what will that get us?”
“You can try.”
Kyuubi grins at him, wider than a human mouth should be able to and feral. “Come back when you’ve been bonded, and we’ll see if you stand a chance.”
For the first time, Gaara looks away.
Naruto sinks down on his bedside, the little bit of it not covered by restraints. “You’ll be fine.”
“I’m always fine.”
“Two out of three of your litter already bonded human. What’re the odds, right? You’ll be fine.”
“I’d kill them,” Gaara says. He’s not looking away anymore. “If I ended up with a human, I’d kill them.”
“That’d be a waste.”
“Yes,” Gaara agrees without hesitation.
Naruto leans over him. “Don’t you want to live?”
“I do. But not under any circumstances.”
“That’s a coward’s way out.”
“Not any life is liveable.”
“Then you change it! You make it better.”
“Have you found a way to undo a bond, then?”
“No, but – ”
“A life chained to something I can’t abide – I won’t have it.”
Naruto rotates on the bed, until he can put his legs across Gaara. “You’re such a fanatic.”
“Humanity should be exterminated.”
Naruto snorts. “Isn’t that such a waste? Then who’s gonna be our slaves?”
Gaara stares, then snorts, the looks – oddly betrayed. “Did Uchiha say that?”
“You can hardly have thought I came up with it.”
“Maybe I hoped.”

“Look. Shifters are objectively biologically superior to humans. Sure, that’s obvious. But that can’t be all that matters. In that case exorcists are way superior to shifters and humans both.”

“That’s bullshit. A single bullet, they’re gone. They’re nothing.”

“If shifters were exterminated, nothing would happen. The world would go on. But if there were no exorcists? The entire fucking world would be gone within a month.”

“We’ll exterminate humanity, not the exorcists. We’ll keep them as our weapons.”

“Mmh. And so are we gonna discuss the likelihood of subduing the host of Heaven, or are we ready to talk about the fact that I killed your brother?”

“You did what you thought was best.”

“Yeah.”

“You didn’t mean for him to die.”

“No.”

“You chose that girl over him.”

“No. I didn’t – I never thought she’d kill herself just like that. I wouldn’t have let her do it if I could’ve stopped her.”

“Why?”

“Because she died and Kankurou died! They could’ve both lived!”

“She didn’t want to.”

“Yeah, well, suicide is not okay. Other people need you.”

“Is that why you forced yourself on Uchiha?”

“I didn’t!”

“He let you?”

Naruto shrugs, uncomfortable “Well, yeah.”

“Oh. But you wouldn’t have killed yourself for him, then? If he didn’t want you. You’d have forced him.”

“Of course not! Dying for someone else and dying just because you’re too weak to stand your own life, that’s different.”

“You wouldn’t have been dying for him,” Gaara snaps. “He can obviously live with being someone’s fucktoy. If you killed yourself over that, you’d be doing it because you were too weak to handle what you’d done.”

“You know,” Naruto says, his face hurting around a wobbly smile, “you sound just like him.”

Gaara looks like he’d shrug, only the restraints don’t allow it. “I’ve never liked him, but he’s not an
“idiot.”

“You’d have liked him fine if he wasn’t an exorcist.”

“Maybe.”

“Anyway it would’ve been his decision. If I killed myself or not. It was his decision.”

“You let him decide? Naruto!”

Smiling really hurts now, it cuts through his face. But if he stops he’ll cry. “Not every life is liveable. If he wants me to die, I can’t live. It’s weak. It’s a betrayal of everyone else. But it’s how it is.”

“I don’t understand how he doesn’t want you dead.”

Naruto laughs. It’s a ragged sounds that feels like it scrapes his throat raw, gritty and coppery in his mouth. “Neither does he.”
Just Gonna Stand There and Watch Me Burn

His own clothes are cut differently than Naruto’s, tighter and more fitted, with less colour and no ridiculous prints. They hide his weapons by show off his assets, as Kakashi put it. Naruto’s slightly broader shoulders would hardly fit in his shirt.

It’s time he got on top of things.

He walks briskly though the building, and the shifters have learnt by now not to stand in his way.

In the lift he discovers Jiraiya, who still looks like an injured beast.

Naruto’s grandfather is younger than Orochimaru but appears far older, his shaggy hair already white. He also shares Naruto’s rather eccentric taste in clothes, and doesn’t wear them well: shoulders perpetually sagging, the left one more than the right, although he can’t help that.

Sasuke did that to him, six years ago, and hasn’t actually spoken to him since.

Today too they ride the lift down in silence. Jiraiya doesn’t speak until they’re on the ground floor and Sasuke makes for the door.

“Uchiha,” he finally snaps. He says the name like he thinks it’s an insult, which is ludicrous. “You don’t think you’re leaving?”

Sasuke turns slowly to face him, savouring the moment. “Try to stop me.”

Jiraiya snorts. “If I decided to stop you, you’d have to kill me to get out.”

“So?”

Jiraiya snorts again, a rather animal sound. “Naruto would never get over that. And then –”

“Yes, he would.”

There’s nothing Jiraiya can say to that, apparently even Jiraiya realises that: there’s the kind of love that goes away – enough distance, enough time, enough hurt, and it can fade – and there’s the kind of love that doesn’t. Sasuke turns his back on him and walks out the door. Jiraiya growls, but he’s been useless for a long time and must be used to being left behind.

One of the guards outside reaches for Sasuke – “are you really supposed to…” – and Sasuke immolates him without thought. The rest of them have the sense to leave him alone.

He waves down a taxi, forgetting that he hasn’t got any money until they’re stopping outside Orochimaru’s compound. It’s similar to the Sabaku building, and evidence of the city’s age: one of those incongruous houses, a private mansion in between highraises, built in the days when this street was situated just outside the city rather than in its centre.

“He’ll pay you,” Sasuke decides, pointing at Jirobou standing guard. Jirobou will either pay the driver or kill him, Sasuke doesn’t much care which.

The gate still opens under his hand. There’s no door here that won’t open for him.

The corner of his mouth twitches up sharply. “Tadaima.”
He walks through the familiar building, through rooms he’s spent years walking, running, crawling through: walks straight to Kabuto’s lab. Nobody interferes, until he’s standing there in the antiseptic smell he associates with impersonalised torture. Whatever Orochimaru did to him, it was always very specifically about Sasuke. To Kabuto, in contrast, he was just a piece of meat, a means to an end whose reactions were irrelevant.

Sasuke occasionally provoked him into going too far, so he could show Orochimaru a cut that might scar, an injury that might impede his ability to carry out missions. That always ended up hurting Kabuto far more than it hurt Sasuke.

Kabuto seemed surprised each time, as though he’d really believed that he could ever compare to a crusader. Kabuto, like Temari’s human, has a mistaken idea of what determines a person’s value, and keeps suffering for it.

“Hello, Sasuke.” Kabuto blinks. He usually only does that when talking to people he perceives as dangerous, to win time before having to speak. “I’m afraid Orochimaru’s not home.”

“I know. I’m here for you.”

“I see.” Kabuto blinks again, his eyes cutting to the container with Sasuke’s foot. “I’d really like to…”

“I didn’t really come here to talk.”

He steps forward quickly and cuts off Kabuto’s tongue. It’s a moist, dead thing in his hand.

Kabuto makes a sound like a cow screaming. Tries to clench his jaws together, to trigger the suicide substances hidden in his gums.

But Kabuto’s not even a crusader. It’s child’s play to do to him what Kakashi did to Sasuke, in the car driving to Minato: force more power into him than he can handle, short-circuiting him with it.

Kabuto collapses into his desk chair. Sasuke smiles.

There are running footsteps outside, and then a security unit entering, presumably called by Kabuto’s agonised noises.

“Leave,” Sasuke says.

They obey. They’re used to obeying Sasuke, and nobody likes Kabuto, nobody here hasn’t dreamt of killing him.

Kabuto’s eyes have been pained but only now become scared.

“They don’t take orders from dead men,” Sasuke says.

He’s fantasised about doing a lot of things to Kabuto over the years. Today he does them.

Kabuto’s been experimenting with shifter healing, not without results, and so won’t die easily: Sasuke can cut off his arms and legs in increments. Pull out his nails. Slice off the tips of his fingers, the first knuckles, second knuckles, half the palm. The entire hand, and then bit after bit of the wrist and then the arm, working his way up to Kabuto’s shoulder, until Kabuto doesn’t have any limbs.

It takes a long time.

Sasuke pauses halfway through the second leg, cauterising the wound with Uriel’s fire and starting
instead to flay Kabuto’s torso.

He tears the skin off in porous stripes, exposing the bleeding meat underneath and rubbing it with salt. Pulverizes Kabuto’s ribs, using Kyuubi’s strength to crush them between his fingers. Flakes of bone fall like snow inside the hollow of Kabuto’s chest.

All the time, Kabuto’s screaming never stops.

It’s gratifying for a while, but in the end Sasuke cuts off his dick and gags him with it, forcing it deep into his mouth.

He leaves Kabuto for a little while, retrieving some of the lab rats. Placing shields inside Kabuto to protect his vital organs, he reaches inside the cages for the rats, putting them in the holes where Kabuto’s arms and right leg used to be, letting them feast as he finishes the flaying and the last amputation. The sound of their chewing intermingles with the sound of Kabuto trying to scream.

Only when Kabuto’s last limb is gone does he burn Kabuto’s face off, watching his eyeballs boil and melt down the black, crackling mess of his cheeks.

xxxxx

“I’d like to be able to send you as our liaison to Rock,” Kushina says. “Your sister’s there now, as you might have heard, but there’s little doubt you’d be a better fit.”

Gaara, still restrained from the neck down, gives her a dry smirk. “Temari’s rather more moderate than I am.”

Dad shrugs. “Doesn’t she have to be? Given Shikamaru.”

They all fall silent as Sasuke’s steps become audible outside the room. Naruto’s felt him approaching for some time, has left Gaara’s bedside to strain towards the door.

Dad was freaking out about Sasuke burning some guards to leave, but Naruto knew Sasuke never meant to leave. It’s new, that Dad takes his word over Jiraiya’s.

“Maybe he’s good for you,” Gaara says into the silence. “He shares my views on humans. You’d have never said shifters are obviously superior before you were bonded to him.”

Sasuke steps into the room carrying a large plastic sack.

Naruto lets himself be distracted from the weigh of that, catching the hem of his shirt. “These aren’t my clothes.”

“They’re mine,” Sasuke tells him, surprisingly patient. “Sakura got them for me.”

“She went to Orochimaru’s?”

“To Kakashi.”

Naruto’s fingers tighten around the fabric. “You kept clothes at his place.”

“It’s not like I could borrow his.”

It’s hard to argue with that. Kakashi’s tall, even for a white man: Sasuke would look like a child playing dress-up, Kakashi’s clothes pooling around him.
“Sasuke,” Kushina interrupts. “Good to have you back. I understood from Naruto that you went to see Kabuto Yakushi?”

“Ah,” Sasuke agrees. “I brought you a gift.” With the sunniest smile Naruto’s seen on him since they were little children, he drops the sack.

It opens to reveal what Naruto understands intellectually to be Kabuto, but what doesn’t – it doesn’t look like anything that’s ever been a person. Kyuubi stirs in interest.

“I’ve sealed him off,” Sasuke says, gesturing to what seems to be a glowing rosary twisted around the thing. “Once that’s taken off, he’ll go nova. You could consider him an anti-demon bomb.”

Naruto touches his hand. “How’re you…” He saw things like this up north, and was so sick he collapsed on his hands and knees in his own vomit. But anchored by Sasuke’s satisfaction, he’s so calm now.

Sasuke smirks, steady and sure. “I’m good.” It’s not a lie. Clearly those advocating forgiveness as the key to rehabilitation haven’t properly appreciated the healing properties of a good vengeful torture.

Gaara laughs. “Do you remember what your stupid little human used to tell Uchiha? Evil is almost always human. You can live with evil, laugh with evil, undiluted evil is very hard to find, but irredeemable evil is not. Look around you, Naruto – maybe she should’ve been telling you.”

“Not now, Gaara,” Kushina says. She slants a look at what used to be Kabuto. “Can I keep this?”

Sasuke shrugs. “It’d be a waste not to use him.”

Kushina says, “I quite agree.”

“All right.” Sasuke speaks then into Naruto’s ear, “I’m going to fuck you until the only word left in your head is my name.”

Naruto gives him a kiss, a quick deep kiss that Sasuke surprisingly accepts. “Let’s.” Sasuke’s done an evil thing: it would have been simpler, cleaner somehow, if that had made Naruto want him less, if that had mattered more to Naruto than holding Sasuke’s hand, smelling Sasuke’s skin. He likes to think it makes a difference that Kabuto – there’s no way to deserve something like this, but Kabuto certainly came close.

Rather later, he nudges his face against Sasuke’s. “You really gave Dad and Kushina an exorcist bomb. That’s gotta be the weirdest dowry ever.”

“You’re so stupid.”

Naruto might have taken more offense if they hadn’t still been naked. He leans up and kisses under Sasuke’s jaw, licks along his veins.

Sasuke smirks, then scoots down and bites his nipple quite hard.

“Ouch,” Naruto grumbles, swatting at Sasuke head even as he’s arching up for more. He tightens his legs around Sasuke’s hips, and feels something warm seep down his buttock. “I get it more about the condoms now.”

“You didn’t seem like you minded.”

“I don’t. I like it.” He reaches behind himself, dragging his fingers through the sperm on the upper
backs of his thighs and licking them clean. Sasuke gives him a rather odd look. “What?”

Sasuke unfortunately rolls off him. “It’s not like it tastes good.”

“It’s okay,” Naruto argues, and then hears himself say, before he can stop himself, “I sort of want to drink mine out of you.”

But Sasuke just stretches, fucked-out and gorgeous in Naruto’s bed. “I don’t mind.”

“Really?”

“Sure. Orochimaru did it all the time.”

“Eww.”

Sasuke gives him an impatient look. “He kissed me all the time too, are you going to stop doing that as well?”

“No,” Naruto grumbles, rolling onto his side and kissing Sasuke rather thoroughly, hand curled around the back of Sasuke’s neck. “You could,” he mumbles. “I mean, obviously. If you wanted to, you could…”

“If I’d wanted to, I’d have done it. It’s disgusting.”

“Excuse me? You love it when I –”

But the idea of putting his mouth on someone’s arse is disgusting to Sasuke, even more so with the heightened smell and taste of bleedover shifter senses. “I’m not doing it,” Sasuke tells him, scratching up his ribs. “I’m never drinking it again either.”

“Again? We never…”

Sasuke shrugs, pressed close and relaxed. His toes flex, tickling Naruto’s shin. Naruto thinks how his strongest memory of Kabuto involves Sasuke’s foot, the one that’s lost now: the white arc of Kabuto’s arm bringing the bone saw down. He knows for a fact that Kabuto kept the foot afterwards, as a trophy maybe. He’d have said Kabuto’s paid for that now, only there’s no paying off a dept like that.

His ears ring faintly, the world still distant and static like a limb that’s fallen asleep. But Sasuke’s here, and while this was very different from last night, with no emotional openings, Sasuke’s at least comfortable seeking pleasure in Naruto’s body.

“Sometimes when he was enjoying himself with both of us, he’d come in Kimimarou’s mouth and then have him spit it up in a glass. I was supposed to drink it.” Sasuke shrugs again, his shoulder dragging against Naruto’s chest. “Kimimarou always got it down when it was his turn, but I threw it up. Then he made me drink that too.”

Naruto goes cold. Kyuubi growls, jealous and possessive. “But you’re mine now.”

Sasuke kisses him, slow and hard, before edging Naruto’s mouth down towards the seal.

xxxxx

“Am I to understand,” Mikoto asks, “that you had Sasuke assassinate Kabuto Yakushi?”

“No,” Kushina says, blowing steam off a spoonful of borscht. “I don’t have the authority to make
Sasuke assassinate anyone. If I did, I wouldn’t sic him on Kabuto.”

Mikoto hums tunelessly. “It would be senseless. Despite his shifter experimentation.”

Kushina lifts her eyebrows. “You’re acknowledging that now?”

“Off the record I’ve never denied it.” Mikoto brings a piece of meat to her mouth and chews slowly. “It was a beastly practice.”

Kushina snorts. “Agreed.” She has some more borscht, wipes her mouth meticulously on the thick cloth napkin. “I understood Orochimaru’s out of town.”

“Yes,” Mikoto says, putting her cutlery decisively to the side. “He’s consulting with his following.”

“Your extremists.”

“In a manner of speaking, yes.”

“Are we in a war?”

“Jesus, Kushina. We never ceased being in one.”

“We’ve had seven years of peace.”

“Temporary measures. A war doesn’t end until there’s a winner.” Mikoto draws in a breath. “Our extremists, as you call them, they can’t be negotiated with. They’re fanatics. True believers. You must understand this.”

“Orochimaru’s managed to keep them in check.”

“They respond to power – and to the promise of a final purging.”

“And the rest of you – what? Sit by? These people are not a majority. We’ve got fanatics too, we’ve got the beastmad – well, we deal with them. We have them put down or handed over.”

Mikoto ignores this. “I couldn’t help seeing this,” she says, taking her phone from her handbag. “Would you like to explain?” She angles it towards Kushina, who presses play.

It’s a short clip, less than thirty seconds. It shows Sasuke on the pavement, carrying the sack with Kabuto’s remains. Some reporter, visible only in the form of a microphone, asking a question drowned out by static. Sasuke smiles the cold smile that was Orochimaru’s long before it was his. He says, “I’ve been asked to tell you that I’m not being held against my will. This time it’s even true.”

Kushina sits back in her chair. “I don’t know what you want me to explain. I don’t control what Sasuke says, or whom he speaks to.”

“Is that so? That seems rather inconvenient for you.”

“Mmh, well. He’s wiped quite a few of ours,” Kushina admits.

“There was quite some surprise that he didn’t exorcise Rock. It was considered that the only logical conclusion must be that he was still too sealed to manage it.”

Kushina chooses to shrug. “Naruto can be fairly convincing when he wants to be.”

Mikoto again hums tunelessly, looking blankly past her.
“You know,” Kushina says. “I remember speaking to Kakashi, years ago now. He said how there was so little to gain, for the rest of you, in aggressively opposing your fanatics. Exorcist fighting exorcist means diminishing the world’s protection from demons, it’s contrary to your calling. And what would you be doing it for? A subhuman race of filthy beasts.”

“If he understood that,” Mikoto says, “I’m surprised he serviced your husband for as long as he did.”

“If you wanted to keep him on your side once you’d finally got him, you shouldn’t have given away Sasuke.”

“Sasuke’s a child,” Mikoto says. “Kakashi had no right.” A pause, before she adds, rather more belligerently, “And before you judge me, you remember that it’s not my people, not my family, who would have been slaughtered if Orochimaru hadn’t been pacified.”

“I’m aware.”

*What do you do, Shikamaru Nara keeps asking, when the bigots are right? Some people really are worth more than others.*

One day, she has to believe, one day they will have created anti-demon weaponry that anyone can use. One day, everyone will be able to exorcise. That day is not today.

Mikoto asks, “Are you considering returning him?”

“That’s not an option.”

“You’re not expecting me to believe that you value your husband’s bastard over the rest of your race.”

Kushina smiles thinly. “What Itachi and Orochimaru could do to a little boy and what Minato and I can do to a grown crusader are two very different things.”

“I suppose Sasuke’s never been martyr material. He wouldn’t…”

“Go back to Orochimaru on his own? No. Not for us, not for you.”

“Still, the alternative might well be to let the world burn.”

“I’ll be frank, I’m having difficulty understanding why you think he’d be opposed to that.”

“I’d hoped I’d raised him better.”

“Mikoto, you didn’t raise him at all.”

“No, you didn’t,” an all too familiar voice says.

Kushina closes her eyes for a second, allows herself that one moment of respite. “Naruto.”

“Yeah. Tsunade asked me to find you. About the – situation from the infirmary. I guess she didn’t know who you were seeing.”

Mikoto smiles her devastating smile, the smile like a polite slash across her mouth. “Hello.”

“Naruto,” Kushina interrupts. “Where’s Sasuke?”
“At home,” Naruto says. “He’s hanging out with Sakura.”

“Good. That’s good.” Relatively speaking, it’s for the best, though Sasuke with Sakura has always reminded Kushina of that parable, something Sakura herself must have quoted: a lynx trying terribly hard to pass itself off as a housecat. If that pretence breaking down means Sasuke failing her, then of course he was always going to fail her. In fact, Kushina had assumed that the end of that charade – well, that it would end with Sasuke eating her alive, and is relieved that it hasn’t happened. As yet, it hasn’t happened.

“Maybe,” Naruto says. Ever since he came, he’s not stopped staring at Mikoto.

“Well,” Mikoto says, standing. “However I raised him, I clearly didn’t do it well enough. I’m disappointed.”

“You’re a disappointment,” Naruto says. His voice comes searching and young, trying to find words for a situation they were never meant to cover, for the sort of betrayal and horror that language can’t contain.

“That wasn’t my point,” Mikoto says mildly, collecting her handbag.

Kushina puts a restraining hand on Naruto’s shoulder, but of course there’s no stopping him now.

“How can you say that?” It’s not a rhetorical question. It’s wretched and real, an echo of that famous cry: *why have you abandoned me?* Sasuke, Kushina remains absolutely convinced, could not have said these things to Mikoto. “You were a monster to him. You’ve – missed the whole point. Anything he is, he is in spite of you.”

Mikoto gives him nothing. “Yes, well, whatever you believe you know about him, I am still his mother, and unfortunately –”

“But you’re not! Don’t you see that? You should’ve been but you – you never loved him. You never made him happy.”

Mikoto cocks her head in a way that makes Kushina think perhaps Sasuke doing it isn’t only due to Orochimaru’s influence. “Shouldn’t you be grateful?”

“What?” It’s a helpless question. Furious too but mostly helpless.

“If I had loved him,” Mikoto says, so steady, so sure, “you would be dead. Happiness… I’ll bury him in the sky, where he belongs. Then he’ll be at rest.”

Naruto’s quiet for a bit after she’s gone, biting his lip. Then he smiles, a hurt little smile, at Kushina. “You weren’t awful to me. I’m glad you weren’t awful to me.”

His hands are shaking badly, violence trembling and erupting in bursts of vermillion energy.

“Let’s go,” she says quickly, steering him out of the restaurant with a steady grip on his shoulder and into a taxi.

In the car, he sits with his claws closed tight inside his own body, searing through muscle and bone, shaking and shaking on the verge of eruption.

It’s been too much, too bloody much. Mikoto, staring him down: *if I had loved him, you would be dead.* Because she would never have allowed Naruto to lay a finger on a child she loved.
I'll bury him where he belongs, in a grave in the sky. Which is, horrifyingly, where Sasuke thinks he belongs too.

And Mikoto hasn’t really been relevant for a long time, but the whole world is going to pieces, Naruto is going to pieces. He’s been fighting Sasuke so hard, and now with the impossible return of him – don’t stop. I’ll kill you if you stop – everything else comes crashing down on him.

Sasuke doesn’t love him. Sasuke didn’t choose him, and Sasuke doesn’t trust him.

And Naruto has become someone who isn’t stopped by that, someone that he never meant to be. He promised he’d save them, that he’d save them both, and now instead he’s with Sasuke even though he’s – Orochimaru too said he loved Sasuke, and that Sasuke belonged to him, Orochimaru too took him in violence and in tenderness, and – Orochimaru at least doesn’t prioritise having Sasuke with him over having Sasuke alive.

The way Sasuke looked at him, before they went to Rock: toppling off the roof, and then on the ground as Naruto hit him.

Sasuke on the airplane, after Naruto stepped into his dream: how are you any different from Orochimaru? and Naruto just spluttering in response.

Sasuke that first night, just after – after Naruto had forced the bond on him, white-faced and dead-eyed, trying to claw Naruto out of him, claw himself free from this latest manacle, and –

And this shouldn’t even be about Sasuke, because Naruto’s letting so many people down, not just himself and Sasuke, but Sasuke’s all there is.

He swallows and swallows. Sasuke doesn’t need to feel this: Naruto pulls on the holy writ inside him, makes it uncurl from where it nests inside his skeleton and cage in his black hysteria, the wild grief wracking him, wrecking him.

“Here we are,” Kushina says, manhandling him out of the car.

They’re in what seems to be the corpse of the Hokage building.

“We need this demolished so we can rebuild,” Kushina tells him. “Go crazy.”

Naruto does. He goes absolutely batshit insane, comes to his senses what must be hours later, when it’s dark outside and his throat is raw from screaming. Cement has been pulverized, steel bent and ripped.

Naruto stares for a moment, feeling purged and fine, and then he starts to cry. It’s fugly crying, tears cascading and snot all over his face, great hulking hyperventilating sobs. He cries until he pukes, until there’s nothing left, and still the tears come.

He feels himself reaching out, into thin air, in this absurd way. Sometimes at school he woke up rolling off the bed, reaching for Sasuke. Which was insane, because he’d barely ever shared a bed with Sasuke. A few sleepovers, usually involving Sakura too, and then of course every night snuggled up tight for warmth when they ran away together after Mum died.

Sasuke had been oddly calm about that, oddly calm in fact about everything at that point. Isolating himself from the world. Naruto had understood afterwards that this was around the time Sasuke found out that Kakashi was aware of the full extent of Orochimaru’s abuse.

In any case Naruto had said, There’s something I have to do, you know.
Sasuke had looked at him with those steady eyes Naruto’s never been able to look away from. *I know.*

His impotently reaching fingers find a drain pipe, and crush it into nothing. It’s a sensitive topic, something Gaara only reminds him of when they’re really going at each other, but destruction has always come easily to Naruto.

He was always a physical kid, always open to violence. Sasuke for a long time was far more sedate, or at least controlled. It was after he’d been given to Orochimaru that suddenly he could be provoked into deadly force, went crazy at unexpected touches.

Naruto got hospitalised twice, after Sasuke pushed him in front of a car. And Naruto, who was used to fighting with Gaara and Kiba, with people who had shifter healing, broke Sasuke’s bones more than once. Usually he only found out afterwards, because Sasuke in the moment never gave any indication.

“Naruto? You here?”

“Narutoooo!”

Naruto hurries to rub the worst of the snot off his face, but he can’t doubt that his eyes are still wet and red when Konohamaru bounds in, Kiba following.

“There you are!”


“You about ready to go home?” Kiba asks, holding Konohamaru back from pouncing.

“Yeah,” Naruto says again, and gets to his feet on the knowledge that he’s beyond ready to go home. Where he will run with his heart beating fit to break through his ribcage and leave him behind, run to Sasuke.

It’s pathetic, it’s horrible – all the time in the car, when he talks to Kiba and Konohamaru, who are his friends, his family, his people – there’s this horror, this distance. He’s speaking to them like he’s speaking to everyone else, as a stopgap measure until Sasuke pays attention to him again. Doing things to distract himself, let time pass, until he can have more of Sasuke, always needing more.

Every time Sasuke’s out of his sight, there’s this feeling that dawn will never come again.

It’s only when he has Sasuke with him that he can feel normal, feel good: calm and happy, a functional person. It’s only then that other things, other people, can matter. All the rest of the time there’s only the lack of Sasuke, which hollows out everything else.

He remembers back in school, all these imaginary conversations with Sasuke that never quite stopped, a constant murmur in the back of his head. Everything that happened, everything he did, relevant as background to speculation of what would Sasuke have done, what would Sasuke have said. Sometimes for hours he could feel sort of normal, sort of okay, only then suddenly there was that airless emptiness again, this crippling need for Sasuke’s presence.

When he called and called, and how when Sasuke finally picked up this relief. The world a place to be lived in again, instead of this terrible prison.

“Naruto,” Konohamaru insists, kicking at his knees. “You’re not paying attention.”
“Sorry,” Naruto says. “I had a run-in with Sasuke’s mum. She’s – not a very nice person.”

“No,” Kiba says, when Konohamaru falls uncertainly silent. “No, I imagine she’s not.”

Eventually, still subdued, Konohamaru says, “But aren’t we – like, allied with her?”

“Well,” Kiba says. “Sasuke’s not a very nice person either, but we get along all right with him, don’t we?”

Konohamaru looks deeply unconvinced.

Naruto manages to laugh, ruffling his hair.
As they drive slowly through rush hour traffic, Naruto sinks into the car seat. It wasn’t always like this: he wasn’t always psychotically desperate, and Sasuke wasn’t always so damaged.

He steps into the memory of the last summer they were really kids, onto a dirt road in June sunshine.

Standing there in memory, Naruto knows the moment he sees him: Sasuke Uchiha will be trouble. If it were just Sakura up ahead, he could slip away easily – she’s used to his weirdness, might even wait for him. But Sasuke isn’t like that, with nothing easy about him. Naruto knows from experience that those keen fuck-off eyes will follow him if he leaves the road.

Surely it’s not normal, he thinks, eyes so dark that iris becomes indistinguishable from pupil. Naruto discovered this during an Art assignment in kindergarten, when he was forced to lean very close to Sasuke’s disgruntled face to make out the difference, which is one of nuance not of colour.

He’d apparently gone on about it, because eventually Iruka told him he needed to stop talking about it, that it was “culturally insensitive”, which Sakura had to translate to “racist”. He’d have said he was sorry, or that he didn’t mean it that way, except either Sasuke already knew that or he didn’t give a shit, because he never brought it up. When Naruto finally asked him straight out, he got a snort and a baka gaijin.

Now Naruto scuffs his feet, giving himself a moment of hesitation, and Sasuke’s eyes are still strange, in ways that have nothing to do with being Asian, and they still stare without blinking – that too was something Naruto noticed at once, that Sasuke’s eyes remain almost perpetually open, like those of a snake – which is too bad but doesn’t relieve Naruto of the need for a little off-road excursion. Something smells wrong, and Naruto’s decided that it’s a demon and that he’ll take care of it.

“Go ahead!” he calls to Sakura, waving her on, not without disappointment: she’s exceptionally pretty in that pink dress. “I’ll catch up!”

When she says, “But Naruto…” he’s already jumping over the ditch, and she’s not yelling so she won’t expect him to hear.

“Ruin of my social life, God damn bad-timing bastard…” Naruto grumbles. Sasuke had better not take this opportunity to notice how pretty Sakura is, sunlit and smiling in the sudden summer… although Sakura’s less relevant here, in the dappling shadows of a forest where she’ll have never set foot. “Come out already, arsehole!”

It doesn’t. Naruto supposes maybe that’s a good thing, because the only demons who come when you call are supposed to be the ones strong enough to beat you. Then he’d definitely be stuck here until long after Sakura’s patience runs out.

None of which makes the thorny hedge in front of him more inviting, and just, “Oh fuck off, I’m gonna kill you so damn hard.”

People say only exorcists can do that, maybe super strong shifters working together, but Naruto’s going to prove them wrong. All the exorcists sneering down at him, and all the humans scorning him too, and how he can’t even fight back against the humans without breaking them…!

Two steps later the first thorn scrapes into his arm, deep enough to bleed: time to shield the shirt.
He’s out of clean school clothes, and Iruka will go spare if he shows up in what his teacher only stopped referring to as trailer trash fashion after finding out that Naruto’s actually spent most of the spring in a trailer park.

Mum’s busy with work and Dad’s sorting things out with the bigwigs, so Jiraiya’s taken charge of Naruto and decided to slum it a bit. Also it’s safer out here, safer from the war. It’s left their part of the country mostly untouched, but sometimes there are attacks in the city. Terrorists like crowded places, and so do bomb strikes. A lot of kids have been evacuated, including Sakura and Sasuke and Kiba and stuck-up Neji Hyuuga and his weird cousins.

It’s funny, though. Sasuke’s relentless about everything else, but he never bullies Naruto for the white trash spring. Just for things Naruto actually does: for things he can help, has some control over.

While he saves the shirt from tearing, the cuts on his arms bleed all over it before they scab over.

Then in the sudden sunlight on the far side of the hedge, he looks up from the messy shirt at…the feeling of wrongness, the source of which he can’t really see, no matter how much he strains his eyes.

He could so have left this for tomorrow.

Only Naruto is tired to people leaving everything for tomorrow, for later, for fucking never.

He stares at the thing he can’t see, pointing an accusing finger at it. “You!”

There’s something like – he thinks it hisses at him.

Naruto hisses right back.

Kyuubi’s energy breaks through his skin like a sudden sweat, so hot the air steams around him. The claws, barely visible back on the road, just badly cut nails, brand his hands with their presence, a burn that feels bone-deep.

His jaw distends as his fangs, Kyuubi’s fangs, push up through his gums and his whole mouth fills with scalding blood.

Tsunade says he hasn’t really awakened yet, that he’s just twitching a little in his sleep. Jiraiya says he’ll be strong one day.

He needs to be strong now.

And he can totally handle this, except – oh God damn – the sound he hears now isn’t hissing, but distinct human footsteps approaching. For a moment he contemplates running away.

But Naruto’s never been in the habit of running from Sasuke Uchiha.

“Naruto?” comes Sasuke’s voice, and by the time he too steps through the hedge, Naruto is just that, only Naruto. Kyuubi has receded back under his skin.

“Yeah, bastard.” He notices firstly that Sasuke, inexplicably and entirely expectedly, has not been mauled by the thorns, and secondly that for a long, long moment Sasuke looks right at the thing Naruto couldn’t see. “What are you doing here?” Naruto demands, his voice oddly quiet, breaking over the need to be careful all the time – with demons, with humans, with the fucking exorcists. Everything’s messed up at home, and still he wants to go home, back to Mum and Dad who should be together.
Kyuubi simmers right under his skin, hotter than the sunlight on his face, and caught between Sasuke and the demon he wants to forget being careful, wants to forget every cautious thought he’s ever had and every careful movement he has never made.

It’s Sasuke’s turn to look awkward, which on him is easily mistaken for annoyance or constipation. “You ran towards a ward breach.”

“A ward breach,” Naruto repeats, defeated. Not a demon at all then, just a tiny weakness in the shielding.

Sasuke shrugs, looking away from him for a moment. Right at the place the breach must be. “What are you doing here?”

Naruto shrugs too, barking out a laugh. “Just had to take a leak. You know how it is.” Because no way is he telling Sasuke fucking Uchiha that he came here to fix a problem he can’t even see. He still has that childhood insistence that he can handle any demon perfectly well on his own.

“Are you done? Get out of my way.”

“I’m not – what.”

“I’m going to repair it,” Sasuke says impatiently.

“No way! I’m going to repair it!”

“How?”

“I, ah. I’ll come up with something.”

“Uh huh.” Sasuke pushes past him, moving his hand and mumbling Latin under his breath. His hand maybe glows a little, if Naruto squints. Sasuke smells weird suddenly, an inhuman kind of smell entirely unlike that of a shifter. Naruto breathes it in, scrunches up his nose, and feels gooseflesh break over his arms. “Let’s go.”

“You are not the boss of me,” Naruto tells him, but it’s not like he’s going to stay here like some weirdo. “But fine. Oh, is Sakura still waiting for me?”

Sasuke lifts an eyebrow. It’s a twitchy, angular movement, more a jerk than anything else. Sasuke tries to look so dignified all the time, but he moves in sudden spasms. Like there’s something inside of him too, waiting to break out into the world. Possibly it’s the stick up his arse grown so enormous that it’s become sentient. “She was still waiting for the bus when I left, yes.”

“Come on then!” Clothes already messed up, he’s much faster through the hedge this time.

Sasuke’s not far behind but, frustratingly, stops right outside the hedge and –

“What are you doing?”

“Hmm?” Sasuke finishes pulling his jumper over his head, holding it out towards Naruto.

“Wha – no – wha.”

Sasuke’s eyebrow climbs back up under his fringe. “Were you planning to try and get on the bus all bloody?”

“I – oh.” Looking down, he rediscovers the dark red splatter covering most of his front. He must’ve
wiped his hands on it without really noticing. “It’s manly. Heroic.” He keeps himself in motion, rubbing at the back of his head, so Sasuke won’t notice how unsettled he feels. Everything’s a mess – the war, what Iruka calls his home situation, the demons, and Naruto needs to do something. For a long, long moment he doesn’t know how to stop himself randomly jumping Sasuke.

“Yes,” Sasuke says dryly, and the moment breaks, everything once more everyday and ordinary, “I’m sure the driver will think so.”

“Probably,” Naruto agrees, preening. Then it comes to him that the driver in question is the crankiest old lady with the worst breath in the county. “Okay, you convinced me!” He snatches the jumper from Sasuke’s hand, dives into it. “Why would you even give me your shirt?”

Sasuke looks away. “I was raised right,” he says in a snotty voice.

Naruto slows down a little, letting his head emerge from the jumper only slowly, so Sasuke has time to get his face under control again. He often needs that, when his family’s come up.

Naruto’s never worn Sasuke’s clothes before. Of course he hasn’t. It’s dark blue and quite warm, about same size Naruto would’ve picked for himself.

Back up on the road Sakura’s still sitting in the bus shed, and Naruto chooses to forget that really this will be because she’s waiting for Sasuke. “Sakura!”

She does smile back, and scoot away a little so he can perch beside her on the bench. It’s taken him a long time to become her friend and he relishes the possibility of being close to her, pressed side to side in the overwhelming smell of her shampoo. Stomps down the vicious unfair disappointment that it’s not – not what it was supposed to be, what he’d thought, hoped – that it’s not everything he’s ever dreamt.

He also stomps down on the memory of one of those uncomfortable moments of self insight, of understanding that he wanted Sakura because she’s sweet and easy and normal, is human acceptance, and because she couldn’t have left, wouldn’t be strong enough to leave if he held on to her. The realisation that that just means she’d break in his grasp.

Sasuke remains standing, a little apart. Without the jumper there are goose bumps rising up his arms, and Naruto’s about to say something, feels the words heavy and unwieldy in his mouth, a bastard tripping on the barrier of his lips and falling back down his throat into silence when the bus rolls in.

With the heroic blood splatter safely hidden, he dares to grin at the driver.

He needn’t have bothered, of course – she only has eyes for the nice kids, pretty Sakura and stuck-up Sasuke, only pays attention to Naruto when she feels he needs to be glared into quiet submission. He’s cheated his way onto the bus too many times, hidden under the seats back in the days before Jiraiya remembered to buy him a bus pass, which was also the days he smelled weird and was never really clean, and sometimes stole from the other passengers. Before Kakashi stopped by, and had word with Jiraiya, who remembered afterwards to make Naruto shower and to make him dinner.

Also he and Kiba have maybe played a few too many pranks on the bus.

“Shut up,” Sasuke says, and at Naruto’s confused and affronted blink adds, “Idiot.”

“I wasn’t even saying anything!”

Sakura smiles a little, looking mostly embarrassed but a little fond, as well. “You were humming.”
“No, I – oh. Huh. Guess I was.” He smiles back at her, keeping his eyes carefully on her face so he won’t tip Sasuke off, and then kicks him in the shin. Not many people do that, not to Sasuke. People pick fights with him sometimes, although almost everyone has learnt better by now, and a lot of the girls cling to him, but nobody just kicks him. “I hum better than you!”

“No,” Sasuke says, dead-pan. “Given the state of your English, you’d never manage the Latin, that’s for sure.”

“Hey, I could totally…” While he’s busy protesting, Sasuke takes the opportunity to kick him back. Hard, too. “Bastard.”

Sasuke smirks.

“Bet you don’t even know any Latin, you stuck-up little –” Absorbed in ranting, in the challenging glint in Sasuke’s eye, he doesn’t notice the bus braking abruptly for the 10th Street stop until his face is already smashed into the seat in front of him and he’s halfway on the floor.

“Veni, vidi, less of the vici,” Sasuke snorts, slipping off of the bus before Naruto can reply, and certainly before he remembers about returning the stupid jumper.

“Arsehole!” he yells after him, but it’s less satisfying when Sasuke’s a solid metal door away from hearing him.

In comparison Sakura, hushing at him, is so soft. She remains on the bus when Naruto gets off, is staying with relatives slightly closer to the city.

The trailer park Jiraiya’s chosen for them is on the outskirts of the outskirts. It’s basically a reservation, land that’s been in Namikaze and Sabaku possession for generations, on which displaced shifters take refuge. Big and run-down, the building that was once some sort of fancy summer house stands guard over acres of mostly uncultivated land.

Rather, it was uncultivated. Naruto takes the well-trodden dirt path towards the house, waving at the people in the tents and trailers. There are a lot of those, now, and clothes lines and vegetable patches have sprung up between them. Kids chase the hens and dogs, under the not-so-attentive eyes of the adults occupying several sets of plastic patio furniture.

Naruto sidesteps Inari and then has to catch his shoulder to prevent a full-frontal collision with the ground.

“Eheheheh, thanks Naruto!”

The brat is off again before Naruto can decide to steal his no doubt stolen pear in reprimand, and Naruto looks back towards the adults. Most of them are just talking, but some are drinking, some are playing cards, and he has to stare at old Mr Jen and his friends for a bit to make sure everything stays calm after the deck’s been thrown among hisses of cheating.

“No trouble, Naruto, no trouble. Although he is a cheating bastard…”
Naruto laughs and says he’s sure. They always say that, no trouble Naruto no trouble at all, but then when his back’s turned there’s sometimes trouble anyway.

It’s new and weird and sometimes incredibly frightening, to be in a place where the adults are so lost that they look to him to take charge.

These are the people Mr Sabaku never looks at, when he’s talking about being superior and beating the humans at their own game.

They are however the ones he points at when he talks about the exterminations in the west and those fucking exorcist bastards, and never again

Naruto has never particularly liked Mr Sabaku, who’s mean to his children and keeps fighting with Dad. Make something of yourself, he sneers at Kankurou, who’s always been the weak link among the siblings. Ranting about keeping to shifter culture, honouring their traditions, and reminding everyone he bankrolls a lot of shifter activity. Insisting they should keep to themselves, both because humans are inferior and because the bond usually happens with someone you’re already connected to in some way, so minimising human contact means minimising the risk of a human mate.

Mum always stayed out of his way, and now that she’s moved out – temporarily! It’s just temporary, no matter what she says, and Naruto’s going to make her see that – Naruto doesn’t need to try and get between them anymore. These days it’s Kushina who snorts at Mr Sabaku about how he’s happy enough with human technology and about how isolation like that usually just leads to inbreeding. Also maybe we should have the kids put to bed, they don’t need to hear this. That too was something Mum said sometimes, but much more softly: Kushina has never been intimidated by Mr Sabaku.

Maybe they do, he always snarls. Maybe we all need to hear this.

All they hear, Kushina tells him, which Mum never did, is adults fighting.

But Mr. Sabaku isn’t here, would never set foot here.

“I’m home!” Naruto calls, kicking off his shoes in the crowded hallway.

The place is dirty and nobody answers him, but it’s still easier in some ways to be here than in the Hokage building, where he has to pass by what is still Mum’s room, will maybe always be Mum’s room. It’s definitely more homey than Mum’s new place, in the strange human suburb.

He sneaks up the stairs to Chouji’s room. Chouji looks all right today. The matesickness has hollowed him out, hallowed him somehow: he’s like one of those carvings of martyrs in old churches, twisted and burnt out.

This is why everyone’s so worried about getting a human mate instead of another shifter, why the entire house simmers with quiet panic over Chouji and his human boy.

Naruto overheard Tsunade telling Chouji, It can work out. You spend time with your human and they grow used to you, and everything’s fine. That can happen. There are things they don’t know, that they can’t understand, and they can leave while you can’t, but sometimes they want to stay. That happens.

Gaara says, Just lock him up and consummate when you have to, it’s not like he could stop you.

That’s part of why Gaara isn’t here right now.

“Naruto.” Chouji smiles. It’s a real smile, a grin really, it’s just it looks small in between the wrinkles
like trenches. Chouji is sixteen. “Good day?”

“Yeah,” Naruto decides, and proceeds to tell him all about it.

xxxxx

It’s still the same childhood summer when he ventures into a church, partly because Sakura’s talked about it, mostly because it’s one of the few places in town that boasts free toilets with no queue. Stuffing his sun glasses down his pocket, he’s stopped short by the practicing choir.

Much to his disappointment, Sasuke isn’t wearing one of the priest dresses. In fact they’re all in their normal clothes, jeans and t-shirts under the stained glass windows, Sasuke with Neji beside him and Sakura with Ino and the Hyuuga girls.

When did she join the choir? It makes sense, though, he supposes. The director doubles as their music teacher, which makes it an easy and oft-trod road to higher grades, and Sakura’s very concerned about her grades, maybe even more than about being close to Sasuke.

Really Sasuke’s is the less expected presence, despite Naruto knowing all the exorcist kids go, partly because Sasuke never deigns to try for good grades, partly because his voice is noticeably deep and not exactly suited to singing.

All the same, they don’t sound too bad, despite psalms definitely not being Naruto’s musical preference.

Finished in the bathroom, he sneaks back into the main hall and sprawls in one of the pews. It’s sort of cosy, or what he imagines went for cosy in Medieval times, when there was no real way to avoid drafts or uncomfortably hard seats. Maybe he should join, his grades could definitely use it… if they even accept shifters, which is doubtful. Three thousand shifters died last week, up in River county, because the human hospitals wouldn’t treat them after the bomb raid.

He realises he’s almost fallen asleep when the advent of someone sitting down beside him wakes him up.

“Kakashi!” Naruto says too loudly, crawling back into a sitting position.

Kakashi smiles benignly. “Hello. You seem a little young to be waiting to pick up your spawn.”

Naruto laughs, also a little too loudly. “Yeah, no, I was just lazying. You here to pick someone up?”

“Ah, yes. I’m here to fetch dear little Ducky.”

“Ducky? Who’s…”

The inquiry is interrupted by an icy, “Kakashi!”

Kakashi smiles again, never quite stopped. “Ah, Ducky, there you are.”

“For the last time,” Sasuke sneers, “stop calling me Ducky.”

“But you’re such a darling little duckling,” Kakashi argues, reaching up to ruffle Sasuke’s hair.

Or that must have been the intention. In practice he reaches up only to get his hand caught.

“Enough.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, did you prefer Princess?”
Naruto’s happy to notice he’s not the only one snickering, even if it’s mostly in shock.

Sasuke sighs. “Was there something you wanted, aside from embarrassing me?”

“That is a talent of mine,” Kakashi agrees. “I’m supposed to get you boys home. Or Neji at least, but I figured I might as well get you too.”

“How touching.” Sasuke grumbles, but he doesn’t protest when Kakashi joins them leaving the church. Neji’s silent as always, but Naruto figures he can more than make up for that – especially when Sakura catches up with them, smiling and rosy from hurrying.

He distracts himself from the disappointment of her clinging to Sasuke’s arm instead of his by further musings on Princess Ducky. “Oh! Now I remember!”

There are a number of raised eyebrows: Sasuke’s sceptical, Kakashi’s anticipatory, Sakura’s anxious, Neji’s disdainful.

“It’s what your brother called you! When he’d come get you from preschool, he’d always call you Ducky! I guess because of your hair?”

Sasuke mumbles something that sounds like, give me strength, but it’s Kakashi who says, “Why, that’s true! And did you know about the princess?”

He does not, and so it’s revealed that Sasuke broke his leg two years ago, and had to be carried around quite a lot – often in what amounted to a dress, since the injury made trousers tricky. Apparently he was a very cute, too.

Sasuke bears these embarrassments with the impressive patience of long, arduous practice, which is hilarious until the idea strikes Naruto of what Jiraiya could say about him, should the old pervert ever find an audience like this. Naruto certainly wouldn’t be able to keep himself from yelling right back…

In contrast, Sasuke’s composure, cracked as it is, doesn’t break until Kakashi leaves the past well behind. “Sakura? Oh, my, I’ve heard so much about you.”

Her cheeks go pink again. “Really?”

“Oh, yes, of course. Your sweet face, and your beautiful eyes, and…”

“Shut up!” Sasuke hisses, but of course if that worked they’d have never got to the princess part.

“…stupendous nose…”

That’s where Naruto starts laughing, a great big roar of a laugh. “Yeah, right!”

Kakashi looks mildly disappointed. Whatever expression Sakura has, it’s not discernible through her blush.

“Enough!” Sasuke snaps. “Take Neji and go!”

They’re in the parking lot now, so Kakashi does stop, and Neji too, even Sakura. Sasuke keeps walking, fast belligerent steps, but doesn’t protest Naruto’s company.

They don’t slow down until they reach the bus stop, where Sasuke’s stuck pacing on the platform, which he gives up on soon enough, slumping against a pillar.
“Kakashi’s kind of a freak,” Naruto says.

“Hn. He doesn’t have a little brother of his own to torment, so Itachi-niisan generously shares me.”

“Lucky you,” says Naruto, with only a little jealousy: Naruto who’s always wanted siblings, all the family he could get. Konohamaru’s so little yet, he hardly counts.

Of course, in so many of the ways that matter, Sasuke’s missing both a mum and a dad.

It’s not something anybody ever mentions, but they all remember the long awkward silences when his parents came to pick him up from school, how much better everything suddenly got when it was Itachi or Kakashi instead. How Sasuke no longer looked starved, falling easily into step with them.

“Yeah,” Sasuke snorts, quite lightly. “Anyway, how’d you… how’d you know?”

“How did I… ? Oh, oh, right. Well, isn’t it obvious?” Under Sasuke’s impenetrable gaze, it doesn’t seem to be. “You’re not like that.”

Sasuke keeps staring in that way of his, with those strange stabbing eyes.

“It’s like, either you don’t like her, in which case you’d never talk about her that way. Or you do like her, in which case you’d – never talk about her that way.”

Sasuke nods, seeming cautiously pleased. Anything he says is swallowed by the noise of the incoming bus. Naruto follows him onboard, sprawling over three seats while Sasuke sits primly upright in one, his bag tucked neatly between his knees.

It’s funny because only yesterday Naruto watched him tackle Kiba so hard they both rolled through several meters of mud during P. E. Sasuke doesn’t like to lose, anymore than Naruto does.

Speaking of, Naruto takes the opportunity to give him a friendly kick.

“Idiot,” Sasuke mutters, but two stations later, when he liberates a packed lunch from his bag, he only smacks Naruto’s hands away after Naruto’s stolen a few bites, so he can hardly mean it.

“This is awesome,” Naruto exclaims around a mouthful of fish. “No way you made this.”

Sasuke only looks a little like he wants to die when he discloses, “Kakashi did.”

“Guess he’s good for something. Although to be honest I would’ve expected him to make duck.”

“Fucking die.” A piece of fish hits him square in the forehead, which is totally worth it because then it falls into his lap and he can scoop it up and eat it.

Sasuke of course makes a face at him, because he can be a prissy bitch like that, and Naruto makes sure to chew with his mouth wide open.

“Do you, by the way?” he eventually asks, when the train is mostly empty so his voice comes shriller than he meant it to.

“Hmm?”

“Like Sakura. I mean, I mean! You’ve been – around her more. And I wanted to ask her to the picnic but there’s no point until she’s given up on you asking her and, and, are you going to? Cause if you are I – I still totally wanna go and I’ll ask someone else. As friends. So are you? Do you?” He realises he’s leant forward when Sasuke’s fingers meet his forehead and push him back.
“I wasn’t going to.”

“Great! No, wait, wasn’t? Now you are?”

“You’re making it more tempting by the second.”

“No fair!”

“I don’t even like picnics.”

Naruto wants to say something about how Sasuke doesn’t know how to picnic, but he knows: if Sasuke doesn’t do something, it’s because he chooses not to.

“Why not? But you have to go! Everyone’ll be there, it’ll be way awesome!”

Sasuke sighs. “Now that Kakashi’s here, I’ve no choice. He’d drag me there by main force.”

Naruto snickers, realising he’s missed his stop but not much caring. Might as well keep Sasuke company until he gets off at South Central and change there instead.

“It’ll be awesome,” he repeats. “A bunch of us were talking about meeting up before, dunno if Sakura told you?”

“She did,” Sasuke allows. “Also Ino, and Tenten, and –”

“Fine, jeez,” Naruto laughs, kicking at him again. “I’m sure they wouldn’t be so excited about you if they knew you were actually Princess Ducky.”

Sasuke kicks back bloody hard. “Then maybe you should tell them.”

“Maybe I will!”

Sasuke smirks. “Have at. No one would believe you.”

“Augh! No fair!”

Snorting, Sasuke stands up, and Naruto scrambles after him off the bus.

Smiling like a madman, even waving at them, Kakashi stands waiting for them on the platform.

“Oh, great,” Sasuke mutters.

“Ducky! Finally! When I explained to Itachi how you’d stormed off in high dudgeon, he completely agreed that there must be something upsetting you, and I should come meet you and find out. Are you feeling – pressured? Bullied? Lovesick?”

“Sick of you, that’s for sure.” Sick enough of him to hurry rudely forward, although that’s pretty standard Sasuke behaviour.

“Mnh,” Kakashi says noncommittally. “Oh, that’s right, Sakura – lovely girl, by the way – told me about the picnic. I take it you haven’t asked her yet? You know, I could help you with that, I’m quite the expert. In fact, she seemed quite amenable to a lot of my brilliant ideas…”

“No,” Sasuke interrupts. “No, look, that’s enough. Stop it.”

“But Ducky dearest…”
“Enough. I mean it. I’m – going with Naruto.”

Naruto finds himself brought to an abrupt halt, as Sasuke’s fingers close around his wrist. They’re long, thin fingers, cold and unexpectedly strong.

A slow, terrible glee lights Kakashi’s face as he turns towards Naruto. His arm falls around Naruto’s shoulders much like a descending executioner’s axe. “Oooh, secret boyfriend intrigue! How romantic! Now, Naruto, of course you must tell me all about it…”

Naruto stares in despair as Sasuke basely abandons him.

In revenge, as he informs Sasuke in a great number of pugnacious Skype messages that evening, he feeds Kakashi what is at once the strangest, dirtiest and most absolutely ridiculous love story of the century.

*Would be more impressive if the century wasn’t less than two decades old, idiot.*

:*p:*:*p!*!!!11111! U dont get 2 talk! U abandoned me 2 dat freak how cd u?!!?*

*You got out in under two hours, you’ve nothing to complain about.*

While recognising that having to actually live with Kakashi would be an unimaginably worse torment, the mere memory of those two hours makes Naruto shudder down to his very bones.

Kakashi can be nice. Kakashi can be awesome. But Kakashi can also be the worst teasing tormentor in the history of mankind.

Feeling strongly that the keyboard is unequal to expressing his trauma, he gives the Call button a try. Rather to his surprise, Sasuke actually answers – maybe he feels guilty after all, the traitor.

“He asked me when did I first feel you up in public! Who asks that? Does he know we’re kids?”

“I find it telling,” Sasuke says very dryly, “that your question isn’t, who *does* that.”

Sasuke’s voice is different like this, disembodied and slightly tinny because Naruto’s speakers aren’t that great. There’s so much less to distract from it, and how it doesn’t exactly feel like talking to a friend, which rather makes sense because Sasuke isn’t exactly a friend, in the usual sense of the word.

“You could’ve just told him you were going with Sakura,” he whines.

“No.”

“Why not? She’d have loved it.”

That last isn’t something Naruto usually likes to think about, but it’s late evening after a truly harrowing interrogation, and somehow he seems to have pulled the pretence off along with his wet socks, thrown it away towards the laundry pile.

Though really it’s more like pulling off a scab.

After a while of silence Sasuke says, “She’s my friend.”

Sakura’s careful about that too, about never encouraging Naruto, never suggesting they’re anything more than friendly.
“But me you just threw to the wolves?!”

The quality of the silence indicates that Sasuke shrugs. “You can take care of yourself.”

“Damn right!”

xxxxx

Still the same summer, back in the trailer park house. “Chouji? Hey, you okay?”

With the words a meaningless background noise, Naruto hurries forward into the room. Chouji’s room, with Chouji’s bed, on which Chouji is sitting slumped and sweaty, shaking a little. “It’ll pass,” he gasps. “Fuck, I hate this fucking mate sickness, why the fuck couldn’t I have got another shifter?”

Naruto’s never once heard Chouji swear before.

“Because then it wouldn’t be a challenge,” Naruto reminds him, crouching next to him on the bed so Chouji can support himself on his shoulder without having to ask, to admit. “And you’d hardly be the Don Juan of the tribe if you were spooked by a challenge!”

“It’s just – so bloody unfair.”

It is bloody unfair, not least because Chouji’s nobody important: because nobody will intervene for him, especially not when they’re finally getting somewhere close to successful peace negotiations.

“Yeah,” says Naruto, quieter than he’d have liked. Get another shifter, and you’re safe. Maybe you won’t like each other all that much, though most people do, maybe you’ll fight a lot, have some other lovers, but you’ll have each other, the need will be mutual and understood. Get a human, get sick. “But he’ll love you. He just needs a little – a little more time. You’ll win him over!”

Naruto’s seen matesick people before, but those were adults: not his upperclassmen, someone not even ten years older, the experience close suddenly and raw.

Seeing Chouji, in perfect health six weeks ago, reduced to this wreck of twisted, hollowed yearning – it makes it really real, for the first time, what they must have been like, before the sickness hit them, all those other people who’ve died like this.

There are so many stories, always so many stories, about when they were strong and young, all dreams and hopes and the power to back them up. Before they wind up like this: trailer trash, refugees, society’s refuse.

“He’s gone from not knowing my name to cursing my name,” Chouji wheezes. “I’m fucked.”

“That’s the idea,” Jiraiya says from the doorway. “Naruto, get out.”

“Talk to you later,” he says to Chouji, the words clumsy, just vessels for the boneheaded, bone-strong belief behind them. “We’ll come up with a plan and you’ll sweep him off his feet!”

“Yeah,” Chouji says, weakly but he says it.

On the far side of his closed door, Naruto sinks to the floor.

He sits there until Anko comes to get him, to drive him and Kiba back to Dad’s.

“Are you scared?” she asks, in that chilly laconic voice of hers. “It’ll be your turn soon enough, after all.”
“Keep driving like this,” Kiba yells from the backseat, to which he and Naruto have been relegated, “and we’ll be dead long before we’re mated!”

“Bitch, bitch, bitch,” Anko says, taking a curve so fast she almost takes them straight into a ditch.

Theoretically Naruto knows that she can drive perfectly well. It’s just that in practice she never does, not when she has the opportunity to fuck with them.

“I’m not scared!” he insists.

“Oh really.”

“Oh really!”

Kiba snorts beside him. “You can’t even get Sakura to like you. If you wind up with a human, you are so fucking screwed.”

“That’s different!”

“Why? Even if she was your mate, she wouldn’t know. It wouldn’t make any difference to her.”

Naruto…for some reason chooses not to mention that he’s never thought of Sakura in mate terms. Instead he shrugs, trying to settle the tense cast to Kiba’s shoulders, his own elevated pulse, “Almost everyone gets another shifter, anyway.”

“Yeah,” Anko agrees, with something like pity. “Almost everyone falls in love with each other, too.”

She didn’t, they all know. She and Hayate are mated, she and Hayate get along, she and Hayate exude that familiar sensation of power and belonging when they’re close.

She’s currently involved with an entirely human Ibiki Morino, and Hayate has about four girlfriends.

It’s not what Naruto would want, but she’s never seemed exactly unhappy about it.

“So,” she says, “this boy of Chouji’s. He goes to school with him?”

“Yeah,” Naruto says. “He should just tell him. If he explained…”

“I’d imagine,” Anko says dryly, “that that wouldn’t exactly help with the delusional stalker impression.”

“But! He’d hardly just let him die!” Naruto wrote the boy a letter saying approximately this and put it in his locker, but he never received an answer. Chouji’s mate will know about bond craving in theory, though some humans insist that’s just fake, but Naruto tried to explain in a better way, a realer way.

Anko shrugs. Sighs, from deep inside. “Maybe Gaara was right.”

Gaara, who said, Just take him, not like he could stop you.

There are no words that can be said to that, or no words that Naruto has, or Kiba either apparently: yelling back at Gaara was easy, but this is different, Anko’s tired voice and the long grey hours of sitting watch over Chouji backing it up.

The motor gives a last roar before falling abruptly silent, Anko deciding they need some fresh air before driving on, and they slip out of the backseat and into the woods. Naruto and Kiba share a
With Chouji back in the house going to pieces, and Dad trying to keep everything together and mostly failing – with little Inari already headed for juvie and Jiraiya wasting himself on booze that hasn’t aged enough and girls that haven’t either – Kyuubi doesn’t think like that. Lives in a world of instinct and impulse, with very little place for anything else.

Kiba talks about shifter magic as gentle, compares it to wind and water. Naruto has always felt Kyuubi like a potential volcano eruption in the depths of him, and lets the energy overflow him now like lava. It breaks across his skin like fever sweat, hot and sticky and he can almost smell it.

Runs through the forest and its scents, with the sensation of as yet imaginary tails twisting around the trees.

He catches onto a scent, at once familiar and absolutely alien, that impression of something pure…

Kyuubi’s so absorbed in it, he doesn’t notice anything else until Kiba stops him, hanging on to his arm and hissing, “Horses!”

“The hell?” The words are rough, scraped raw against his canines and coppery on his tongue: talking doesn’t come easy to Kyuubi.

Neither really does thinking, but horses mean people: mean pushing Kyuubi back down, into the depths.

He doesn’t want to go, clings to awareness so that Naruto feels him like a shadow in his eyes, like a primal red filter, for a long time after.

Back in fully human state, with the recognisable but suddenly much fainter smell of horses trotting up his nostrils and Kiba beside him, he hurries towards the clearing by the pond. Grace left him when Kyuubi did, and twigs and roots trip him up, scratch him, but it’s only a kilometre or so.

Then they come upon the visitors – intruders, that red filter wants to paint them as – Sasuke and Neji Hyuuga, mounted on ridiculously large and increasingly hysterical horses.

And now there’s Naruto, bursting out of yet another bloody hedge and apparently scaring the living hell out of Sasuke’s horse.

“Shit! Sorry!”

But Sasuke masters the horse so quickly, Naruto barely has time to hope to see him thrown off on his arse before all is calm.

“Naruto,” Neji says in that colourless voice that only vaguely indicates surprise, peeking out from under the disdain. “And Kiba. Naturally.”

“Hi to you too.” But his eyes are on Sasuke, a moving contrast to Neji’s freaky stillness. The horse is still nervous, Sasuke’s letting it walk it off in circles.

Kyuubi salivates, his hot hunger washing through Naruto before he shuts him down, slams layers of restraint and control and humanity between beast and boy.

Despite Tsunade’s worrying to the contrary, he’s been aware since he was very, very small that few shifters – no shifters, really, she says, no sane ones – are so interpersonal with their magic. For a long time they all talked about Kyuubi as a pretend friend, before Dad and Tsunade realised that to
Naruto there had never been any pretence about it, and got scared.

“I’ll go on ahead,” Neji says, to Sasuke exclusively even though Naruto’s standing right there, close enough to be hit by the warmth from his horse.

“Let’s,” Sasuke agrees.

“I think,” Neji starts, glancing meaningfully and pompously at the pond, “someone should stay and keep an eye on them. We don’t want any more accidents.”

“Fine,” Sasuke snaps, stilling his horse at least with a sharp pull at the reins and a sharper look Neji’s way.

“Sasuke…”

“Whatever. I said it’s fine. Go.”

“Sasuke,” Neji says again, only this time he says it like please rather than like oh come on, brat.

Whatever he’s asking for, Sasuke clearly doesn’t give, because Neji turns his back without another word and trots away.

And there it is, the reason they’re not exactly friends except when they’re best friends: that terrible way Sasuke has of staring through people – only now he turns from Neji to Naruto and he sees him.
Having watched the clip four times, Sasuke decides the contents of the sack can’t be identified. He’s been lazy about this, careless, but it’s time he went through the post-bond news properly.

He’s switching tabs when Naruto appears behind him, basically throwing himself across the room to lock his arms around Sasuke’s shoulders. “Hi,” he whispers, pressing his face into Sasuke’s neck.

“You saw my mother.”

“Not on purpose.”

Sasuke’s shrug juts Naruto’s face against his, Naruto’s scars scratching his cheek. “She doesn’t matter.”

“Mmh,” Naruto says, on a short shaky exhale that tries to be a laugh. “I was – I tried to think that.”

Sasuke turns in his chair, dislodging Naruto and reaching up to drag a fingertip along the whisker scars. Naruto’s memory of their inception is disjointed, an impression of bright pain, blood, his own screams, and of needing it done.

You should look like what you are, some BEASTers argue, after mutilating shifter corpses: no more monsters masquerading as human, this is what they’re really like.

“Hmm,” Naruto says, rubbing his cheek into Sasuke’s hand. “Good thing facial scarring’s mainstream after Harry Potter.”

“They’re not unflattering,” Sasuke says dryly. “You’d look like a total pussy without them.”

Naruto snorts, angling his cheek more firmly into Sasuke’s hand. “Just cause you’re a kinky beast banger.”

“Excuse me…!”

Naruto drags a sudden fang along Sasuke’s jaw. “You love this shit. I bet you wouldn’t even get off with a non-shifter anymore. I’ve spoilt you.”

“Do you want to find out?”

“No!” Naruto throws his arms messily around him, burying his face in Sasuke’s chest and looking up at him with playful remorse. “Never.” When Sasuke pushes him off, he simply folds his legs beneath him, sitting on the floor.

“You want me to never be with anyone else,” Sasuke says. “For the rest of my life.”

Naruto’s eyes are huge and enormously blue, staring up at him with that single-minded focus. “Yes. I realise that might not be all – charming, or, or, nice, or… But you’re not interested in being with anyone else, anyway.”

“That’s true.”

“What about me, then?” Naruto says, fingers moving like he wants to play with the seam of Sasuke’s jeans. “Are you all, you know nothing, pathetic virgin, go sleep around to be experienced and cool like me?”
“You had better fucking not.”

The vehemence of it takes him aback, shocks him still while Naruto surges up to press a brilliant smile against the edge of his mouth.

Sasuke pushes him back down and he goes easily, but there’s something obscenely content about the tilt to his face. He does that damn humming thing that sounds mostly like purring. “Before,” he says, in a much more serious voice, “I was thinking. If, if someone had needed me like this, I would’ve helped. I would’ve wanted to, of course I would. I don’t like to see people suffer, and I could never – if there was something I could do, I could never just not. But I would’ve fought the bond. I couldn’t have not done that either.” He breathes in, shallow. “So I would’ve had to do it but it wouldn’t have been good for – for me or for them either. I would – I would still have needed to have you. To be with you.” He wets his lips. “I love you. You know that. But it’s – more than that. I love a lot of people, you know? Not all of them the same, not all of them as, as much. None of them with this – this unflinching wholeheartedness, or whatever. And it’s not just the bond, you’ve seen people who’re bonded and who are nothing like this, and, and…”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

“You’re lying.”

“I don’t want you to say things that aren’t real.”

Naruto smiles like heartbreak. “Aside from the bond. I’m in love with you.”

In the long, deep silence after the impact, Sasuke reflects that nobody has ever said those actual words to him before.

And it doesn’t matter, because they’re just words.

“I’m not expecting you to say anything back,” Naruto says, getting up on his knees and slipping his arms slowly around Sasuke’s waist. “But I love you. I love you so much. I think even Kyuubi loves you.”

“I know he does,” Sasuke says dumbly. “He loved me even before you did.”

Naruto’s fingers tighten against his ribs. Naruto smiles up at him before leaning forward, pressing his face to Sasuke’s chest. “I love you,” he says again. “I love you more than anything. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do to be with you.”

“You’re a fool,” Sasuke says. His voice comes dry and cool, but his fingers are locked around Naruto’s shoulders and for a long, long time he doesn’t know how to let go.

Eventually Naruto settles on the floor, back resting against Sasuke’s legs, facing the computer. “I should see this too, huh.”

“Probably.”

Anti-shifter violence on the increase, unsurprisingly. Speculations about Sasuke, about the bombing of the Hokage building, about the durability of the armistice. Naruto tugs Sasuke’s trouser legs up, following his veins with his fingers. Sasuke knows from experience that he can do it without looking, that he knows where to touch the way a migrating bird knows where to fly.

“Are you gonna say anything?” Naruto asks. “To the press.”
“You’re the media whore.”

Naruto sticks out his tongue. “Well, you’re the whore whore.”

“Fuck off.”

“No,” Naruto groans, leaning more heavily against Sasuke’s legs. “But like. Maybe we should talk to the humans. About you.”

“They never cared before.”

“BEAST will care now.”

“BEAST is an extremist fringe group.”

“With close ties to several parties on the anti-shifter end.”

Sasuke snorts. “Maybe we should see about getting me a lawyer or something. Someone who’d look independent.”

Naruto snorts back. “Dad would have a stroke.”

“He’d heal,” Sasuke says dryly.

“Yeah.” Naruto rests his face against Sasuke’s thigh, humming again. The tips of his fingers play absently against the small of Sasuke’s back, up under his shirt.

Sasuke leans forward, closing the tabs he’s done with. “Anyway I talked to Neji. He could use some support. That might be something you could talk to your father about, if we’re playing politics.”

Naruto’s low laugh moves his throat against Sasuke’s thigh. “I tell you I’m in love with you, and you see this as your sign to ask me for favours, huh.”

Sasuke feels himself stiffen so suddenly it stings, his body locking up. “If we’re a team, there aren’t any favours.”

Naruto looks up, wrong-footed. “Sasuke…”

Sasuke mouth feels numb. His body’s so ready for violence, it’s difficult to move it softly. “If you’re on our side like you keep saying, why would I need to ask you for fucking favours.”

Naruto clings to him. “Sasuke, I didn’t, I just…”

Sasuke stands up abruptly, almost braining Naruto with his knee, and shakes his hands off. “This isn’t a service I currently feel like providing.”

“But I didn’t…”

“The favour you can do me right now is to leave me alone.”

Part of him feels like he’s overreacting. Most of him feels like anything short of mass murder is an underreaction.

A lot of this is Naruto’s residual upset, the turmoil that tore down half a building and still simmers, but it feels like his own.
“Yeah, well, I’m not going to!” Naruto erupts.

And Sasuke does know, sort of, that Naruto didn’t mean anything by it, that Naruto was just basking in things being easy and all right, jokable. That Naruto meant *I love you* and would never think of their involvement as favour trading or sex for pay.

“Here,” Naruto says, grabbing Sasuke’s hand and pressing it to his heart. Sasuke’s hand goes through his skin and his flesh, breaks through his ribcage. Naruto gasps, wide-eyed and open-mouthed and never doubting. Sasuke’s fingers move inside his chest, curling around Naruto’s heart, catching its beat against his palm.

xxxxx

Sasuke’s on the treadmill when the call comes. Naruto, who’s picked up the phone, is tempted to answer it himself, but that’s not the kind of controlling behaviour that Sasuke accepts.

“It’s for you.”

Sasuke reaches out for his phone, only stepping off the treadmill when his sees Naruto’s expression.

“Ah.” He wets his lips and takes the call. “Orochimaru.”

He gestures for Naruto to leave, so Naruto walks far enough away that he only hears Sasuke’s side of the conversation.

“Yes,” Sasuke says. “That’s true … I gave him to Kushina Namikaze, but I suppose he’s yours if you want him…Maybe. It was just something I had to do… I see. Well, I suppose I’ll see you then… That’s none of my concern. You’ve trained me better than that… Hn.”

He smirks at Naruto when he’s ended the call, doesn’t even scowl too much when Dad and Kushina and Tsunade intrude. Shikamaru, Naruto knows, Sasuke barely ever notices.

“I spoke to Ibiki,” Dad says. It seems he’s finally caught on that directness is the best approach with Sasuke. “We’re arranging a dinner. He’d like for you to be present.”

“Sure, of course,” Naruto says.

Sasuke frowns. “I already talked to Sakura. She’ll have told him I’m not a sex slave.”

“With all respect,” Shikamaru says, “while he’s very fond of her, I doubt he puts much stock in her judgement.”

Sasuke would be hard pressed to disagree with that assessment. He puts the phone away and straightens up, startlingly lord of the manor despite visibly sweating through a ratty set of training clothes.

Shikamaru slumps down on the floor, because he’s Shikamaru and even the sight of a gym tires him out. “We’ve been supposing you’re none too keen on a press conference, or interviews, that sort of thing.”

“It’s a waste of time,” Sasuke says.

Shikamaru shrugs. “I disagree. If Orochimaru’s faction starts trouble in earnest, it’s important that the human government stays neutral or better yet on our side. If nothing else then because that’ll encourage the middleground exorcists to remain calm.”
“He’s not wrong,” Naruto says.

Sasuke directs a rather sardonic gaze at Dad, who’s clearly letting Shikamaru talk because anything Dad says, Sasuke will be opposed to on principle. Eventually he says, addressing himself to Naruto and Kushina, “For your information, Orochimaru has a lot of footage of me. Snuff films, torture porn, sex tapes.”

“That complicates matters,” Dad says.

Kushina gives Dad a look of distaste. “That’s awful.”

“Yeah, not shit,” Naruto agrees, diffusing. “Awful and complicated. We’d have to – put out just a little thing, and see how he reacts, what he throws at it, before we could start building any sort of media image.”


“Eh,” Naruto rubs at the back of his head, absurdly pleased and embarrassed. “There’s some footage of me from up north that’s not too human-friendly.”

“So be a war hero,” Sasuke says.

Dad looks worryingly thoughtful at this pronouncement. What he says, though, is, “Well, about the dinner. Think about it.”

Sasuke says, “I’m going to shower.”

Naruto tags along, but Sasuke in the event does not enter the changing room. He walks far enough away that Dad and the others can’t hear his footsteps anymore, and then quickly steps into the air, returning to stand just outside the half-open door. Naruto, wobbling a little, hurries to copy him.

Sasuke still smells quite strongly of sweat, but then they’re in a gym. Clearly nobody notices him, because they keep talking.

“…this one,” Shikamaru says. “Anything explicit would be child pornography and couldn’t be shown, and anyway – Orochimaru will have a lot of material like that, a lot of material where he looks like he likes it, that’s how he’s been trained to look, it wouldn’t mean anything.”

Angling his head and almost falling to the ground until Sasuke grabs his shoulder, keeping him upright, Naruto manages a glimpse of the clip Shikamaru has selected.

It shows them on a plane or a bus or something, Naruto asleep in his seat, Sasuke beside him directing a wry, rather soft smirk at him and then leaning over to rest his head on Naruto’s shoulder. He looks safe and comfortable and familiar with Naruto.

“That’s good,” Tsunade says.

Naruto can only agree that it’s a very lovely clip, but he agrees with Kushina too: “Does he know you took that?”

Shikamaru’s rather surprised tones, “No, of course not. But one of my selection parameters was it couldn’t be something that’d upset him too much. This is fairly low key.”

“Then no,” Kushina says. “We’re not using it.”

Dad’s voice, exasperated, “Kushina…”
“No. That child has been sold out enough. We’re not doing this behind his back. If you want any semblance of trust or loyalty –”

“He can’t stand any of us anyway –”

“Oh really?” snaps Kushina, who rarely does sarcasm, but does it well now. “Because I was under the impression that it was Kabuto he turned into minced meat, while you got your son alive and your northern vassals saved from their demons.”

“He didn’t do that for me.”

“No, he did it for Naruto, and so far he’s held off hurting you for Naruto, but I don’t doubt there’s a limit to that. Let’s not cross it for trivialities.”

“This isn’t a triviality. Oh, enough. I know you’ve always failed to grasp the importance of preventing catastrophes, I know it doesn’t come with the same glory as swooping in to sort them out, but it’s –”

“Preventing him from turning on you over some stupid media stunt is exactly –”

“Enough,” Tsunade interrupts. “We all know Orochimaru’s shown him off in rather more revealing positions. I doubt he cares about anyone seeing him using Naruto as a pillow, especially since it’s common knowledge that they’re childhood friends.”

“What matters,” Kushina says, “isn’t the contents of the clip. It’s that it was taken without his knowledge or consent – behind his back. That we’re going behind his back to use him to further our own goals.”

“If we asked, he’d hardly agree to a photo shoot,” Dad snaps. “But this is nothing. Odds are he won’t care.”

“He’s spent his whole life being used by other people, he has every right to care.”

“Are you feeling sorry for him now?” Dad sneers.

Kushina unexpectedly calms down. Naruto knows from uncomfortable experience that she’s a yeller, but she doesn’t yell now. “Sure. I’ve never been sorry enough that I stepped in, but of course I understand that he was in a horrific situation, of course I feel sorry when I see a child being abused. What kind of monster wouldn’t? But I’m talking sense. He’s someone now that we’d do better to work with.”

Dad sighs. “If that was possible…”

“Why wouldn’t it be? We got along perfectly fine when I spoke to him.”

Naruto imagines Dad blinking, taken aback. “Then I don’t see why he’s so uncooperative with me.”

Tsunade snorts. “He already has a father figure, albeit a rather terrible one that he hates. He’s been lacking a mother.”

Kushina’s rather faint but also rather vehement voice, “I’m nothing like Mikoto.”

“No,” Tsunade agrees. “I doubt he could stand you if you were.”

“If I may cut in,” Shikamaru says in the deafening silence. “What’s happened to Kabuto?” Dad quickly explains, and Shikamaru says, “Oh. Then I’m strongly opposed to spreading this clip. Or any
clip.”

“Don’t be absurd,” Tsunade says.

“No,” Shikamaru says, sounding upset for once, alive. “I don’t wish to be tortured to death – to a point I wished for death, and couldn’t have it – over a stupid clip. No. I’m not taking these odds. We should tell Naruto. He can decide. He’ll survive it, either way.”

“Like he’d ever agree to this kind of thing,” Kushina says.

“Let’s revisit this conversation later,” Tsunade cuts in. “I need to check up on Gaara.”

Sasuke quickly walks away, Naruto in tow. All the while Sasuke’s remained expressionless, giving away nothing, and he still offers no reaction.

Naruto’s too antsy, too curious, to be more than half distracted by Sasuke entering the changing room and pulling up the hem off his shirt.

“Hey,” he tries.

Sasuke gives him almost the same smirk he did in Shikamaru’s clip. “She’s wrong. You’d totally give that thing to the media behind my back.”

“Well, yeah. Cause I know you don’t care really.”

Sasuke nods, pulling the shirt over his head.

Naruto is struck by a terrible suspicion. “But you’re not pissed. You’re – do you have like a girlcrush on my fake mum?”

“I certainly don’t have one on you.” He drops his trousers, and Naruto licks his lips, trying to stay focussed. “She can have it if she wants. The clip.”

“Dad’s the one who wants it.”

“He’s not getting anything from me.”

“Ah.” His phone beeps. “Um. Gaara’s asking for me.”

“Go.”

“I just…” He surges forward, pressing his face briefly to Sasuke’s. “Okay, I’m going.”

Minato’s in his office when it happens. It’s Tsunade who comes in to tell him, like it was Tsunade who came into this very office six years ago and told him Yui was dead.

She doesn’t need to speak. Her drawn, haggard face says it all: war has come.

He sits back in his chair, forcing his shoulders to straighten from their slump. “We knew it was only a matter of time,” he reminds himself.

Tsunade makes a sound of agreement. “It’s about what we predicated.”

The situation in Rain Country, never stable, has imploded. Shifter communities wiped, supposedly
collateral damage during exorcisms. The government looking the other way as much of the military aids and abets BEAST rising up.

“We’re going to have to step in,” Tsunade says.

“Naruto will go,” Minato decides. “We’ll want our own exorcist there. He can bring Gaara, too. They’ll balance each other out.”

“He’s not ready.”

“None of us are. He’d better grow into it.” He sighs. “You go with them, if you prefer.”

“When the situation here has cleared up,” Tsunade agrees. “We’ll need to go over exactly where we stand.”

I did this, he thinks. Hundreds of thousands of people will die. Millions, probably.

If he’d fought this hard, sacrificed this much, for Yui when she was still alive… But he’s always too late.

He expected blame from Kushina – certainly he deserves it – but Kushina’s never been one to blame people. She remains unshakable and on his side, a better family than he’s ever deserved. “I’m glad now that Sasuke gave us Kabuto,” she says, hours later. “If worse comes to worst, we can handle an infestation on our own.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

Kushina snorts. “It wouldn’t be the first time.” Her voice softens, grows more serious. “You miss Kakashi.”

Sasuke’s actually been incredibly accommodating and efficient about exorcising, but yes, Minato certainly misses their exorcist being his exorcist, rather than Naruto’s. While Kakashi had different commitments, had directives from the Crusader Council to abide by, he was far more reliable because genuinely loyal.

He’s a grown man now of course, but he was tiny when Minato first knew him. It was a remarkable thing, when that pointy, unloved child became the hand of God upon this earth, crushed a skyful of demons in his fist. When afterwards he stepped down out of Heaven, and smiled that crooked, secret smile up at Minato, as if asking for approval. As if wanting to reach out and not knowing how, viciously not knowing how.

“Mmh,” Kushina says. “That’s not what I meant. The way he believed in you – he looked at you like you’d hung the moon, like he couldn’t conceive of you ever failing. That’s something to miss.”

“I disappointed him,” Minato says, tugging the covers up securely over Konohamaru’s sleeping form. Konohamaru wasn’t happy about Naruto leaving again, and the news of war breaking out can’t have helped.

“Of course you did,” Kushina tells him. “There’s nobody in the world could live up to those expectations.”

“Perhaps not.” He strokes Konohamaru’s forehead, smoothing out the sullen creases.

Kushina’s face is mostly amused, the amusement she dons to shut out anything else, as she says, “I remember your mother expressing her surprise that you never considered – well. Keeping him.”
“You can’t be serious.”

She shrugs, very lightly. “Sure.”

“My mother would hardly approve of my cheating on you.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time.” It’s said without rancour.

“I did not,” he snaps. “If anything, I cheated on Yui with you.”

She nods towards the door, signalling it’s time for them to leave. “I know you see it that way. You know nobody else does.”

In the darkness after he’s turned off Konohamaru’s nightlight, he sheds the pretence that this is a joking matter. “He was a little kid. A little kid who’d been let down by every single adult in his life.”

“They seem to have a knack for that, don’t they, the exorcists? Letting their children down.”

He sees another example of that next morning, when he finds Neji Hyuuga outside the door. Minato’s never yet seen an expression on the boy’s face, and this time is no different. Sasuke too keeps his face blank in this way, but where Neji’s eyes are as expressionless as the rest of him, Sasuke’s always burn.

“Good morning,” Minato says. “Can I help you?”

“Good morning,” Neji echoes. It’s impossible to pinpoint just what it is that makes it sound like he’s talking at a dog. “I’m here to see Sasuke.”

Minato doesn’t expect the Council to have sent him, not when Kushina spoke to Mikoto so recently – and if anyone were to stop by for a personal visit, he’d have reckoned on it being Kakashi. Neji’s plainly uncomfortable in this shifter stronghold: not in the sense of someone surrounded by threat, but rather in the sense of a cleanly person surrounded by incredible filth.

“He left yesterday evening.”

It’s clear that Neji doesn’t believe him.

“Why don’t you give him a call?” Minato suggests, choosing to be amused. It would be too exhausting to feel any other way about the constant need to placate sullen, racist exorcist children.

Neji stares at him blankly for perhaps twenty seconds, before picking up his phone. Presumably Sasuke answers, because Neji starts talking in Latin. He nods at Minato, semi-politely, and walks away. His rather possessive grip on the phone leads Minato to conclude that it’s for the best that Sasuke isn’t here.

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Shikamaru decides it’s time he started updating Naruto’s social media accounts again. Naruto actually had quite a following, before the hiatus necessitated by the northern campaign, built mostly on candid charm. This morning, Naruto sleepy and dishevelled in what looks like an old Spiderman pyjamas that clings snugly to his muscles and rides up to show slices of skin, would fit right in. It’s approachable, it’s attractive, and it’s charmingly ridiculous.

Shikamaru would particularly like to capitalise on this morning because Sasuke seems…happy, sort of.
The photos of him that have circulated lately have been either of Sasuke the crusader, still glowing with God’s grace and turning his haughty, judgemental face away from any nearby shifter, or of Sasuke the heavily abused child, visibly injured.

No faction is openly accusing each other of that abuse, because they were all involved, they’ve all had a hand in it.

Still, it’d be good to show off this Sasuke, who responds to Naruto’s incessant, smitten bickering quite warmly. Who looks rather surprisingly human, in an overlarge fleece jacket and with his hair an utter mess, yawning and making tea. Naruto slides his arms around his waist, whispering in his ear, and when Sasuke eventually turns to face him, he puts his arms around Naruto’s neck, lets Naruto press their cheeks together.

They look like they’re in love.

The post-coital bliss is practically rolling off Naruto in waves, and he keeps crowding Sasuke as Sasuke picks up his tea cup and makes for the table. Leans forward to kiss him, making a sour face at the taste of what smells like strong green tea but not stopping.

Sasuke apparently draws the line at letting Naruto pull him down into his lap, but he does rest his feet, one in a big woollen sock and one just metal, on Naruto’s thigh, sitting curled around his tea. When Naruto wraps his tail around the flesh foot and up his leg, Sasuke lets him.

“…and then,” Naruto says, gesturing with his sandwich and spraying crumbs as he finishes some anecdote, “boom!”

Sasuke snickers, saying something too low for Shikamaru to catch that makes Naruto laugh.

“You are such a ninny,” Kiba remarks, and Naruto gives him the finger and a huge grin.

“Anyway,” Naruto says, reaching for the bowl of tomatoes and pushing it towards Sasuke, “we should see about getting Pari exorcised.”

“No,” Sasuke says flatly.

Naruto leans in for a quick kiss that must be thoroughly disgusting, an unnatural mixture of green tea, tomatoes, and Naruto’s hot chocolate. “It’d be a great statement. We could show we’re in charge and we’re sorting things out, get the whole situation settled down.”

“They killed an exorcist,” Sasuke points out, “that’s why they’re blacklisted.”

One of those good-for-someone-who’s-not-a-crusader exorcists, shot to death. Supposedly collateral damage in a terrorist attack, but nobody knows for sure. Shikamaru privately suspects it was Orochimaru who arranged for it, to up the tension in the region.

“So did Rock, though? Kind of.”

“Mmh,” Sasuke agrees, around a mouthful of tea. “And if I’d known about that officially, Rock would be dust and ashes.”

“I,” Naruto starts.

“No,” Sasuke cuts him off, implacable but still calm and rather cosy. “I’m gonna go nova one day, and the Council may still decide that this whole – you – is cause to make me. Doing it over a stupid town that didn’t have the sense to protect the exorcist sent their way – no.”
“Over me,” Naruto repeats, closing a hand around Sasuke’s knee.

“It’s unlikely.” He snorts, a slightly less bitter sound than usual. “Orochimaru wouldn’t let them.”

“That can’t be,” Naruto begins, looking absolutely devastated.


Shikamaru calculates. Kakashi, as Head of Hatake, has his own seat. Hiashi Hyuuga listens to Hanabi, if not to Neji. And the Council would never go against Itachi and Orochimaru both.


Sasuke offers a tiny smirk, misshapen and strokey the way that means it’s real, that he’s not controlling his face. “He likes me.”

Naruto’s bowed head comes up. “Did you sleep with him?”

Sasuke doesn’t hesitate. “Yes.”

It’s a clear indication of how Orochimaru handled things that Sasuke, whom Shikamaru has always considered a rather private person, obviously thinks nothing of having this conversation in front of him and Kiba.

Naruto’s hand fists with a crunching sound, and Sasuke hisses sharply. “Fuck you!”

“Shit. Sorry. Sorry!” Naruto snatches his hand away, letting Sasuke’s crushed kneecap heal.

“It wasn’t serious,” Sasuke says. “I have no interest in doing it again.” It must be true, because Naruto calms down.

Shikamaru doesn’t like to think Naruto’s taking it better than expected when Naruto’s just pulverised his boyfriend’s knee in a fit of jealousy, and certainly if Temari ever behaved in this fashion towards Shikamaru he’d be deeply disturbed. But it is what it is, and Sasuke, who unlike Shikamaru does have the means to retaliate, doesn’t even move his feet from where they’re still resting against Naruto’s thigh.

“Still,” Naruto says, sprawling back in his chair and taking a belligerent bite of his sandwich. “We have to do something about Pari.”

“No, we don’t.”

“Uh, yes? Obviously? It’s a big town, they’re having a lot of trouble trying to evacuate, at least half the population’s going to die.”

“So?” Sasuke takes another sip of tea. “People die all the time. I can’t see they’re contributing much value to an already overpopulated world.”

Naruto blinks at him, reaching for the cheese. “Uh, all life is precious?”

“There are seven billion of us,” Sasuke tells him dryly, snatching up some cheese himself, “most of whom cost more than they contribute. On average, it’s really not that precious.”

“Such a misanthropist,” Naruto mutters around a mouthful of cheese sandwich.
“Humanity is a resource drain,” Sasuke says. “A million of them aren’t worth one exorcist. They need to know their place.”

“Thousands of civilians dying over something they couldn’t control is just going to create resentment.”

Sasuke shrugs. “Everyone knows the rules. An exorcist dies on your watch, you’re done for.” He reaches forward, towards the chess board Shikamaru’s using to play himself, and pushes a white knight forward. It’s not the move Shikamaru would’ve made, which makes it far more interesting.

“I’m gonna go inspect the troops,” Naruto says, standing and pressing a possessive kiss to the side of Sasuke’s face. “I wanna know exactly what we’re working with before I have to start fighting with Gaara about how aggressive we should be.”

“Wait up,” Kiba says, abandoning his almost finished breakfast.

In their absence Shikamaru contemplates Sasuke and his chess strategies, and wonders if he played with Orochimaru, or Kakashi, or Neji. Whoever it was, he’s good enough to make it an interesting match.

“Tell me again how you got him to agree to this?” Naruto asks, straightening the hem of his shirt.

Shikamaru shrugs. “I just had to beat him.” Beat him three to one, though they were fairly entertaining games. “Now put on your tie.”

Naruto struggles with it until Shikamaru takes over, and Naruto can slump down in his seat. It’s a rather lavishly arranged mock interview, the sitting room dressed up as a TV studio and teeming with their in-house media people.

Naruto’s … unexpectedly calm. Rather, he has the same pre-television jitters he always gets – a good jittery, drumming his feet against the carpet – but Sasuke is unexpectedly calm. It’s a bit weird to see him dressed like this, slacks and shirt and woollen jumper, since usually Sasuke’s either in his work clothes or a complete slob about it. This is how he used to dress as a child, before Orochimaru: back when he was still a preppy kid who actually liked his school uniform and took pride in keeping it clean.

Directing a bright grin at the reporter, Naruto’s aware that this could go significantly worse than Shikamaru’s expecting: Shikamaru seems to assume that Sasuke’s difficult past will have made him a good liar. Naruto on the other hand is aware that Sasuke’s actually rather an awful liar, because he’s had to learn to expect never to be listened to, never to be believed, and it comes through in his voice.

Sasuke doesn’t seem concerned about this, however, and it’s partly because to him this is just a stupid penalty for losing at chess, but it’s also … that he’s not expecting to have to do much lying.

“What?” Sasuke snaps.

“Nothing,” Naruto says, resisting the urge to lean in like a 50s couple and kiss Sasuke’s cheek. He’d lick it if he did, bite lightly at Sasuke’s cheekbone.

Sasuke’s face grows rather stiff with not showing displeasure, so Naruto leans in after all, mumbles, “Nothing you’d like me to talk about in public.”

A lascivious brow climbs up to hide itself under Sasuke’s fringe.

“Not like that! Pervert.”

“Uh huh.”

“No, it’s just.” He’s leaning in really close now, because the attendants have shifter hearing too, his lashes brushing Sasuke’s cheek. “You’re like, you’re here to convince people that this is where you’re supposed to be. And you’re not thinking about it as lying.”

Sasuke blinks, as though taken aback. “I made a choice,” he says. “Idiot.”

Naruto’s stomach burns at the simplicity of it. Insane possessiveness, and the dizzy heat of Kyuubi’s love, but also the acid corrosion: really Sasuke has no other place to go. Naruto is the only one who hasn’t betrayed, who can’t betray.

The reporter shifts in her chair. “I’m ready to begin when you are.”

“It’s what we’re here for,” Sasuke says with some impatience.
Naruto sits up properly, with mild reluctance, and smiles at her.

They start out soft. “It’s been a controversy in the news lately,” she says. “Using shifters for medical research.”

Shifters rarely ever fall ill, and there’s hardly an injury they can’t heal from: if shifter healing could be used to treat humans, it would revolutionise medicine. Kabuto’s not the only one who’s been experimenting, and there’ve been a few suspicious disappearances lately, though mostly it’s corpses going missing from hospitals, not live shifters.

“Ah, yeah,” Naruto says. “I think that’s great? They’ve made some real progress with paralysis treatment, haven’t they?”

“Yes, quite a bit, from what I understand. So you’re in favour of this?”

“Of course. It’s like organ donation, you know? To be able to help people even after you’re dead – I think that’s amazing. Once I’m gone, my body’s just…well, it’s just a body. If human scientists can use it to come up with treatments, to help thousands of people, of course I’d want that.” He shrugs, still smiling. “You know, I went in for these check-ups they ask for, donated blood and – um, some other stuff I didn’t quite get what it was. They explained it to me, but… Well, but the point is, they thought they could maybe use my samples for their research. I hope they can.”

“And the disappearances?”

“Obviously taking live people is reprehensible. Unacceptable, ever.” He bites his lip, leans in towards her. “But the corpses… I don’t know – and I feel the same way about human-to-human organ donation – but a corpse doesn’t have any rights. It’s not a person anymore. And someone else’s right to live has to outweigh the family’s wanting to say no – I don’t even know what their interest in this is supposed to be. You shouldn’t have the right to deny people health and life when it doesn’t cost you anything to let them have it. It’s basically killing them out of spite. If doctors need corpses, I say take them.”

Sasuke remains silent. Naruto’s good at this. More puppyish, and more showily sincere that Sasuke will ever be comfortable with, but handling people is Naruto’s talent and Naruto’s training. He’s… warm.

He’s also keeping himself reigned in, understanding that this is, really, Sasuke’s interview. Sasuke would’ve preferred if it was Naruto’s, but it is what it is.

They cut to the chase quickly enough, the reporter turning to him. “You’ve been part of Orochimaru’s household for the last seven years, since you were eight?”

“That’s correct.”

“When you were nine, you obeyed orders to participate in the cleansing of Mist Town, is that right?”

“Yes. No regrets.”

The woman’s face smoothes over, attentive but expressionless. “You’ll forgive me for asking frankly, but there have been quite a few inflammatory rumours that we’d like to get cleared up. You’re bonded to Naruto now. Were you kidnapped?”

“I got in Kakashi’s car of my own volition.” His voice remains expressionless, relentlessly cut-glass superior, as he says the name.
“And now… there’s a clip of you saying you’re not being held against your will.”

“That’s true.”

“All right,” the reporter says carefully. Sasuke figures if it was a real interview, she’d have pressed him harder. “So let’s get straight to the point: were you forced into the bond?”

“No.”

“No?”

“Eh,” Naruto interjects, breaking the tension. “Dying shifter beast versus archangel, who’d you bet on?”

That hurdle cleared, Sasuke leans back a little, letting his hip rest against Naruto’s. He lets Naruto talk, lets Naruto answer for both of them. Naruto knows what to say: what Sasuke would say, and how to translate that into PC.

Then eventually Naruto nudges his shoulder, and Sasuke forces himself back into the conversation. They’re talking about the bond now, which Naruto’s patient about explaining, making jokes and gestures. Humanising himself, which Sasuke doesn’t have to.

Sasuke shrugs, the first shrug he’s allowed himself since the interview started. “It is how it is. Explaining is pointless.”

“That’s rather harsh.”

“The truth usually is.”

Naruto leans forward on a laugh, touches his arm, and takes over. More kindly words, though essentially they mean the same thing.

And then in the end Naruto freezes there, Sasuke can feel his heart stopping in his chest, where it rests against Sasuke’s own.

The reporter has remarked on the permanence of the bond, said something about possible enquiries into breaking it, which people have attempted for hundreds of years with zero result. She continues, “You don’t seem willing to discuss it? I’m sorry, is it that it’s harder to deal with the possibility of hope, when it’s such a slim one?”

Sasuke blinks, the slow way he blinked when Orochimaru’s minions needed their place explained to them. “But I don’t necessarily want it undone.”

They’ll have to cut here, he realises with impatient relief, because when Naruto’s heart starts beating again it’s racing, punching like a boxer inside Naruto’s chest.

And Naruto will know that Sasuke not necessarily wanting the bond broken is tied to how Kyuubi’s healing makes it possible to force magic through the seal, but it’s enough. Naruto’s face is all flushed, and turned entirely to Sasuke: to Naruto, again, the rest of the world has ceased to matter to the point that it might as well have ceased to exist.

“I,” Naruto says, his voice wild and raw and rallying with hope. Kisses the corner of Sasuke’s mouth, and then his mouth. “I love you.”

In this one moment, Sasuke knows this like he knows his own heartbeat.
Naruto smiles at him, summery with warmth, and declares, “I’m your family.”

“Che.”

“And you’re mine.”

“Keep talking like a romance novel and I won’t be for long.”

“Che,” Naruto echoes, scrunching up his face in one of those absurd grimaces of his. “Like you could do anything better! I bet that’s why you never say anything nice, you’d go all constipated and cliché.”

And in the end, Sasuke thinks, hears the words in Kakashi’s distant voice, we were only human, drunk on the idea that love, only love, could heal our brokenness.

“Well,” the reporter says uncertainly, looking away from them – presumably towards Shikamaru. “Well, I think we’ve got what we need?”

“Mmh,” Naruto agrees, in that idiot way of his of saying corny things and meaning them so much it hurts, so much it changes the world, “I’ve got you.”

Only later, over lunch, does it occur to Sasuke that everyone has watched the interview. “Oh Sasuke,” Kiba moans theatrically, “you’re my sun, my moon, my star-studded sky. Without you I am as nothing, and with you I am still a complete dork who’d have been laughed out of any decent chick flick.”

“Shut up,” Naruto pouts.

Next to Sasuke, Shikamaru directs an interested, albeit lazy, glance at him. “You’re not embarrassed?”

Sasuke shrugs. “Smooth is overrated.”

Kakashi was smooth. Orochimaru was very smooth. Being good with words means being good at using words, making them work for you. Anyway at the end of the day, words are only words: excuses for acting or not acting.

Kiba snorts. “What’s there to be embarrassed about? I mean, he’s always been this way…”

Shikamaru wouldn’t know, but Sasuke’s soft snort indicates agreement.

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Naruto looks up from the endless mess of print-outs on the floor between them. “You meant it.” And he doesn’t need to say anything else because Sasuke knows perfectly well what he’s referring to, but he does need to say it because the words are a spell, he’s spell-bound by them. “You don’t necessarily want the bond broken.”

“Shut up,” Gaara says. He’s attacking a casualty report with a highlighter, lips pursed.

“Maa, maa,” Shikamaru mumbles, lying on his back and reading from a tablet. “Troublesome.”

Sasuke also said he wasn’t forced into the bond, but then Sasuke’s ideas of coercion and consent are warped. He told Naruto, way back in the beginning, You knew it was all right really.

And Naruto – would like to think that he did, and he hopes, he hopes to God and with everything he
is, that he would’ve stopped if he hadn’t.

Sasuke, who without question can feel his doubt, pats him on the head. Frowning at whatever numbers he’s going over, he’s steady and sure. And Sasuke believes in nobody and nothing, but he’s still – he’s still here, still steady enough for both of them.

“Sasukeeee,” Naruto whines, wriggling like a seal across the floor until he’s pressed tight to Sasuke’s side. *Place me like a seal over your heart,* he thinks, liking the thought, and then scowling as he remembers the considerable amusement with which Itachi finally explained that *seal* in the quote doesn’t refer to the animal.

“It’s time to move forward,” Gaara declares.

“Right, okay. Hold your horses.” Naruto sits up, and things start falling into place.

They will clear out the area around their posting, following which Gaara will take charge of their defences while Naruto contains the situation south of them. It’s not what Gaara would prefer, but the risk of large-scale conflict right by their HQ is negligible, which means Shukaku isn’t likely to go berserk – and after his stint with Shizune, Gaara has a lot of trust to earn back.

“But first,” Naruto grins, “time to clean house!”

Sasuke’s slow, dark smirk matches Gaara’s all too well.

It’s easily done.

Naruto thinks afterwards, uncomfortably, feels the thought like an itch at the very edge of pain, that maybe it shouldn’t be this simple.

His mind caught between Kyuubi and Sasuke, with Gaara beside him, it’s easy to get caught up in their enthusiasm: in what Shikamaru would call their enthusiasm, because it sounds better, but what is really their berserker bloodlust.

In less than four hours they’ve cleaned out the county.

Naruto wipes blood off his face, and that’s a clear sign that he let himself get too out of control. He shouldn’t have got blood on him, there’s no reason to be that close or that gloatingly vicious. It’s not efficient. It’s not professional. It’s not the way to accomplish an unpleasant but necessary task.

He catches Kyuubi’s pleased growl between his teeth, the instinct to lick up the blood. Swallows it down, and distracts them both, himself and Kyuubi, by looking past Kiba at Sasuke.

This is presumptuous, maybe, but Sasuke would be – *interested,* now.

In response to Naruto’s staring, Sasuke lifts an eyebrow, tilting his head back: letting Naruto’s gaze spill hot and greedy down the sharp line of his throat.

Naruto has to pull himself together, sort things out, but there remains a red haze over his thoughts. Sasuke fortunately handles some of the sorting out, and plays along when it’s finally taken care of and Naruto basically drags him up the stairs.

Sasuke laughs as he kicks the door shut behind them, and Naruto’s cheeks ache with smiling as he tears through Sasuke’s zippers.

Sasuke’s hands sink into the back pockets of Naruto’s jeans, Sasuke grins up at him from under his
fringe. He’s … teasing: not snidely, not dismissively, but at ease.

Naruto pulls his own shirt off with one hand, using the other to comb through Sasuke’s hair, tugging until Sasuke presses his open, smirking mouth to Naruto’s. He might not be as excited as Naruto, but he’s clearly comfortable, clearly in the mood to be convinced.

By the time they hit the bed, naked now, heat radiates off his skin, and their kisses have become messy with their panting. Naruto remembers Sasuke saying he doesn’t like to ride people, but he obviously likes straddling Naruto’s lap, face to face. Naruto has his back against the headboard, his legs drawn up tight behind Sasuke.

Sasuke looks like Naruto feels, flushed and out of control. Every movement is a struggle, almost a twitch, because he’s lost track of how to control his body. The only smooth movement is the rolling of his hips, because that’s his body acting on its own. No thought, all instinct.

Sasuke bites at the back of Naruto’s neck, soft blunt human teeth, and Kyuubi’s energy flows over him and fills him, a magma river running through his veins. Sasuke kisses Naruto like he did at the Sabaku’s, before Tsunade interrupted. Kisses him like he’s drowning, dying, and he’s happy about it, like he can’t get enough: like he wants Naruto the way Naruto wants him.

Naruto didn’t exactly mean to push love into Sasuke, but he can’t stop it pouring out, torrential and wild. It leaves Sasuke’s twitching and cramping in his arms, body clenched tight in equal parts anxiety attack and sexual climax.

When his eyes blink open afterwards, Naruto has to force himself not to grab harder, not to sink Kyuubi’s claws deep into Sasuke’s flesh and fist his hands around Sasuke’s ribs – Sasuke’s about to punch him and shut himself off.

But Sasuke’s never been one to run.

Naruto poses a challenge with his eyes, lets his whole face turn into a dare, and Sasuke pushes him down into the bed. Sasuke’s fingers trace the seal on Naruto’s stomach, bringing it burning to the surface: Sasuke smirks at him, and Naruto’s forcibly reminded that Sasuke being freaked out has never stopped Sasuke taking charge.

He scratches Naruto’s seal, blunt nails and the prominent bones in his fingers and a slight heavenly burn, and Naruto squirms in overwhelm. It’s a feeling like tickling but worse, he’s so over-stimulated he feels he’s bursting open, even before Sasuke starts licking along the edge of the seal.

Finally he has to escape by rolling onto his stomach, and Sasuke snorts at him. Naruto glares as best as he can, but is quickly mollified when Sasuke kisses under his ear, touching his back instead, the same way he touched his stomach and now without the seal it’s perfect, on the very edge of too much.

“You love me,” Sasuke says, in a tone Naruto can’t decipher. Thoughtful, mostly, but something more than that.

“I love you,” he agrees without hesitation, twisting around to be able to look at Sasuke, who’s teasing his legs now, firm strokes along his thighs and then ticklish fingertips in the hollows of his knees. Naruto’s toes are cramping with how good it feels. Very quickly he starts writhing against the sheets, rubbing his hips into the mattress.

“Be still,” Sasuke orders him.

Naruto freezes so abruptly, a little drool drips down his cheek before he starts swallowing.
Sasuke explores his hips, his touch slow and thorough, and Naruto’s moans come thick and stuttering, he’s beginning to tremble in a way that’s almost thrusting into the bed.

Sasuke snorts, giving him a mostly playful smack. “Up on your knees if you can’t be still.”

Naruto obeys, heat pooling in his cheeks until he’s lightheaded. Sasuke strokes through his tails, over the small of his back, in between his legs. Already Naruto’s dripping and aching, caught in this helplessness, this almost humiliation: the extreme exposure, the sharp sweet edge of trusting that Sasuke won’t scorn him, won’t turn away from him.

“Spread yourself,” Sasuke tells him.

Naruto groans, deep and wordless – so far beyond words now – resting his weight on his shoulders to reach behind himself, spreading himself open for Sasuke. The room around them has become distant and surreal, swaying as though in a heat haze. Naruto feels every beat of his own heart as the beat of a hammer.

Sasuke leans forward, nudging his face against Naruto’s hair and slipping his hand around Naruto’s throat.

“Please,” Naruto grounds out. “Please for fuck’s sake…”

Sasuke’s fingers squeeze, not allowing him any air, but his other hand fists around Naruto’s cock. Naruto pushes back against him, body coiled in desperation, almost in lockdown, until finally, finally, Sasuke sinks into him.

He’s barely sheathed before Naruto comes, erupting like a natural disaster and collapsing in the wet spot. Which is fine, Sasuke likes to wash off but Naruto rather enjoys the stains and smells, like to wallow in them.

Sasuke rolls off him and lies on his arm, quite close and still quite excited.

Naruto kisses his chin, the edge of his cheek, catching his hand. “Can I, um.” He lifts Sasuke’s hand to his face, sucks the thumb into his mouth and lets his tongue curl greedily around it. He loves the taste of Sasuke’s skin, coated now in traces of blood and gun oil and holy fire, and also Naruto’s sperm. He loves it even more when Sasuke’s pupils dilate. “Can I suck you this time?”

Sasuke’s thumb moves in his mouth, dragging against his teeth. Kyuubi’s fangs ache and want to burst into existence, but Naruto manages to keep them down.

“Yeah,” Sasuke decides, pulling his thumb free and briefly replacing it with his tongue. “You can suck me.”

The grin splits Naruto’s face. He’s up on his knees immediately, pushing Sasuke onto his back and crawling between his legs.

Sasuke snorts turns into a chuckle turns into a strangled gasp.

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He hangs up because Sasuke’s standing in the doorway. This isn’t Shikamaru’s room per se, but it’s commonly known that he frequents it. Also Sasuke would hardly be wandering into conference rooms at random.
“Uchiha.”

Sasuke nods at him, scanning the room. “I didn’t know you played shogi.”

“I could say the same to you.” But Shikamaru lifts the game onto the table in invitation. It’s not subtle, but then subtlety doesn’t impress Sasuke. Polite manipulation, politic suggestions, Minato’s harsher but still indirect approach – all of them have fallen on deaf ears. Then Shikamaru beat him three to one in an unplanned chess game, made a wager, and here he is.

Shikamaru quickly determines that Sasuke’s rather better at shogi than at chess, and settles into the game quite pleased. It was a happy surprise that Sasuke is in fact amenable to being beaten at these things.

They’re perhaps halfway through the first game when Naruto and his entourage appear. “So,” Naruto says, “we’ll be going now. Back soon!”

The way he stares at Sasuke is so hungry, so needy, Shikamaru’s uncomfortable seeing it. It’s the look of a child begging not to be left behind, to be seen, to be saved.

“All right,” Sasuke says. To Shikamaru he looks expressionless, but Naruto obviously gleans something from him, because he stabilises. Smiles, reaching out to squeeze Sasuke’s arm.

“All right,” he repeats. “You hold down the fort, okay? Let’s go!”

Shikamaru’s fought hard for this, for Naruto to go take care of the worst of the southward conflict without Sasuke. Fortunately the demon activity predictions were centred on the HQ area, which convinced Naruto to give in and go solo.

The conflict is relatively contained, and should be quickly handled. He doesn’t need Sasuke for that. Meanwhile, Shikamaru would be unhappy to remain here, with so much predicted demonic activity, without an exorcist.

In the middle of their third game, Sasuke abruptly says, “I hear you’re good with technology.”

“Well,” Shikamaru says, moving his piece sneakily forward, “rather.”

Sasuke nods, sitting straight-backed and blank-faced as a doll. “I understood from Kakashi that you’re a hacker.”

“I dabble.”

“Cut the bullshit.”

Shikamaru makes a disarming gesture. “I’m good at what I do. What’ve you got?”

It turns out that Sasuke’s interested in accessing Orochimaru’s full digital library, and that he took several files from Kabuto’s office after torturing him.

“I can’t get into Orochimaru’s networks,” Shikamaru admits.

“I’ve got an in.”

“Let’s take this to the computer lab.”

For whatever reason, Orochimaru hasn’t rescinded Sasuke’s internal network access, which is extensive. But what Sasuke’s after is whatever information Orochimaru has on sealing, and that’s
one area he’s never had clearance to.

It turns out, rather to Shikamaru’s surprise, that they make quite an efficient team. A lot of the security would be impossible for Shikamaru to breach, because it’s written in holy language unreadable to human eyes. That very fact seems to have left Orochimaru complacent, because with Sasuke translating for him Shikamaru breezes through. All the personally crafted passwords, everything chosen by Orochimaru himself, Sasuke cracks without a second thought. Shikamaru finds himself stopped short by how well, how intimately, Sasuke obviously knows Orochimaru: wondering if Orochimaru knows him equally well, equally deeply. It seems the wiser course of action not to remark on it.

What’s been giving Sasuke trouble is the security Orochimaru must’ve contracted in for, high-end human software. For someone who’s clearly self-taught, he’s pretty good, but he doesn’t have the skills to counter a team of talented professionals.

Fortunately Sasuke’s not the only prodigy in the room.

Shikamaru takes longer than he should, because while Sasuke’s only interested in sealing, Shikamaru finds a lot of other data far more compelling. When the alarm prompts Sasuke to go exorcise, Shikamaru makes sure to download whatever he can get his hands on, never mind that the most interesting stuff remains unreadable to him. It’s no longer inconceivable, after all, that Sasuke might translate for him. Given time, it might be possible to construct a translation program…

It’s barely five minutes before Sasuke returns. He must not even have gone properly outside, probably just stood on the balcony. Shikamaru snorts: the holy work of God’s chosen ones has become so mundane since Sasuke joined them. Shikamaru’s seen him exorcise while towelling his hair, while eating, while arguing with Naruto.

“There isn’t much,” Shikamaru tells him. “Have a look here, is there anything else that looks promising? No, okay. I’m exiting.” Afterwards, high and sweaty with adrenaline, he leans back in the desk chair. “My exorcist books – that’s where they went. You were looking through them.”

“They can’t have been much use to you,” Sasuke says, more a question than a snideness.

“No,” Shikamaru acknowledges with a shrug. “Not much.” He cracks his knuckles. “How about Kabuto’s files?”

Sasuke hands him a memory stick. “He was always better at this than Orochimaru. We ought to use a computer than can handle viruses.”

“Of course.” He chances a smirk. “By the way, what’s in this for me?”

Sasuke lifts an eyebrow. “You mean aside from the extras you already downloaded?”

Shikamaru shrugs, plugging in the memory stick.

He’s surprised when Sasuke actually asks, “What do you want?”

Shikamaru snorts, starting to unpack the files. “For one, I’d like to stick you in a lab. Get a proper scientific measurement of an exorcism.”

“I doubt you’d be able to perceive enough of it to make meaningful measurements.” Sasuke’s tone is marginally colder, and Shikamaru decides it was perhaps a mistake to bring up the lab rat possibilities. He’d assumed Sasuke hadn’t been through that with Kabuto, but it’s possible he was mistaken. Or perhaps not, because Sasuke sinks into the chair next to him, to all appearances riveted
by Shikamaru dancing around the virus eruption threatening to destroy all the files. “Anyway there should be quite a bit of that in Kabuto’s data.”

Shikamaru feels himself start to grin.

The following morning Shikamaru looks up from his laptop – luckily Kabuto wrote almost exclusively in English and Dutch, and aside from being a sociopath was quite a genius – and realises that it’s here now, the reason he wanted Naruto to go south without Sasuke: the delegates from Forrestfall have come knocking. As expected, they’ve heard of Naruto’s arrival, and have heard also of Naruto being kind, being fair to humans.

All the same, already there are raised voices, strained voices. Shikamaru quickly puts his computer away. He isn’t normally one to hurry, but needs must…

“Naruto isn’t here.” Unfortunately it’s Gaara telling the forrestfallers this, head cocked in a fundamentally inhuman fashion.

The man Shikamaru recognises as Gino, one of the Forrestfall leaders, visibly steels himself, pushing instinctive fear away with rage. “Who speaks for him in his absence?”

“You don’t, Gaara,” Shikamaru cuts in very quickly. Most of the time Gaara remembers that Shikamaru’s bonded to his sister, and most of the time that’s enough to prevent him hurting Shikamaru.

Presently Gaara seems mostly amused. “Neither do you.”

There’s a long moment of uncomfortable uncertainty, of people looking around to find someone whose word Naruto would abide by, even in the likely event that the situation turns into a complete shitshow. Someone whose failures Naruto would overlook, no matter their cost. Shikamaru lets it build, and build, and build, before he says, “Let’s get Sasuke.”

Gaara gives him a rather cynical look, but there’s nothing he can say. Whatever Sasuke does, however much it clashes with what Naruto would’ve done, Naruto will get over it, and Naruto will consider himself bound by Sasuke’s word. There’s no one else with that distinction.

Also Gaara and Sasuke tend unfortunately to agree on a lot of things, though Shikamaru doesn’t expect they will this time.

“Let’s sit down,” Shikamaru says, which means Sasuke arrives to a fairy acrimonious brunch.

It’s Shikamaru he looks at when he demands, “What?”

Gino breathes out, “The exorcist. It’s really…”

“Have my seat,” Gaara tells Sasuke. “I can’t stomach this charade.”

Shikamaru’s glad he hacked for Sasuke yesterday, because he doesn’t expect Sasuke would’ve sat down otherwise. He hopes he won’t burn all his goodwill today.

“These gentlemen are from Forrestfall,” he tells Sasuke. “They’ve come hoping to renegotiate the Kira matter.”

Sasuke holds up a hand. “The shifter that went out of control and attacked a kindergarten. What about him?”

“We want justice!”

“Kira is presently being held here,” Shikamaru says, rather more calmly. “They want us to hand him over. If not – well, they’ve acquired two shifter girls, aged five and seven, and are threatening to wreak their vengeance on them instead.”

Forrestfall is a strong community, one of the premier city states of the region, but Kira isn’t technically beastmad, Kira is pack, and so the matter has been at a standstill for weeks.

“You want to trade,” Sasuke summarises. “Fair enough.”

“It – you agree?”

Shikamaru draws in a long, silent breath. Naruto could not have made this deal, no shifter could. With pack loyalty valued so highly, with no man left behind their creed, any shifter who traded away one of their own would be politically dead. And Shikamaru couldn’t have enforced this order, not in his own name: it had to be Sasuke.

Gaara’s absence suggests, or at least Shikamaru would prefer to believe that it suggests, that even he understands that this had to be done, and that Naruto couldn’t do it.

“If you want him, you can have him.” Sasuke slants a look at Shikamaru. “I assume you’ve already got a hand-over scheme in mind.”

“As a matter of fact, I do.”

“And you,” Gino begins, flustered. “You speak for Naruto Uzumaki?”

“No,” Sasuke says. “I speak for myself. But Naruto won’t go back on an agreement I’ve made.”

The conversation’s put on hold as Gino, and everyone else, freezes at the sound of the alarm. Normally, people would be running to their stations. Today, with Sasuke calmly getting to his feet, they move rather more sedately.

“Set it up,” he tells Shikamaru.

“Where’re you…” Gino starts.

“He’ll exorcise the demons,” Shikamaru explains: reassures. “Shall we watch?”

Sasuke climbs out through the window and stands on thin air. Shikamaru, Gino and Gino’s colleagues stand by just inside that open window, watching the show. It occurs to Shikamaru to wonder what it would look like to another exorcist, or to a shifter. His own human eyes see a vaguely humanoid figure of light, surrounded by indistinct darkness. Blink, and there’s only Sasuke, standing incongruously in the air. Blink, and the light and the darkness are back.

Later that afternoon, the girls are returned, more or less unharmed. Shikamaru leads the forestfallers into the prisons, thankfully accompanied by Sasuke. In one of the cells, heavily restrained, is Kira. He looks like nothing special. There’s a feral gleam to his eyes, a suggestion of claws when his hands move, but that’s nothing out of the ordinary.
“How do you want him?” Sasuke asks.

Gino blinks. “We’ll be taking him with us.”

“What sort of restraints do you have?” Sasuke specifies.

Only now does Kira seem to grasp what’s happening. At first he smiles, bright and fanged, apparently believing that he’ll be handed over only to get loose.

“Standard,” Gino starts. “Seven-layer steel, the works.”

“I’ll paralyse him for you,” Sasuke decides. He’s rubbing at a spot of grease on his hand, perfectly ordinary. “Full sensation, no movement. From the neck down? I presume you still want him able to scream.”

This is when Kira changes, becomes wary. “Minato wouldn’t – Naruto wouldn’t – ”

Sasuke smirks at him. “Naruto isn’t here.”

In the end Kira’s carried out unconscious, gagged and chained, but these are formalities. He can’t move anymore.

“He won’t heal?” Gino asks.

“No,” Sasuke says. “If he lived a thousand years, he wouldn’t heal.”

“He won’t live a thousand years,” Gino says.

Sasuke shrugs. “I’d be disappointed if he did.”

Back upstairs he watches the girls rush into their families’ arms with a rather odd expression: blank not because he’s controlling his face but because his face doesn’t know how to respond.

“That one,” Shikamaru says, nodding at a woman lifting the smaller girl into her arms, “tried to get her daughter back on her own. Her husband attempted to get his hands on Kira, to arrange for the trade. They had to be confined, of course, to avoid further mishaps, but in light of the circumstances any punishment was suspended.”

Sasuke, still looking at the girl clinging to her mother, at the mother crying into her hair and the father embracing them both, has nothing to say to that.

The older girl eventually walks over to Sasuke, staring up at him shyly but with determination. “Thank you.” Her voice is low and shaking, stuttering with sincerity.

At first, Shikamaru’s really worried that Sasuke will say something truly terrible in response.

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amenable to translating – unfortunately Kabuto seems largely to have used these words because there aren’t any English equivalents.

Gaara finally asks, “Why are you helping him?”

Sasuke shifts on the couch, seemingly relaxed. Really they’ve aggregated together because none of them trust each other out of sight, but there were a few demons to exorcise this morning and that always improves Sasuke’s mood. Presently he shrugs, looking up from the print-out of some obscure volume on sealing. “He wants to create exorcism simulacra. Which isn’t possible, God can’t be replicated. But if they get some better DEW shields or whatever out of it, all the better.”

Shikamaru refrains from argument. Sasuke has a high school student’s understanding of science, which is to say almost none – but then again the world’s foremost scientists have devoted their careers to creating anti-demon tech for generations, with precious little result.

That’s when it happens.

Sasuke freezes, his face bleached white as ice.

“What?” Gaara snaps.

The ice shatters, expressions rushing across Sasuke’s face. Even his lips are moving, but he’s not speaking to Gaara – arguing with Naruto, as upset as Shikamaru’s ever seen him.

Finally he makes a sharp motion with his hand, as though slamming a door shut.

“What is going on?” Gaara bites out.

Sasuke evidently becomes aware of them again. “Someone fed us false information. It’s not a task force, it’s the entire fucking stonehallian army. He’s in an ambush.”

“Kyuubi,” Gaara says, on his feet now. “Tell me he’s let Kyuubi out.”

“Idiot,” Sasuke grumbles, the word like a coal ready to flame up again at any moment. “Thinks there’s too many civilians close by. That it won’t be such a terrible thing for him to get captured, that he could talk them around…!”

“That is not possible,” Gaara says, his voice flat but with this depth, the inhuman depth of Shukaku’s roar. “Get up. We have to go.”

“It’s too far,” Shikamaru says.

“We still –”

“Kyuubi will have finished them before we get there,” Sasuke cuts in.

Gaara turns on him, with something almost hysteria. “You said he wouldn’t let him out!”

“I did,” Sasuke says, calm now as the eye of a storm. “I let Kyuubi out.”

“Ah.”

Sasuke remains sitting, on the surface placid. “He’ll annihilate the army. I’m going to let him raze Stonehall City too.”

Shikamaru blinks. “Does he have enough energy for that?”
“Uriel does.”

“Right then,” Shikamaru says, already speed dialling Temari. “I’ll start sorting out the false information. Gaara, maybe you should contact Kiba?”

It’s much later that Sasuke stands up. “Keep out of the way,” he says. “He’s upset.”

Through the window Shikamaru can see Kyuubi thundering towards them like a comet on track to hit the earth.

xxxxx

A/N: as some of you know, I recently graduated and started my first real job. The glamorous life of a junior associate chained to my desk unfortunately means that I’ve got quite a bit less time, and quite a bit less mental energy, to spend on writing. I hope that’ll get better as I get used to things and hit my stride at work, but if updates are slower for a while, this is why. I’m very much committed to continuing the story, and I’ve got a lot more written (though not edited) – there’s no risk of it being abandoned.

As always, I’m incredibly grateful for the generous and brilliant reader response. I love hearing and sharing thoughts about the story, and on that note, I’ve got a question for you all. Again as some of you know, there were a lot of lovely comments on the flashback chapter, “Feet in the Air, Head on the Ground”, that got me thinking “well what if Itachi hadn’t given Sasuke away, what then…” and eventually got me writing a 2-part AU on that premise. And recently there was another lovely comment discussing might-have-beens that got me tinkering with a short “what if Naruto had bonded with someone else”-AU that I expect I won’t be able to stop myself writing sooner or later – would you prefer to have these posted in between “normal” chapters in Grave, or would you prefer that I post them separately? In the latter case, would you rather I put them all in, like, a Grave AU Collection, or that I post each one as its own separate story?
Naruto’s eyes blink open, lashes scratching against the pillow case.

Sasuke’s asleep in his arms, exhausted to the point of peacefulness. Naruto’s claws skim over his back, drawing blood, but he doesn’t wake.

Sasuke’s always been a quiet sleeper, but he’s often tense, there’s often a jerk just under his skin, waiting for Naruto’s touch to activate, to make him press closer or shudder away. Today he breathes soft breaths right against Naruto’s chest and doesn’t react to Naruto moving – not even to Naruto hurting him.

Naruto sucks the blood, the stripes of skin, from his fingers. He’s tempted to sink his fangs into Sasuke’s shoulder, take his pound of flesh.

But he already did.

Bit at Sasuke’s thighs and buttocks, biting off pieces, swallowing them down.

Opened Sasuke’s chest, ribs splintering, and fist ed his heart. Brought his mouth to it. Ate it, tore it up with his fangs and savoured it, before Sasuke could heal and stop him. They were watching each other, eyes locked as Naruto’s mouth opened and closed inside Sasuke’s chest.

The sooty handprints on his arms burn and tingle as he clutches Sasuke harder. Presses his closed eyes into Sasuke’s hair.

This is different from the last time Sasuke let Kyuubi out, because this time, he didn’t lock Naruto in: Naruto was aware, all the time that Kyuubi was in charge.

He was in that clearing, everything sharp and heavy with the realisation of the ambush. Kyuubi wanted out, and Sasuke wanted Kyuubi out, and Naruto didn’t let him: and then suddenly what Naruto wanted was irrelevant. It had no bearing on what happened anymore.

Sasuke opened Kyuubi’s cage, fuelled Kyuubi with the power of an archangel, and Naruto couldn’t stop him. His mind was flooded with red, he was drowning inside his own head, and Kyuubi charged.

Naruto’s body didn’t much resemble Naruto’s body anymore. It was just a kernel inside the huge beast that leapt through enemy lines, earthquakes breaking out under its paws.

The enemy army turned to red mush, the clearing became a bloody marsh. Kyuubi wanted more food to play with.

Naruto was starting to rein him in, now that there was nobody left to slaughter, only then Sasuke pushed them on. Wanted the same thing Kyuubi wanted, and again Naruto was washed under.

Stonehall was a vast, thriving city state.

Now it’s dust and ashes.

The huge beast that Kyuubi had become stepped easily over it walls, and razed it to the ground.

So many dead, so much carnage and all the ruin and all the bloodshed, civilians and little kids, Kyuubi tore through hundreds of thousands of people.
He shouldn’t have had the energy for it, he should’ve had to stop, but Uriel’s power fed him. Made him want to crush more people, only then Sasuke was calling him back – Sasuke did what Naruto couldn’t, stopped the slaughter before Kyuubi turned on the next town, and the next. Sasuke could make Kyuubi turn around, because in the end Kyuubi’s always wanted Sasuke more than he wants anything else.

Then he was back home and Sasuke was there. Kyuubi swallowed him. Just opened his huge monster jaw and gobbled him up.

Sasuke burnt his way out of the beast, and Kyuubi, drained and damaged, reverted to a more humanoid shape, which in any case was better suited for the sort of fighting he wanted to do with Sasuke.

Very shortly they were rolling on the floor, the desperate straining of locked bodies that might break when unlocked.

Naruto’s memories of the brutal coupling that followed are mixed up with his recovered memories of the first night Sasuke let Kyuubi out, up north when Naruto was locked in the cage.

He remembers his pulse beating so hard he could see it in his wrists, his legs, his privates. His chest jumping with it, his ribs looking human again and feeling bruised on the inside.

Remembers splitting Sasuke open, leaving him so full of Kyuubi there could be room for nothing else. Sasuke hitting him, in time with the movement of their hips, Kyuubi’s lip splitting, his skull. But the burns weren’t lethal, and so couldn’t deter Kyuubi.

Kyuubi’s hands are larger than Naruto’s, the bones formed differently than human bones. He intertwined their fingers, his own and Sasuke’s, a pair of locked hands pressed into the floor on either side of Sasuke’s head. Kyuubi kept his face over Sasuke’s, eyes locked too, and Sasuke – knew what Kyuubi wanted, which maybe wasn’t entirely different from what Sasuke wanted.

Sasuke, after all, has always had some incredibly self-destructive impulses.

They savaged and ravished each other for a long time, but in the end Kyuubi nudged Sasuke’s face with his own, his nose rubbing across Sasuke’s cheek. He was making sounds, a very soft growling or a very aggressive purring, noises that might have been humming if he’d been Naruto. He mouthed Sasuke’s entire body, licking and sucking from head to literal toe. Over his twitching knees, up his trembling thighs, into the dip of his navel.

He did this, after he’d slaughtered a whole city: after he’d broken Sasuke’s skull open and torn his intestines out, sucked the marrow from his broken bones. Half his face burnt off, but Kyuubi rides Naruto’s body that way, as something that can’t really be hurt. Rode Sasuke the same way, fucked him ruthlessly to the point of prolapse. Punched his teeth out when he bit.

Lost most of his own limbs, at one point or another, Sasuke incinerating him, using his own strength against him to break him apart.

But Sasuke, Naruto reminds himself now, is clearly fine.

Kyuubi’s still mostly in charge of Naruto’s body, and so Naruto’s awareness of Kyuubi’s actions is muted, he feels it like a wound under anaesthesia. When his eyes are blue again maybe it’ll look horrible, maybe it’ll be nauseating, but for now he can only take pleasure in Sasuke being wonderfully marked, all over. The broken bones and ripped-out organs have healed, but the rest remains. Kyuubi’s touch, branded into him.
It’s rising to the surface like a leviathan, the knowledge that it should disturb him – *does* disturb him
– thinking these things and taking such pleasure in this...ownership, but it’s so good to fit his hands
against the bruises on Sasuke’s body, like it was made for him.

He leans forward, buries his nose in Sasuke’s hair, smells it, kisses it.

Clutching Sasuke’s unresponsive body, claws twitching against the finger bruises covering him,
Naruto thinks of an evening before Sakura went home, when the three of them were watching some
show Sasuke and Sakura liked: how Sakura slanted a look at him, and how Naruto thought at once
of Kyuubi’s covetous obsession with Sasuke, when a character turned to the screen and said
something like, *I love that woman like a shark loves blood.*

He swallows, fingers tightening on Sasuke’s skin, cutting through the scabs.

He becomes distracted when Kyuubi picks up on a presence outside the door. Sasuke’s eyelids
flutter, his face scrunching up, but he must be attuned to Naruto’s emotions more than to Naruto’s
sensations: must register Naruto’s sense of Tsunade not being a threat, rather than Naruto’s
recognition of her.

Sasuke rubs at his face with his knuckles, almost taking out his own eye in a startlingly childish
movement, and rolls over onto his back. He’s still lying on Naruto’s arm. He’s still calm,
unselfconscious.

“Hey,” Naruto mumbles, his voice strange and guttural with Kyuubi’s dominance, instead of rolling
on top of him. It’s *so much,* Sasuke’s face soft and slit-eyed with sleep. “Sasuke!” He inches forward
with sudden messy haste, presses his face to Sasuke’s shoulder.

“Mmh,” Sasuke says, more a grumble than a word. He puts his hand on Naruto’s head, positioned to
push him away, but doesn’t actually push. He does move one of Naruto’s tails, swatting it out of his
face and down towards the three others curling around his waist and legs.

Sasuke’s hand is still there, on his forehead, fingers just touching the edge of Kyuubi’s ear, when
Tsunade knocks.

She doesn’t want for an answer, just steps through the door and the mess on the floor with Kakashi
right behind her.

Naruto hasn’t seen Kakashi in weeks, months, since before his heart stopped being able to beat on its
own.

Naruto freezes. Beside him Sasuke changes in the blink of an eye. He’s still calm, but it’s a very
different sort of calmness, with nothing peaceful about it – summer morning calm versus winter night
calm. His head is empty and ringing like after a numbing blow.

“Tsunade,” Naruto says, his voice high and strange, stumbling on the last syllable. “Kakashi.”

Kakashi isn’t looking at him. His face is the colour of ash and perfectly expressionless.

Sasuke too has become distant, blank. He makes no effort whatsoever to cover himself up.

Naruto supposes he looks a little… well, seen with Naruto’s eyes he looks savage, but to someone
else Naruto supposes he might look savaged.

“Sasuke.” Kakashi’s voice too is perfectly ordinary. He doesn’t move at all. Naruto doesn’t know
why that should seem incongruous.
“Good morning,” Tsunade says, asserting control over the situation at last. She’s never seemed so irrelevant. “Kakashi was sent out here.” She leaves a pause there, but Kakashi doesn’t speak again. “We arrived almost at the same time.”

Sasuke says, “Did you want something?”

Tsunade sighs. “Nothing that won’t keep until you’re dressed. I – heard about Stonehall. We’ll talk when you’re up.” She turns to leave. Kakashi stands still for another long moment but then follows her.

Sasuke’s eyes have gone opaque as black glass, like trying to look in the windows of a house at night and all you get is your own reflection.

He shifts, making an annoyed face when their knees touch, which for a moment makes Naruto go cold hot cold very quickly, but it becomes clear it’s about the bruising, not about Naruto.

He reaches for Naruto’s magic like the most obvious thing in the world, like it’s always been his to use.

Kyuubi, more teasing than territorial by an extremely narrow margin, and in love with his handprints covering Sasuke, attempts to block him. It barely slows Sasuke down. He’s impatient about it, hardly even irritated, and Kyuubi retreats to pace in the bowls of Naruto’s mind, infuriated and more infatuated than ever. Most of Sasuke’s injuries heal.

The background smells of blood and ash become abruptly more disturbing.

But Sasuke does offer every indication of being fine, lying warm and close and clearly pissed about still being tired but no longer sleepy. Not ready, Naruto surmises, to be pissed about Kakashi, or about – about Naruto.

Naruto is not fine.

The smell here is nothing compared to the smell of Stonehall, which was…biblical. Old testament destruction, infants with smashed heads, buildings collapsing and the earth opening to swallow everyone down. Searing energy burning people, a monster crushing them underfoot.

For a moment Naruto’s not sure if it’s him or Kyuubi rolling on top of Sasuke, slamming abruptly into him. Sasuke groans in surprised pain, kicking at his hip. Naruto leans over and casually breaks the kicking leg.

More importantly, he claws at Sasuke’s mind, which erupts in aneurysm.

Sasuke’s eyes are wide open and bleeding. He lies limp under Naruto, his brain drowning.

For a long still moment he stares into Sasuke’s eyes. Then the moment breaks, and Naruto feels so does he. Feels he should be dead, before he did any of this.

He scrambles off Sasuke, pushes healing energy into him. Finally they’re both sitting up, Naruto with his back against the headboard and his face buried in his knees.

“Idiot,” Sasuke says sharply. Sasuke never lets anyone run or hide.

Naruto looks up, has a hard time seeing him because his eyes are red, Kyuubi’s tearless eyes, but it feels like he’s crying, he has to keep blinking. He swallows useless words and empty howls.
Sasuke’s eyes on him are absolutely steady.

“I…” Naruto starts.

“You caught me off guard,” Sasuke says. “You had less control over Kyuubi than I estimated.”

“I – but you – didn’t you…”

“I was aware of his impulse. I didn’t think you’d act on it.”

“I was angry,” Naruto says, his voice thick and raspy but his own again. “I’m really angry with you.”

“I know,” Sasuke says, standing up and locating a shirt. “What’s your point?”

“So that affects how much I can hold him back. How much I can protect you.”

Sasuke has this odd look on his face, as if Naruto’s not making sense. “I don’t need you to protect me.”

Naruto swallows and swallows. There’s too much saliva in his mouth, vomit in his throat. He always was an easy crier but Kyuubi doesn’t allow him that. “When I came back…”

Sasuke’s found a pair of tracksuit bottoms and pulls them on. “You were pissed. You needed to get it out of your system.”

“By…!”

“I know what you’re like. I knew I upset you.” He shrugs. The seal’s been bitten so many times, it’s barely visible beneath the teeth marks and the heavy bruising. “You have no business pissing people off if you can’t handle them when they’re angry.”

Naruto tries to say that he’s not like this, this isn’t who he meant to be, but the lie of it stops him. He does cry now, stupid helpless tears that can’t wash anything clean.

Sasuke grabs his chin, forces his head up. “Is there anyone else who could make you this angry? Who could make you do this?” He says this with a certain finality, as though expecting an argument he will win.

Naruto shakes his head, in the jerky little movements Sasuke’s grip will allow. Sasuke smirks, seeming for a moment furiously pleased.

Sasuke’s the only one who could piss him off like this, and Sasuke’s the only one who could calm him down. Who could break him apart and who could put him back together.

“Stonehall,” Naruto begins, starting to hyperventilate. “I killed – I killed over a million people – I – they were fucking innocent, they were just people, civilians – I – I – ”

“I did this,” Sasuke interrupts him. “Not you.”

Naruto blinks, keeps blinking, unable to get a proper look at the situation.

“Isn’t that why you’re angry? I used you to kill 1.4 million people, against your will.”

And Naruto roars. “Why would you fucking do that!”
Sasuke’s grip on his chin hardens, Naruto’s jaw cracking and bending under his thumb. “You’re such a fucking hypocrite. If it had been me, what would you have done?”

Naruto growls. “I’d have killed them all for even thinking of taking you away from me.”

His jaw cracks sharply. “Then shouldn’t you be happy?” Sasuke sneers at him.

Naruto feels dizzy and beaten up, like inside tides have pulled him this way and that. “You – for me –” And despite everything he feels himself start grinning, one of those glowing grins that take up your entire face.

Sasuke’s voice comes dark and twisted in on itself, inhuman as Kyuubi’s. “I won’t have anything taken from me again.” Sasuke’s thin, unforgiving lips are bloody and swollen around the words. Naruto did that. Sasuke let Naruto do that: Sasuke fought him but was also responsive to him.

_Sex and violence go together for you, _Sasuke told him once. _Naruto thinks now, they do for you too._

He can hardly contain himself, feels he’s shaking apart even though his hands are perfectly steady.

Sasuke looks down at himself, dirty and messy, and makes a face. “I’m taking a bath.” He tugs at Kyuubi, too, forcing him to heal the last of the scratches.

When the swelling and bruising fades, the seal is…far fainter than it used to be.

Naruto reaches for it on instinct, feels like Sasuke’s skin burns his hand, but Sasuke doesn’t immediately step away. Smirks at him first, clearly having noticed, before walking away.

Naruto doesn’t want to let him go but has no right to stop him. There’s nothing to it – he grabs onto Sasuke’s feeling, Sasuke’s wanting to leave, being fine with putting distance between them. Pulls it into himself, until it’s Naruto’s feeling, too. It doesn’t sit as comfortably in him as his native emotions, but he can do this. He has to and he will.

Tsunade wants to talk to him, he remembers. But he’s not – he can’t talk about Stonehall yet. Ambles aimlessly through the house, until he stumbles over Kakashi, who’s staring out a window while giving every indication of being utterly blind to the view.

Naruto comes to a halt beside him. Things are surreal and strange, for no clear reason. This is Kakashi, he’s grown up with Kakashi, they’re _family_, for all Naruto hasn’t seen him in months. For all Kakashi was the person Sasuke chose – that Sasuke felt for and trusted, with no bond or bleedover emotions. The person who responded by selling Sasuke, to save Naruto’s life.

Kakashi says, without looking at him, “You look better.”

Naruto snorts, a short embarrassed sort-of-laugh. “Those weren’t my most alluring moments.” Photos taken up north, when Dad had started calling every day and didn’t sound angry on the phone anymore, just scared.

He still looks fucking awful, face hollowed out with horror.

Kakashi seems to barely register that. “Well, you look better now.”

The laughter, the possibility of laughter, dies away. “You don’t. You look terrible.”

Kakashi’s always been pale, but this is different. This is a dead, internal pallor, like there’s nothing underneath to light him up.
“Yeah, well. I don’t have a boyfriend to impress with my fancy looks.” He says this lightly, easily.

“You saw Sasuke.”

“I did.”

They’re simple words, unpretentious and quite mild. That’s the same way Kakashi often kills people.

“I don’t understand. Sasuke’s fine. He’s – pissed off and messed up, and. And lots of things. But he’s fine.”

“I’m sure he is.”

“I…”

“What the fuck were you thinking? You let Kyuubi loose on him, what kind of monster fucking does that.” He stops speaking abruptly, the way you do when you’ve not run out of things to say but you’ve run out of things you can say without starting to scream.

“But! He, he let Kyuubi out. He could have locked him up again. That was - he did that.” His chest’s acting funny again, tight and heaving like he’s been running underwater.

Kakashi looks at him like BEASTers look at him, like he’s not even human. “His magic’s crippled and Kyuubi was entirely released. He could hardly have locked him up.”

“Yes he could,” and then in a louder voice, like he needs to convince himself even though it’s the truth, “He always could, he can!” Then in the strained impossible silence trying to strangle them both, a desperate chorus, “He’s fine. He’s really - I get that it sucks and he maybe looked rough but he’s fine, if you knew…”

“I know Sasuke quite well,” Kakashi cuts in, and of course he does. He’s known Sasuke for as long as Naruto has, he was still there while Naruto was exiled to boarding school. “Aside from the obvious impossibility of him being fine in these circumstances, that’s not the face he makes when he’s fine.”

Naruto blinks, a slow blink like it’ll help him see things clearer. “You brought him here.”

“Yes.”

“He was – upset about it.”

“Yes,” Kakashi says again. His face is bone-white with sleeplessness, which is odd because Kakashi betrays and destroys people for a living. The realisations that would make it not odd are realisations that Naruto can’t have, right now. He makes Kyuubi eat these thoughts, tear them apart with his teeth and gobble them up into the dark inaccessible depths of his stomach. “Of course he was. He got in the car because he trusted me. More fool him, I suppose.”

The world becomes bleaker. He still has that airless underwater feeling, deep down in the darkness and losing sight of the surface. “If he was devastated, that’d be – but he’s not! I mean he’s devastated but he’s not devastated devastated. He’s… devastated in a way he can deal with and get over. I don’t, I don’t think I should have to die because he’s uncomfortable! If he couldn’t live likes this then I’d have to, but he can.”

“That’s what I thought too,” Kakashi says, light as ice. “Your life is just beginning, his wouldn’t have to end. I thought – well. You’re not Orochimaru, you’re his friend – I thought you’d be better.
Anyway I owed Minato. But it’s… Orochimaru wasn’t forever.”

Naruto’s always, always known that Kakashi too would’ve let the world burn before he handed Sasuke over to Orochimaru.

“No,” Naruto says, and he’s falling and there’s no ground to hit. “I don’t know how to do this,” and he’s reaching out desperately, with his teary-thick voice and the little brother hands grabbing for Kakashi’s sleeve.

“I’m the last person you should ask.” Kakashi turns away, walks away from him.

Naruto straggles to his room, and then on the far side of the door sinks to the floor. Chaos outside matching chaos inside, the room is torn apart and so is Naruto, and he cries again.

That’s what he is from Sasuke’s perspective, what he is to someone who cares for Sasuke: the monster, the end of Sasuke’s future.

That’s how Sasuke finds him, stomping in with his hair still wet but his clothes immaculate. “Enough with the self-loathing, or I’m blocking you off completely.”

Aside from the obvious impossibility of him being fine in these circumstances, Sasuke does seem fine. But then that’s how he’d want to seem.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Sasuke demands.

“I - crashed. I was, I was all right, and then I wasn’t, how could I be, I don’t know. I ran into, um, I ran into Kakashi and I just…”

“Kakashi,” Sasuke says with great deliberation, “is an arsehole and a liar.”

Naruto snorts helplessly, still curled around the hurt.

Sasuke swallows, undeterred. “And he obviously doesn’t know me as well as he thinks he does, and fuck him. I’m stuck with you now, so stop being a little bitch and get over yourself.”

“Get over – how the fuck can I get over! I murdered one and a half million people – I – !”

“If I’d done it, you’d get over it.”

Naruto licks his lips. “Yes.”

“I did do it.”

“I should’ve stopped you.”

“You alone against me, Kyuubi and Uriel? How arrogant can you be?” Sasuke sneers.

“How could – how could you do that? How the fuck could you do that to me! You bloody knew I didn’t want that!”

Sasuke kneels in front of him, lifting his chin again. “I told you. I won’t have you taken away from me.”

Naruto’s lungs expand and collapse, falling out the bottom of his chest. “They’d have just captured me. I could’ve talked to them, it – we’d have arranged some exchange, or I could break out. It would’ve been fine.”
“You believe that. I don’t.”

Naruto’s breathing is coming thick and ragged. He leans forward, until he can rest his forehead against Sasuke’s. In spite of everything he knows about Sasuke, it’s still strange to realise that Sasuke really doesn’t understand why Naruto’s so upset about Stonehall, or about what he did to Sasuke. Massacres and sexual violence are everyday to Sasuke, it makes no sense to be destroyed by them. Other people mean almost nothing, and being beaten and violated is no big deal. He’s not upset about directing Kyuubi to the slaughter, or about burning Naruto almost to death when they were fighting.

Naruto knows, though, that if he’d eaten Sasuke’s limbs instead of his organs, or if he’d whispered sweet nothings when he bent him over, he would’ve triggered an explosion that might’ve destroyed them both.

“You liked that,” Naruto says, growing less tentative as he speaks. “That I – lose myself about you.”

“Yes?”

“But, what, so you’re just…you’re just going to go along with it? With the kind of shit I did to you!” And that’s an accusation, and there’s no reason for him to pick at this and every reason not to, but oh he’s picking off every scab.

“You’re not some bloody hero!” And if he’d stopped there maybe Naruto could’ve stopped too, but it’s obvious Sasuke too feels the scabs itching and can’t stand them, needs them torn away. The air actually crackles with static electricity, Sasuke’s fury taking magical shape but remaining impotent. “People are shitty. You kill them or they turn on you.”

That’s the fundamental difference: Sasuke believes this like he believes in gravity, while Naruto still can’t imagine it as his baseline reality, can’t countenance the thought of it.

“Even if,” he says, because Sasuke’s belief is solid reality, unignorable, “even if I’d be prepared to – to turn on other people, which I’m not – but you!” Sasuke, who understands being callous about strangers and won’t trust any refutation of that, will also understand protecting loved ones: protecting yourself by protecting the people you need.

In his own way, he protected Naruto.

It’s just Sasuke understands hurting loved ones, too.

“Are you going to tell me again that you’ll never hurt me?”

Naruto hits his arm. “I never told you that.”

“No,” Sasuke sighs. “No, I suppose that wasn’t you.” He scoots over, sitting beside Naruto.

Naruto breathes in and out, and it gets more bearable.

“When,” he says at last, strangely distant from his own words, “when Kakashi came – he looked…”

“He looked destroyed.”

“Yes. You – you liked that.”

Sasuke has that knife-slash smirk, his voice coming dark. “Maybe he did care.”

Naruto stops himself slamming Sasuke into the wall. He doesn’t know why it suddenly matters, “Did
“No,” Sasuke says, startlingly calm. His mouth quirks, not quite into a smile. “He told me he believed in the lust of the flesh and the incurable loneliness of the soul.”

Naruto feels like his ribs have broken again, and are turned inside, searing through his heart and lungs. “If you hadn’t felt any bleedover – if we’d just been us. Would you ever have wanted to be involved with me? Would you have slept with me?”

“Before you bit me, I couldn’t have stopped you.”

And Naruto doesn’t want to say this, but – but Sasuke’s been lied to so much, pressured into so much, and this has to be real, something about all this has to be real. “Before, when I – I wanted to hurt you. I liked hurting you.” Sasuke has no reaction, as though this was always obvious. “But I wouldn’t – even if you’d been all sealed up, your pain would still be my pain.” Much like Naruto’s upset, his bloodlust and his lust were Sasuke’s.

“Maybe,” Sasuke says. “But it wouldn’t have killed you.” He’s gone paler, a bleaker fury, subdued, an inside fire that still rages but burns only himself. “Anyway what would my other option have been – being chained up and used at your convenience?”

“No! No, God, that is never an option.” Things can calm down then because he knows. There’s no more uncertainty to be upset about. “I need this. You don’t. That’s, that’s not your fault. And I don’t think it’s really mine either but it’s - I’m the one who’s like this. That can’t be something that ruins everything for you. I can’t let it.”

“Then you’d die.”

“Then I’d die. I could never live with that.”

Kankuro’s girl in the cage, ravaged and insane, kept like an animal. She screamed you’re an animal you’re an animal and seeing her in that cage he knew it was true.

There are things you do not do. Fewer than Naruto once thought, fewer than he’d like, but non-negotiable.

“If that’s what you need, I’ll die. I hope, I really hope it’s not, but if it is then I will. I won’t – I won’t do it just because you want me to. But if you need it.” He laughs this thick stupid laugh that doesn’t sound like one. “I already told you that. Then I thought it was fine, we were doing better. But now I…”

“If I wanted you to die,” Sasuke tells him with icy fury, “I’d kill you. Do not fucking dare kill yourself on my account, you selfish fucking hypocrite coward.”

Naruto lets himself collapse sideways, falling into Sasuke. Buries his face in Sasuke’s chest, head tucked under Sasuke’s chin. Clings tenaciously as a child, fingers shaking in Sasuke’s shirt.

Sasuke’s arm locks around his back, tight as a straightjacket. For the first time Naruto sees a way forward, past the atrocities and towards a liveable future.

Sasuke’s free hand lifts his face. Sasuke leans forward, so close they’re sharing air. “You’re mine, do you understand that?”

“Yes,” Naruto gaps. “Yes, yes, always, yes.”
“Completely?”

“Completely!”

Sasuke’s blunt human teeth close around his lower lip, bites off a mouthful of it. Naruto stares at his throat, transfixed by the swallowing movement.

Sasuke says, “Good.”

xxxxx

A/N: The imaginatively titled Grave AU Collection is finally live, and I’ve managed to post the first half of the “what if Itachi hadn’t sacrificed Sasuke to Orochimaru” au. I hope you’ll enjoy – if nothing else, it’s a break from the sometimes relentless grimness of original!Grave.
“It was for the best,” Gaara says.

“It hardly matters,” Tsunade says. “It’s done, now it’s about doing what’s best going forward.”

Naruto’s sitting hunched in on himself, hands pressed together between his knees.

Sasuke stands up abruptly, and Naruto stares up at him with wide hungry eyes.

“Sasuke?” Tsunade says.

Sasuke slants a look at Naruto. “I have no interest in your self-pity.”

Naruto catches his hand, holds it for a moment before Sasuke pulls free. Afterwards he can sit up straight.

“Gaara’s not wrong, you know,” Shikamaru says. “Things have quieted down considerably. The Dona Alliance wants to talk to us now. To you, really.”

“Right,” Naruto says. “Sure. I’ll talk to them.”

Tsunade gives him a concerned look. She tried to speak with him before, but he could barely hear her over the ringing in his ears.

One point four million people.

What will Dad say about that, when he finally calls? What would Mum have said?

At least the destruction of Stonehall is something that can be spoken of.

What he did to Sasuke afterwards – he barely even has the words to think it, he couldn’t say it out loud.

Also Sasuke would probably rip him a new one if he tried.

He didn’t even throw up: Kyuubi was too concerned keeping Sasuke’s flesh inside. Naruto reckons the delayed projectile vomiting will start when it’s been safely digested.

He’s not – how does one think these things, and remain sane?

He ate two of Sasuke’s fingers before, he reminds himself. He’s been violent with Sasuke before, sexually and otherwise. He just – has to learn to cope with it. Do better. Be better.


Naruto looks up in protest.

Tsunade pinches her nose. “We’ve got a lot of our people here, and the anti-demon defences aren’t all one could hope for. If God forbid there’s actually a devil…”

“You know if it goes wrong, he’ll let Kyuubi out again.”
“I’d fucking hope so,” Gaara snaps.

Tsunade reaches for a bottle and pours herself a generous amount. “There’s a certain irony to this, really. He made the trade for the girls in his own name, not in yours. But the destruction of Stonehall – as far as anyone could observe, it was Kyuubi doing that, not Uriel. So I guess that makes him Good Cop, and you’re stuck as Bad Cop.”

Naruto makes a face. “I don’t want to be Bad Cop.”

“Yeah, well. We should sort out what we want out of this talk before you go.”

But Naruto’s distracted, unable to focus.

Eventually Tsunade sends him off to get it out of his system, and he fights his way through a minor army of their guards. He wants Sasuke – when doesn’t he? – the guards could never be a challenge like Sasuke, and he wants Sasuke, wants Sasuke so badly, but he can’t stomach any more violence between them right now.

xxxxx

It’s Sasuke like it’s always been Sasuke. The familiarity is almost startling.

Even after all this time, all these betrayals, Kakashi finds he still carries the sensation of Sasuke’s skin in his fingertips. The way Sasuke tilts his head, the way he frowns, the sound of his breathing – they have become fundamental and inerasable to Kakashi, like the smell of your first home.

The kid looks better now, whole and healthy. Dressed rather oddly, not in the clothes Sakura came and got from Kakashi – presumably he just pulled on whatever he could find, he’s not particular about these things. Orochimaru is, but left to his own devices Sasuke would’ve probably been content to continue sharing Naruto’s wardrobe.

Kakashi’s eyes zero in on the seal, which is faded, parts of the outline entirely gone.

Sasuke notices him looking, nods.

“Kyuubi, I presume,” Kakashi says, in place of all the words he can’t say, the ones that tear his throat, scorch the inside of his mouth. “And I’m assuming you’ve had Uriel burn away at it from the inside.”

Sasuke just lifts an eyebrow. He’s never been one to waste words on the obvious.

“You must’ve acquired some documentation when you took care of Kabuto. Anything you want a second opinion on?”

Sasuke doesn’t trust him, but Sasuke’s taken insane risks to be rid of the seal before.

Kakashi’s fingers prickle around a stillborn twitch, this unfathomable urge to reach out. A feeling he recognises: wanting to reach out and not knowing how, viciously not knowing how. It’s followed him most of his life.

“Why are you here?”

Kakashi shrugs, slating a look up at the sky. They’re outside, the day chilly but sunny. “I was sent up here. Would’ve been rather blatant if I failed to stop by and see you.” He warms his hands in his pockets. “Well, Sakura suggested it.”
“When have you ever listened to Sakura?”

It comes to him like a gutpunch that he had this. This intensity, this fucked up kid with all his issues and all his trust. There’s so much of Sasuke, such a large personality that he warps the world around him, draws you into his gravity.

“Now, now, you know I always listen when people tell me what I want to hear.”

But there’s no room for excuses. He knew that.

“You already discarded me,” Sasuke dismisses. “What is it you want?”

“I told you,” Kakashi says lightly, leaning back against the wall. Slouching, in the way of tall people speaking to short people. “I owed Minato.” He smiles, that empty scarecrow smile. “I did think it would be better for you than Orochimaru.”

“Of course it is,” Sasuke tells him blankly.

“Ah,” Kakashi says. While this is better than Orochimaru, to Sasuke’s mind at least, it doesn’t change anything between them, because it’s the betrayal that’s unforgivable. Being threatened, being beaten, being raped – Sasuke can overlook all of that. But Kakashi gave him away. That, he will never get over. “I’m not so sure anymore.”

Orochimaru, at least, Sasuke was eventually going to kill. Naruto… Kakashi can imagine Sasuke killing Naruto, but not without going nova afterwards.

“That no longer matters,” Sasuke tells him.

“No,” Kakashi says. “I suppose it doesn’t.”

Sasuke stares at him, silent, eyes like black holes.

Kakashi feels like he’s falling.

“It’s all got rather twisted, hasn’t it,” he muses. Words that mean nothing, spoken because the silence will rupture him.

Sasuke doesn’t relent. “Naruto’s very straightforward.”

“Ah, yes,” Kakashi says, perched on some edge. He’s stared too long into the abyss, maybe now he’ll fall into it. “Naruto still believes his love is special, that it’ll change the world and sa–”

“Save me,” Sasuke cuts him off.

“I was going to say, save him. But I suppose to him it amounts to the same thing.”

Sasuke steps forward a little, tugging down his neckline: fully revealing the seal, which is even more faded than Kakashi first thought. Kakashi traces it with a mostly clinical fingertip, feeling its searing edges and Uriel’s furious light burning against his skin. It doesn’t really feel like touching Sasuke.

“I’m amazed it hasn’t skewered your brain,” he says.

“I’m sturdy.”

“I can try pulling some of the spokes out. Would you let me?”
“I’ll pull them myself,” Sasuke grumbles.

“And how’s that worked out for you?”

Sasuke shoots him a dark look. Kakashi lifts an eyebrow.

Sasuke will have figured out the theory of it, he’s a bright and tenacious kid, but cages are only meant to be opened from the outside.

When Kakashi reaches out again, it’s Gabriel’s hand touching the seal.

The twisted, broken spokes are cutting deep into Sasuke’s mind. Gabriel pulls at them carefully, carefully, untangling them from Sasuke’s thoughts and Sasuke’s brain tissue.

Most of them are out when Kakashi lets his hand fall.

“Why’d you stop?” Sasuke demands.

“I’m not a medic.”

“I need it off,” Sasuke hisses.

Kakashi’s sure Sasuke would’ve grabbed for the seal, torn at it recklessly and brutally, even before he could count on Kyuubi’s healing.

Uriel’s hands rip at it as though at something physical, Sasuke’s skin tearing open as he claws at the writhing lines burnt into him.

Kakashi’s never been good at stepping in, but he’s tired of disappointing himself. He doesn’t have anything more that he can lose.

He catches Sasuke’s hand, stills it in his own. Uriel burns and sputters, but Gabriel can take it.

Sasuke stares up at him, eyes blank as those of a corpse. But they wouldn’t have stayed that way – if Sasuke had been confident in his ability to remain expressionless, he wouldn’t have blinked and opened his eyes red and safely inhuman.

“I don’t expect anything from you,” Kakashi says. He shakes his head, smiles the smile like a slash across his face. “This…it’s a selfish, lonely feeling that I don’t know what to do with. But just so you know. I’m in love with you.”

He steps forward in a movement completely unlike him, the sort of movement Naruto is wont to, utterly alien to Kakashi. He lifts Sasuke’s chin and kisses him hard.

Sasuke stares out the window, in the direction of the capital. It’s hundreds of thousands of miles away, but he could get home in a day. He has things to do there.

Naruto’s hand closes like a manacle around his wrist. “Hey!”

Sasuke snaps around with some impatience. “What’s your problem?”

Naruto’s regressed exponentially, right back into the black loathing and hysteria of the first hours after the bond. His chest is moving fast with shallow breaths: Kyuubi’s claws are slicing deep into Sasuke’s wrist, nestling between the veins. Sasuke hisses at him, the back of his shoulders hitting the
wall as Kyuubi pushes close.

“You’re thinking about leaving!”

His hand’s useless, Kyuubi’s claw must be severing the muscles because he can’t move it. “That’s not...!”

“Don’t lie to me,” Naruto demands, voice erupting higher and higher, though he must know that Sasuke’s not. “You were thinking about it right now!”

“Get a fucking hold of yourself!”

“I can’t,” Naruto gasps, “I can’t, I can’t.” He slams Sasuke into the wall, presses his face into Sasuke’s shoulder. Kyuubi’s ears flicker in and out of existence.

Sasuke walls himself off from the panic attack washing through Naruto. After the Stonehall incident, and Kyuubi’s violent tendencies – after Kakashi this morning – perhaps it was inevitable.

“God,” Naruto groans, his voice breathy, he’s not getting enough air. “I want to eat you.” And then, in an injured tone when Sasuke stiffens, “I’m not going to!”

“Then you know how I feel about leaving, you idiot.”

He gets his hand free at last, forcing healing out of Kyuubi until he can move it again.

The strategic course of action would be to calm Naruto down before he has a complete meltdown... the whole situation pisses Sasuke off, and in any case he’s never known how not to escalate things with Naruto.

“What’s more important to you?” he hisses. “That I’m happy or that I’m with you?”

“I don’t know,” Naruto gasps. His face remains pressed to Sasuke’s shoulder but tilted up so he can look at Sasuke’s face. He still can’t breathe, much less let go. On the contrary, he grabs Sasuke’s thighs and lifts, stepping forward between them to press Sasuke between the wall and his own body. “I want both. Is that so impossible?”

Sasuke kicks at him out of instinct and principle but ultimately locks his legs around Naruto’s hips, his arms around Naruto’s shoulders. If he blocks Naruto off properly, Naruto will lose it completely.

“And,” Naruto eventually grumbles, “What the fuck were you doing with Kakashi, anyway?”

Sasuke snorts. “Like you’d give a fuck if you weren’t freaking out about me leaving.”

Naruto growls in protest and presses him harder into the wall, mouth opening around Kyuubi’s fangs. His shoulders tremble with his fast, shallow panting.

“I’m right here, idiot,” Sasuke says, redistributing his weight to force them away from the wall. “Calm down.”

Naruto rocks back on his heels and goes down clumsily, ending up on his arse on the floor with Sasuke in his lap. His legs go up immediately, trapping Sasuke against his chest.

Over Naruto’s shoulder, Sasuke spots Kiba and Tsunade and demands, “Leave.”

Kiba’s staring at them – at Naruto really – in something like shock. Kiba always was an idiot.
“He’s fine,” Sasuke snaps. “I’ve got this, leave us alone!”

Naruto’s lowered his head and is biting like a puppy at Sasuke’s throat and shoulders, needy and anxious, coming out of his skin. Kyuubi’s huge hands are locked around Sasuke’s hips, forcing him bone-grind tight against Naruto. Sasuke lets him, staring down the intruders until they’re gone.

“Don’t leave me,” Naruto gasps against his ribs. “Don’t you fucking ever leave me.”

“I’m not going to! For God’s sake, enough.” He shifts his knees, ignoring Kyuubi’s hands sinking into his jeans, curling around his buttocks.

Naruto whines, face buried in Sasuke’s chest.

“Naruto, I’m seriously not in the mood.”

“I know, I know.” But Naruto’s still trembling, his face hidden in the folds of Sasuke’s jumper. “I just need.”

“Get up.”

“Not yet.” His fingers are kneading, skin-starved, and Kyuubi’s ears are still out, tickling Sasuke’s jaw and cheeks.

“I said –”

“Don’t leave me. You can’t leave me. Don’t leave.”

Naruto might be too lost in his breakdown to notice, but Sasuke certainly hears the approaching footsteps. Fucking Tsunade must have got reinforcements. “I’m getting up now. If you want to stay with me, so will you.”

Naruto scrambles to his feet on that implied promise, still entirely in Sasuke’s space and with his hands all over him. Sasuke speaks close to his ear, “We’re going to go into my room and close the door.”

“Okay. Okay.”

Naruto moves with him, and seems to calm down when the door locks behind them. “I don’t know what happened,” he mumbles. “I shouldn’t be – this needy. I… Can we just?”

“You can’t act like this in public, what’s wrong with you?” Sasuke sneers, allowing Naruto to cling to him but not responding.

Naruto glances up from his preoccupation with the seal, which he traces again and again. “But I can in private?”

Sasuke slaps him away.

Naruto bends forward again, pressing his forehead against the base of Sasuke’s throat. His knees buckle, depositing him on the floor, dragging his face down Sasuke’s body. His arms come up around Sasuke’s hips, and they’re just Naruto’s arms but there’s no less possessiveness, no less violent potential, in them than in Kyuubi’s. He speaks in the smallest voice Sasuke’s ever heard from him, “You’re not going to leave. You’re not. Are you?”

“No. Hell. Get on the bed. I’m not leaving.”
“You’re not,” Naruto mumbles, letting himself be ushered. “You’re not, you’re not.”

He gets Naruto on his back on the bed, and lies down on top of him. “Go on then,” he sighs into Naruto’s ear. “Take what you need.”

Within seconds he’s rolled over onto his back, Naruto all over him, clinging and covering and holding him down. Keeping Sasuke’s wrists pinned above his head, mouthing his way down Sasuke’s chest and rubbing himself between Sasuke’s thighs, Naruto discovers, “You’re not into this.”

“I told you I wasn’t in the mood.”

“Usually you’d be – infected by it, by now.” He hesitates, not going further but not stopping what he was already doing.

“Anxiety attacks aren’t one of my turn-ons.” Fury is one thing, even panic is one thing, but this is an existential crisis: Naruto feeling he’s losing his grip on who he is. Naruto swallows convulsively, and Sasuke adjusts his legs, bending his knees and crossing his ankles over Naruto’s spine. “This always calms you down.” When Naruto keeps shaking harder, Sasuke frees a hand and drags it across the whisker scars.

“I want you to like it.”

“I’ll like it when you’re yourself again.”

“Yeah?” Naruto mumbles, kissing him.

Sasuke opens his mouth without comment, making himself relax as Naruto grows more intense. He drags his hands through Naruto’s hair, across his back, while Naruto’s anxiety panting turning subtly but clearly into Naruto’s sex panting. Sasuke’s vaguely excited: relaxed enough that it doesn’t hurt much when Naruto slips inside.

Naruto’s calmer after he’s come, but of course what he really needed, what he was really after all along, is the closeness afterwards. He remains buried to the hilt, sneaking his arms under Sasuke to embrace him and resting his face on Sasuke’s chest, pressing soft kisses between his ribs. “I don’t know how to live without you anymore.”

“Naruto…” It comes out a sigh, his fingers catching in Naruto’s hair. “I was just thinking about how I have things I need to do back home. I wasn’t leaving.”

“Oh.” Naruto makes a sound like a laugh, like a moan, into his skin. “Now I feel stupid.”

Sasuke snorts. “How strange and unusual that must be for you.”

“Yes, in fact,” Naruto insists, barely keeping the laughter out of his voice and angling up to kiss Sasuke’s neck. “Unprecedented.”

“Mmh.” His back arches, letting Naruto stroke up his ribs, suck on his exposed throat.

“Mmh,” Naruto echoes, kissing him until Sasuke shifts his hips, welcoming him deeper. Already Naruto’s growing hard again, and Sasuke’s stretched now and slick from Naruto’s climax.

“Roll over,” he mumbles, clinging to Naruto’s shoulders as the bed dips and shifts until he’s on top.

“Bossy,” Naruto mumbles, leaning up on his elbows to bite at Sasuke’s lower lip. “You’re such a
control freak.”

Sasuke arches a brow. “Remind me of the last time I held you down and ripped off your clothes.”

Naruto stiffens, but only momentarily, before electing to reach between Sasuke’s legs and stroke. “Far too long ago.”

“Clearly.” Sasuke breathes, clenching around Naruto. He doesn’t usually – he never wants to do this, but he feels like it now, watching Naruto watch him as he lifts himself up and down on Naruto’s cock.

Naruto stares at him with that dumb bewitched face he gets, teary-eyed but mumbling in almost his normal voice. His feelings always push at Sasuke through the bond, and usually what he calls love is this wild thing, a savage force of nature. But it’s warm now instead of scorching, filled with something like gratitude, like tenderness and amazement –

This isn’t – Kakashi lifted his chin and – he leans forward, scratching at the whisker scars and moaning the way that always drives Naruto insane, until the heat burns away any thought.

xxxxx

Naruto’s looking for Kakashi. Despite all the murky water under the bridge, they’re family, will stay family, and their conversation from yesterday requires closure.

It should be easy to find him – Kyuubi’s nose is keenly attuned to the scent of exorcists, and Gabriel smells differently than Uriel.

But finally instead he lets himself find Sasuke, who’s sitting cross-legged on the floor, one hand raking through papers in a language Naruto can’t read, the other sketching symbols on his seal. He kicked at Naruto until Naruto let him go this morning, wanting to get up at an ungodly hour, but looks up now without rancour. “Kakashi already left.”

“Oh.”

Sasuke shrugs. “He was just stopping by. He wasn’t sent here for us.”

“Mmh.” Naruto says, kneeling on the floor to get a better look at the papers. The diagrams at least make sense. He glances at Sasuke’s seal, confirming: “Something happened with it yesterday.” Its circle is broken, the edges twisted and smeared, flowing down into the hollow of Sasuke’s clavicle.

Sasuke nods. “Pulled some of it out of my mind.”

Naruto blinks. “I didn’t think Uriel could reach.”

“Gabriel could.”

“Ah.” Naruto says. Kyuubi couldn’t. What he can give Sasuke is the blunt force trauma of the bond: Kyuubi can’t grab the seal without having his hands burnt off.

“Bite it again,” Sasuke tells him. “I’m going to pull more.”

“Shouldn’t we align it first? Look, here…” He points at one of the diagrams.

Sasuke shakes his head. “Orochimaru used a modification. Like this…”

“Hmm. But then – here, give me the pen…”
Sasuke nods, leaning forward. “Yes – and then….Like this.”

“Yeah, that’s good. Could we…”

“How precise can you be when you bite? If we got a fang through here, see…”

Naruto pulls Sasuke’s shirt open, dragging his fingers across the sizzling lines of the seal until he finds the place. “That’s down here now.” On Sasuke’s chest, maybe a decimetre above his nipple. “I could still bite but it’d have to be Kyuubi’s fox shape to fit his jaws around you. Those fangs are much bigger, we’d hit these parts too.” He sketches it out with his fingertip.

Sasuke frowns, messing up the papers looking for something. “I need the older diagrams.”

They do eventually arrive at a plan. Naruto’s breath catches when he lets Kyuubi out, but he’s holding the reins this time. He chose to let Kyuubi out, under his own control, and if worse comes to worst it’s he who has the backing of Uriel.

He’d thought – he doesn’t know what he’d thought – but Sasuke shows no reluctance as Kyuubi stands over him, closing his enormous jaws around him.

When Kyuubi gets too excited, wanting to bite more freely and savagely, Uriel’s angel hands keep him in place. Kyuubi’s nose boils and burns where those fingers grip, too large to be Sasuke’s and too strong, filled with a light that spears through Kyuubi.

And then – the seal shatters open.

Sasuke pushes Kyuubi off, draws healing to keep his brain intact as he pulls splinters.

When Naruto’s forced Kyuubi back into the cage and looks at Sasuke’s shoulder, the seal is dead. It’s white now instead of black, the white of old scar tissue.

Sasuke can stop pulling spokes, because they fade into nothing. He’s unsealed.

Naruto’s never seen Sasuke grin so wide, wider than his thin little mouth looks capable of. There’s a faint ringing in his ears, angel song not meant for mundane ears, as Sasuke’s wings unfold. They’re massive, brighter and more unforgiving than ever before. Naruto touches their edge, and feels… something he doesn’t have the words to describe, something wholly out of this world.

He smiles back at Sasuke, starstruck and thrilled, until the screaming starts. “Hey! Hey stop! You’re burning people!”

Sasuke laughs.

Naruto pushes at him.

“Fine.” The wings fade, and Naruto can sit back.

Sasuke didn’t exactly mean to immolate anyone. They were just – necessary casualties, collateral damage when his true wings unfolded. He didn’t bother shielding them.

Cross-legged on the dirty linoleum floor, he’s alight with vicious, triumphant happiness. Ready to erupt with it, in this stunned and almost helpless way: Sasuke’s never had to learn what to do with happiness.

Naruto grabs his hand and squeezes, and it’s not even a human hand, just vaguely hand-shaped light, but it squeezes back without burning him. Without the interference of the seal, Uriel is more in tune
with Sasuke, and doesn’t burn Naruto.

Sasuke smiles at him, an almost shy expression.

Naruto hauls him into his arms, and Sasuke hugs him back without hesitation. His whole body trembles with holiness, with the immensity of the power it contains and commands. Even his smell has changed, tickles Naruto’s nose like an oncoming sneeze.

“Naruto,” Sasuke says. “Naruto.” He says it like he needs to say something and it’s the only word that will come to him.

“I know.”

They’re still clinging to each other, Sasuke’s fingers possessive in Naruto’s jumper, when Tsunade clears her throat. “Should I expect more sudden casualties?”

“No unless you provoke them,” Sasuke smirks.

For the first time in a while, he and Gaara are baring their teeth at each other.

But anything further is interrupted by the tinnitus wail of the alarm. When Naruto chances a quick look out the window, all he sees is black.

Tsunade curses sharply. Shukaku growls.

Sasuke still smiles, standing up. “Easy. I called them.”

“What?” Tsunade snaps.

A nightmare mass of demons, who breached their defences very quickly indeed. Because, Naruto understands, Sasuke let them.

Sasuke’s savage smirk widens. “Time to stretch my wings.”

In the silence after Sasuke’s gone outside, Naruto makes a calm-down gesture. “He’s fine.”

“He stank of holiness,” Gaara says.

Naruto wets his lips, throwing the window open to watch. It’s blinding, but he sees so much more now. He remembers, incongruously, when the hobbits arrived in Lothlorien and felt they saw new colours, colours that were more and so needed new names, better names, because they couldn’t be compared to the colours in the outside world. It’s a little like that.

Sasuke’s joy and bloodlust sing through him, a hymn he can finally hear.

“He’s unsealed,” he says.

Tsunade breathes in sharply.

Naruto turns from the window, from the compulsion to throw himself out the window and join the strange heavenly battle. “What? It’s a good thing!”

“That’s a matter of opinion,” Tsunade sighs. Naruto keeps looking at her, and she rubs her face. “He’s an unstable murderer. He’s also one of the most powerful and dangerous people in the world.”

“You’ve killed thousands of people,” Naruto reminds her. “So have I.”
“Did you enjoy it?”

“No. Kyuubi did.”

“Mmh,” Tsunade says, she too staring out the window. “But it’s not Uriel getting any kicks out of immolating people.”

“He’s under control,” Naruto tells her. “Now about the Dona Alliance…”

xxxxx

“It’d be better if I came too,” Sasuke says.

“Mmh,” Naruto agrees. “You think the predictions are wrong? That there won’t be a devil coming here?”

Anticipation and magic glitter in Sasuke’s eyes.

Naruto leans forward and kisses the tip of his nose. “Exactly.”

“If Dona fucks up, we’d both like it better if I had Uriel eradicate them than if I make Kyuubi do it.”

“That’s not going to happen.” Sasuke says nothing, and Naruto grabs his sleeve. “I mean it. Don’t do that to me.”

“I won’t have you killed.”

Naruto nods. “I get that. But you have to trust that I know what I’m doing, too.”

Sasuke’s silent, the silence that means he’s thinking.

After a while Naruto tugs at his belt loop. “You talked to Kakashi. Yesterday, and this morning. What’d he say?”

Sasuke’s mouth quirks oddly, in this helpless mishmash of expressions. At last he says, “He said he’s in love with me.”

“Oh.” Naruto blinks. “Oh.”

Sasuke makes an aborted gesture. “It’s not like I believe him.”

“Why would he say it, if not…”

“Exactly. He must think he’ll gain something from it. I don’t – ”

Sasuke turns away from him, and Naruto slides his arms around Sasuke’s waist, resting his forehead against the small of Sasuke’s back. “I think – I think he’s just in love with you. It’s not strange. You’re very lovable.”

Sasuke laughs, as if Naruto had said something funny.

When Sasuke turns back around, sits on the bed with him, Naruto turns the tablet back on. “About the Dona negotiations. I was thinking…” And he outlines his main ideas, which he finally persuaded Tsunade to sign off on.

“It depends,” Sasuke says. “Are you just trying to stabilise the area or are you looking to annex?”
Naruto nudges Sasuke’s shoulder with his own. “Do I look like some evil coloniser to you?”

Well, he did colonise Sasuke’s mind.

Sasuke nudges back. “Larger federations are usually more stable than an endless number of squabbling city states.”

“I think – I think humans could get around to being under shifter rule. I mean, this whole thing with shifters only being able to hold public office for shifter-designated areas – that’s bullshit.”

Sasuke rather surprisingly agrees with him immediately.

“Anyway you can’t trust the Blakeswood delegates,” he says. “They’ve been in contact with exorcist extremists.”

Naruto bites his lip in thought, pondering how to use this. They’re still taking about the Dona situation when Sasuke starts yawning. Naruto nudges him towards the pillows, throwing a leg over his.

“If we don’t stay together, my nightmares will just wake you up.” He says this quickly and without quite looking at Sasuke.

Sasuke lifts an eyebrow but rolls over, laying the way Naruto likes best, with his head tucked under Naruto’s chin and his hand fistimg the beat of Naruto’s heart. “You never said,” he mumbles. “How was boarding school?”

Naruto laughs into his hair, unbearably fond, and tells him.

During the night he does wake up, four five six times, lightheaded and darkhearted with the memory of Stonehall and of afterwards, on the floor in his room. He presses his face into Sasuke’s chest and reminds himself that if that’s what it took to be here with Sasuke, it was worth it, it can’t be regretted. Sasuke’s fingers card through his hair, and Naruto always meant it when he said there wasn’t anything he wouldn’t do to have this.
“Seriously, Kiba, it wasn’t a big deal. I’m fine.” Naruto gestures with his half-eaten sandwich, talking with his mouth full. “Anyway we’ve done great, right? We got Dona right where we wanted them.”

There were awkward moments, moments that hollowed out Naruto’s insides, carved his worth out of him: moments of being looked at as a mass murderer. But in the end it gave him credibility, made threats out of almost everything he said, even though that wasn’t how he’d meant it at all.

“Yeah,” Kiba says slowly, uncertainly. He drains his water bottle, buying time before he has to speak again. Finally he shrugs. “Well, at least – he was more protective of you than I’d thought he’d be. But you… you’re okay? Cause I know you didn’t plan for things to go down that way with Stonehall.”

“More’s the pity,” Gaara cuts in.

“Enough,” Naruto says, because he can stand no more of this. “It’s regrettable – shut up, Gaara, it is – but there’s no undoing it. So.”

“Well,” Kiba says, still in that slow careful voice. “You probably saved our lives, letting Kyuubi out. They might’ve captured you – maybe. The rest of us, we’d have just been mown down.”

Naruto feels gutted again. It’s becoming familiar. “The army – of course I don’t regret that. It was awful but, but they did it to themselves, they turned on us. But Stonehall City, that was…. That was different. War crime kind of different.”

Shikamaru shrugs. “Locally and among shifters in general, it’s strengthened support for us. On a global level, humans and exorcists are not best pleased.”

“Hypocrites,” Gaara snaps. “They’ve purged a hundred shifter settlements just like it.”

Shikamaru shrugs again. “Nothing’s fair in love and war.”

There’s a sensation of unease, then, of wrongness: the holy words etched into Naruto’s body start crawling across his skin. Pressure builds, then bursts, and – “Demons!” Naruto snaps. “Fuck!”

They’re on their way back from the Dona meeting, have stopped in a village to stretch their legs. They rush through it now, towards the blackness on the far side of it.

“Shit.”

These are not a few demons. This is a fucking skyfull of them. Naruto settles the DEW gun against his shoulder and fires – at least there’s no way to miss – looking around frantically for an exorcist.

“Naruto!” Ino yells. She and a blond boy Naruto doesn’t recognise emerge from behind the town hall, glowing with the light of God. “Shikamaru! Where’s Sasuke?”

“Not here.”

Ino goes pale. “What do you mean he’s not here? When is he coming?”

“Ino!” the other exorcist snaps, lashing out at the demons. “Start mending!”
The wards are breached. The demons are pouring in.

“You can’t hold them off by yourself,” Ino protests.

“I’ll have to try.” But he looks terrified. He’s just a kid, and he clearly knows he’s going to die.

“We’ve got this,” Naruto says. “Fix the wards.”

Beside him Gaara’s releasing Shukaku, and Akamaru’s rising to the surface inside Kiba. Even Shikamaru’s picked up a DEW gun.

Naruto realises there’s nothing to it, swinging the door to Kyuubi’s cage open wide.

Kyuubi, huge now and glowing not just with his own power but with Uriel’s markings, leaps into the sky. For the first time, he manages to really tear at the demons, bite and claw them apart.

But they taste like poison, he can feel the death marks of a demon injury spread over him. Uriel burns them away, but that burn too is fundamentally hostile to him, diminishes Kyuubi’s own energy.

It’s maybe been minutes or it’s maybe been hours when the exorcist boy goes down. The demons have congregated on him, less interested in the humans or the shifters.

His light winks out.

With less to distract them, more of the demons turn on Naruto, who hits the ground hard.

He can see them now, the golden lines of protection meant to enfold the village. Ino’s standing in the breach of that web, holding it together. But Ino’s only a single exorcist, and not a strong one.

“Shikamaru,” she says. “Get behind me. Now.”

Naruto gets up on his knees, reaching for another DEW gun. Needing to attack, keep the evil at bay, while Kyuubi regroups.

Ino takes a step into the air, but looks over her shoulder with sudden desperation. “Kimimarou please.”

Following her gaze, Naruto spots fucking Kimimarou, crusader prodigy extraordinaire, standing off to the side, arms crossed over his chest, utterly unresponsive. Any demon that gets within a hundred metres of him is instantly obliterated.

He doesn’t respond to Ino, who has warrior eyes now even though she’s crying. “Okay then,” she says. “I can do this.”

Light flares around her, but the wards are torn wide open, without Ino bridging the gap, and the demons are flooding in. Into the village.

Uriel’s desire to exorcise burns just under Naruto’s skin, burns so bright and so loud he can barely hear Kyuubi’s howling, or Sasuke’s desperation.

All is calm now, all is bright. *You can’t exorcise*, Sasuke told him. *If you could, every shifter in the world would follow you. But you can’t.*

He’s never been in the habit of just giving Sasuke the last word.

And anyway he’s going to die now, if he can’t.
His voice starts out uneven, toneless, but the words come easy, and eventually the melody stabilises. “Confiteor Deo omnipotenti/Beate Marie semper virgini…”

And the light comes. He remembers what Kakashi said, when Naruto was a little runt and asked what exorcising was like: everything is beautiful and nothing hurts.

Kakashi’s always been a liar.

Uriel materialises in his hands, burning blades of angelic grace. They eat through his skin and flesh, fusing with his skeleton, but that can’t matter now.

He puts his foot in the air, feels ridiculous for a moment, but he can put his weight on it. Can step into the sky, into what’s always been the exclusive domain of God’s chosen children.

It feels like Sasuke’s hand is inside his own, familiar and confident with the blade.

Just a slash, and a score of demons are obliterated.

“Ino!” he calls. “The village!”

Ino stares at him, but pulls herself quickly together, gesturing at something stuck in the ground, right by the ward breach. “Take the sword! It’s sacred, we’re here to retrieve it – it’ll only activate for an archangel.” She breathes in deep. “That’s Uriel, right?”

“Protect the village,” Naruto tells her, grabbing the sword. It sings to life in his hand.

Faintly, he can hear Sasuke chanting inside his head, and echoes it as best he can. Hoping the sword will mistake his voice for Sasuke’s and respond accordingly.

Ino returns to mending the wards, and Naruto steps alone into the sky.

For a moment, he thinks he can really do this.

He’s never gone up against a demon alone before, and now he’s killed several. But they don’t stop coming, and he can only use a fraction of the sword’s power, a fraction of Uriel’s light. When he gets injured, demon taint spreading across his skin, Uriel’s healing burns his soul.

And the demons, feasting on screaming villagers and distraught shifters, are getting stronger.

He’s back on the ground, knees actually scratched up because Kyuubi doesn’t have any energy to heal them, and he looks up at the sky he’s been slashing at, been cleansing, and it’s still completely black, and – it stops so suddenly.

In the blink of an eye, the darkness is gone. The sword drops from his hand, most of his palm still attached to it, and he stares up at a powdery blue sky.

He lets himself fall, sprawls on his arse, and sees Kakashi.

One hand raised in a negligent gesture, Gabriel’s wings sparkling from his back, Kakashi stops beside Ino. “You all right?”

Ino nods, shakily. “Yeah. Yeah. Oh, thank God. Thank God you’re here.”

Kakashi smirks, that little quirk of his mouth. “I do enjoy a good entrance.”

Only the sky changes again, just a quickly as it did the first time. The scene freezes.

He’s still on the ground when Kakashi walks past him, bending to pick up the sword.

“Get out of here right now,” Kakashi tells him. He smiles, this misshapen smile at the end of all things. “Tell him – tell him whatever you think he needs to hear.”

“Wait!” And Naruto grabs for him after all, clinging like a child to his sleeve. “Where are you going?” Stupid question, stupid hopeless question.

“To my grave in the sky.”

He moves past Naruto, and steps into the air.

Naruto stumbling to his feet, trying to follow, when Gaara grabs his shoulder. “This way. Now. Kiba’s not doing great.”

Naruto lets himself be pulled back inside the wards. Ino’s on her knees now, still keeping the protective web going but her shoulders slumped in resignation. Kiba’s on the ground, clearly injured, but without demon taint.

“You have to go,” Ino says. “You have to go very far very fast. He’s not going to be able to hold them back for long, and then – ”

“Come with us,” Shikamaru says.

Ino shakes her head, tears pearling down her cheeks. “They’ll go after me first. I’ll try to go in a different direction from you, give you more of a head start.”

The part of Naruto’s mind that’s made up of Sasuke’s awareness has gone through panic into relentless clarity: there is nothing Naruto can do against even one devil, and there is no possible way for Kakashi to survive five of them. They have to, have to go, have to go.

The shrill sound of a ringtone cuts through the screaming and the gunfire. Naruto fumbles through his pockets.

“Sasuke.”

“Who’s the other crusader?”

“What?”

“The Council did this!” Sasuke snaps. “They’ll have sent a crusader to keep an eye on things. Who is it?”

“I – Kimimaro’s here. He’s not doing anything, he’s just – Kakashi’s up there with them, and – ”

He cuts himself off, because Kakashi’s not up there with them anymore.

He’s on the ground.


Behind him, Kakashi’s trying to get up. His wings are ripped and his face is black with demon taint. One of his eyes seems to be gone, the socket filled with blood and nothing else.
One step, two, ten, fifteen, and he’s in front of Kimimaro, who looks like a corpse. Pale as one, expressionless as one, there’s always been a certain deadness to him.

“It’s Sasuke,” Naruto says.

Kimimaro takes the phone.

Someone screams. Ino, maybe.

Sasuke’s voice, tinny and too far away, “I’ll take care of him, when you’re gone.”

These aren’t the kind of words that Naruto would expect to change everything. But they do.

Kimimaro says, “Then I’ll be at rest.”

His face remains expressionless as a cranium as he hands Naruto the phone and steps into the air. There’s no slashing now, no blades. Kimimaro walks into the middle of the sky, into the circle of devils, and goes nova.

It seems like all of heaven erupts in light.

Naruto’s eyes melt down his cheeks, and when he can see again everything is ordinary. Kimimaro is gone, and the devils are gone. Erased from the fabric of the world.

What’s left is Kakashi, bleeding out on the ground.

“Ino!” Naruto calls, running forward and falling to his knees next to Kakashi. “Can you help him?”

She can do something, tracing glowing hands over him while Naruto uses his jacket to stop the worst of the bleeding, but it’s not enough. “He needs a real doctor.”

“Let’s go,” Naruto decides. “Gaara, bring the car! Sasuke’s on his way, Tsunade’ll have come with him.”

Kakashi’s scarecrow thin but damn tall, it’s an awkward and fumbling process to get him in the car without jolting his spine. Inside the car, finally moving away from the abject horror, Ino abruptly buries her face in Shikamaru’s chest and cries.

They all look shell shocked, unreal. Naruto lets his knees buckle, ending up on the floor next to Kakashi and trying to keep Kakashi’s brain from leaking out through his empty eye socket.

It feels like it’s been a thousand years when Gaara stops the car, and Sasuke throws the door open. He stands framed in the outside light for only an instant before Tsunade pushes him aside. Sasuke, rather more surprisingly, allows himself to be pushed. He stares at Kakashi without speaking as Tsunade’s assistants carry him and Kiba away.

“Sono me o – ” he says rather blankly. He looks like a lost child.

“Sasuke,” Naruto cuts in, closing his hand around Sasuke’s arm.

“You’re going to learn to exorcise properly,” Sasuke tells him. “I’m making some sacred swords for you. They’ll work better.”

“Good,” Naruto says shakily. “Good.”

And then finally he has Sasuke in his arms, an instant of rightness and warmth before they hurry after
Tsunade.

Kiba’s fine, he just needs rest before Akamaru will be able to heal him. Kakashi looks worse. Looks dead, actually, but Sasuke’s obviously not worried about the demon taint. Just sneaks forward, in between the hospital machinery, and traces a glowing hand over the black marks. They were already fading, and the process speeds up after Sasuke’s interference.

“How did this happen?” Naruto asks dumbly. “The predictions were for – for our HQ area. It wasn’t…”

“How stupid can you be?” Sasuke sneers. “The predictions are shaky at best. The Council sent these devils.”

“On me? Because of – of Stonehall? Or because of the bond?”

“They weren’t for you.”

Naruto blinks. “But – it doesn’t make sense – but Kakashi…”

“The Council decided to entrust me to Orochimaru. It’s not like Kakashi consulted them before he gave me away to you.”

“But he’s been – he’s been all pro-shifter since before we were even born.”

“Orochimaru and Itachi wouldn’t let someone be executed for that, or even my parents. But they’re more proprietary when it comes to me.” He sighs. “Or Orochimaru is. Itachi… he thinks Kakashi hanging around Minato was the Council’s own fault. If they’d looked after him properly, he wouldn’t have turned elsewhere.”

“But you…”

Sasuke grins at him, a painful savage grin. “He thinks I’m like the whore of Babylon. That I corrupt people.”

“Itachi’s fucked in the head.”

“I’ll hardly argue with that.”

“Ino was there too,” Naruto says in a small defiant voice. “And that – that other exorcist kid. Even if they weren’t bothered about the village…”

“They don’t give a shit about people like Ino.”

Neither does Sasuke, so that’s not what he’s pissed off about.

He keeps stroking Kakashi’s face, slowly erasing he demon taint.

“On his chin,” Naruto says. “He’s had that for years.”

“It’s a death wound,” Sasuke says. “If it opens, it’s likely to kill him before it drains.”

“There were fucking five devils.”

“How many did he exorcise?”

“I think – two? The sword worked better for him.”
“Obviously,” Sasuke says, less bitter though not by much. “You’ll do better once I customise one for you.”

“But I could,” Naruto starts, his sentences shattering into fragments. “I exorcised. Like an exorcist.”

“What?” Tsunade interrupts.


“Keep working,” Sasuke snaps at her.

She rolls her eyes. “I can’t do anything about the demon taint, but you seem to have that under control. Physically, he’s stable, apart from the eye.” She pauses there. They all know the significance of eyes. Magic collects in them, shades them red. “I could do a transplant, but he’d have little use for a human replacement.”

Sasuke reaches up without speaking and pulls out his own eye.

Naruto blinks, grinds his palm into his eye through the second-hand pain.

Sasuke swallows, face damp with pain sweat, and hands his eye to Tsunade. There’s a lot more of it than Naruto imagined, long strings of nerve dangling from the eyeball.

“Drastic as always,” Tsunade mutters, but she takes the eye. “I’ll be taking him to surgery to attach it.”

Sasuke stares after them in something like frustration.

Naruto tugs at his sleeve, and Sasuke leans on him, brittle and explosive.

“Exorcising properly,” Naruto starts.

Sasuke nods, sharp and decisive.

“I could sort of,” Naruto says, “feel your hand inside mine? Like you were gripping the sword too, and that made it respond better? And when we chanted together…”

Sasuke’s hand sneaks under his shirt, cold fingers pushing light into the seal across his stomach. “If I walk across the bondbridge, into your mind – if I act the exorcism out in there…”

“Let’s try.” He cups Sasuke’s face in his hands, rests their foreheads together.

Sasuke doesn’t jerk away until the instrument tray beside Kakashi’s vacated bed rattles. Kakashi’s phone is ringing.

Naruto shouldn’t be surprised that Sasuke can unlock it. He’s certainly not surprised when Sasuke answers it.

“I thought I’d check in.” A pause. “Are you giving me the silent treatment? That’s not like you, Kakashi.”

It’s the first time in over a year that Sasuke’s heard Itachi’s voice.

“Kakashi’s in surgery.”

“I see,” Itachi says.
Sasuke’s fingers on the phone are white, but he leans back against the wall nonchalantly. “I thought you were still friends.”

“He can handle two devils.”

“There were five.”

“Were there indeed? I shall have to speak with the Council. I suppose it’s fortunate that you were there.”

Sasuke’s quiet for a long time before he says, “I wasn’t.”

“I’m surprised.”

“You’re never surprised.”

“You don’t know me very well, Sasuke.”

“No, I suppose I don’t.”

“Well. I’ll speak with the Council. They sent Kimimarou to supervise, didn’t they? I suppose I might have words with Orochimaru as well.”

“There’s no need.”

“Oh?”

“Kimimarou’s gone nova.”

“Why would he do that?”

“I told him to.”

“You surprise me. How are you, Sasuke?”

“I’m not dead.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“That’s up to you,” Itachi tells him mildly and ends the call.

Letting the phone drop, Sasuke looks a bit like a long-distance runner finally at the end of the race. He doesn’t want to be touched now, and if he walked into Naruto’s mind he’d probably immolate it.

It’s barely five seconds before the next call. This time it’s Sasuke’s phone ringing.

Sasuke answers with a sort of resigned alacrity. “Orochimaru.”

There’s a dragging, hissing sound that Naruto eventually understands is Orochimaru chuckling. “You sound like you except me to be disappointed in you, Shinigami-chan. On the contrary, I’m proud.”

Sasuke’s eyes widen. His thumb fumbles, slips, before he manages to end the call. The phone rings again immediately. Sasuke puts it on soundless and throws it away.
This time Naruto moves. Doesn’t touch, but stands to close he might as well have been, soaking in Sasuke’s body heat: offering his own.

Orochimaru’s said that before, that he’s proud of Sasuke. He’s the only one who ever has.

The memory of when he’s said it, in what circumstances, makes Naruto briefly see red.

Sasuke makes an odd sound, not quite choked, not quite impatient. “Why are you upset?”

Naruto looks up from his staring contest with the floor. “You were hurt! It was terrible and you were really little, and – of course I’m upset!”

Sasuke shrugs, looking at him oddly. “You’re not jealous.”

“No!”

Sasuke tilts his head. “You were jealous of Neji.”

“You like Neji, I’m – I don’t like that I am, but yeah, I’m jealous of that. But of some paedophile abusing you? No!”

Sasuke shrugs again. “I haven’t been – really little – in a long time. It’s not like I never got off on it.”

There’s no way to argue with that, when the ice under Naruto’s feet is so very, very thin. “No,” he repeats instead, taking Sasuke’s hand. “I’m not jealous.”

“Mmh.” Sasuke extracts his hand when someone starts opening the door, and Naruto lets him. This isn’t for other people to see.

xxxxx

When Naruto looks in on him, Kiba’s sitting up in bed, eager to leave it entirely.

Shikamaru knocks on the doorframe. “Ino’s asleep.”

“Yeah, Sasuke too.”

“That’s why you’re here, huh?” Kiba snarks. “I’m good enough company when lover boy’s unavailable?” He frowns. “Should you really leave him though? I mean, last time…”

“We’re fine,” Naruto says. “He’s with Kakashi.”

“Ah,” Kiba says, more uncertainly. “Weren’t they…” He makes a circle with his thumb and index finger, pushing his other index finger suggestively inside it.

“Yeah,” Naruto says, rather dully. “Yeah, they were.”

“Ouch,” Kiba mumbles.

“On a different note,” Shikamaru says, “you’ll be happy to hear I had the presence of mind to film you. There’s no way this’ll stay quiet, so we should go public soon if we want to frame the narrative.”

“Lesse,” Kiba demands, and Shikamaru hands over his phone.

On the cracked screen, Naruto watches himself glow with the white-golden grace of an exorcist,
watches himself take up a sacred sword and walk straight into the sky to eradicate evil.


“Stonehall no longer matters,” Shikamaru says. “There’s no shifter who won’t follow you now. You did it.”

“The Council, on the other hand…”

“Yeah,” Shikamaru agrees. “They won’t stand for it.” He lets himself fall into a chair. “But Sasuke’s planning to clean house with them anyway, right? Good thing.”

“Sell it as Sasuke exorcising through me,” Naruto says. “We don’t need an exorcist hit squad to deal with right now.”

“All right,” Shikamaru says. “I think Temari would’ve liked to use it on Rock, though.”

“Yeah, sure. I mean, what we say internally is one thing. How’s she doing? Last I heard she had everything under control.”

“You know Temari,” Shikamaru shrugs. “It’s her way or the highway.”

“Haha, yeah. Speaking of, I’m gonna…”

“Check in on the missus?” Kiba fills in.

Naruto snorts and gives him the finger. “Call him that to his face.”

Kiba throws a pillow after him.

Things are much calmer in Kakashi’s room. There aren’t even any beeping machines, which is a good sign.

Sasuke’s curled up in a stuffed chair, frowning even in his sleep. Naruto strokes his fringe, smoothing out his forehead.

When he turns around, Kakashi’s eye blinks groggily open. It’s a sharp reminder that Kakashi doesn’t heal like a shifter, that his left eye – Sasuke’s eye – is still covered by gauze.

Naruto hurries to lean over him. “Hey. You need anything?”

Kakashi shakes his head minutely.

Naruto smiles. “It’s good to see you awake. How’re you feeling?”

“Been better,” Kakashi says, trying to scoot up into more of a sitting position. “Been worse, too.”

“Ah, yeah.”

Kakashi blinks. “Kimimarou went nova?”

“Yeah. Yeah, Sasuke talked to him, and – yeah, he did.” They both glance towards Sasuke, still asleep in the chair. “He said, um. He said the Council sent those devils on you. But – but according to Itachi it was only supposed to be two.”
Kakashi snorts. “How considerate.”

“You don’t sound surprised.”

“That’d be because I’m not.” He makes a weak gesture, fingers scratching against the sheet. “I figured I had it coming.”

“But you’re – are you staying with us now? You can hardly go back to them…”

“It’ll be fine,” Kakashi says, briefly closing his eye. He sounds perfectly convinced of this. “I acted up, they disciplined me, we’re moving on.”

“But why would you want to!”

Kakashi shrugs. “It’s home.”

“They sold him.”

“So did Jiraiya,” Kakashi points out. “So did I.”

“It’s not the same,” Naruto says rebelliously, pulling his knees up close to his chest.

“It’s a difference in degree, not a difference in kind.”

“I – that’s not how I want to think about it.”

“Obviously.”

“When I – what you saw, that morning. When Kyuubi had been out.” He breathes in deep. “Sasuke did let him out. I know you don’t believe me or whatever, but he did. I wouldn’t have let him slaughter Stonehall like that, and – and anyway. I still shouldn’t have done it. I should’ve been better.”

“Yes, you should have.” He shifts, adopting an expression Naruto can’t read. “He’ll get over it.”

“He shouldn’t have to. But yeah. He – I don’t think he even felt there was anything to get over.”

“It’s not surprising,” Kakashi points out. “You know what Orochimaru was like with him.”

Naruto nods, knees still pressed tight to his chest. “He doesn’t really talk about it.” It’s mostly an observation, but it’s a little bit a question.

“No,” Kakashi agrees, “he doesn’t.”

Naruto offers a wet little snort. “He’s not above using it, though.”

Kakashi hums non-committally. “I think usually when he lets something slip, it’s because he doesn’t realise that he’s describing something abnormal.”

“Yeah,” Naruto says, his voice growing thicker. But he can’t stop, he’s never known how to stop. “You know, I told him I’d kill him if he tried to leave me.” His face breaks into an expression that has to be a smile, because the alternative is untenable. “He was happy.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“I don’t know. I guess so you have all the facts when you – when you think about it, when you
decide. If you did the right thing. If you’re gonna try and get him back.”

Kakashi’s voice remains colourless and vaguely amused in that cutting way. “You seem to be misunderstanding something.”

“You told him you’re in love with him, right?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Kakashi says finally.

“Of course it matters.”

“He’ll never forgive me.” He shrugs. “Nor should he.”

“He gave you his eye.”

Kakashi’s fingers press briefly against the gauze, hard enough to draw blood.

“Anyway,” Naruto continues, “he’s not – he doesn’t really do forgiveness. But that doesn’t mean it’s the end of everything? He’s never going to forgive me either, and he still – he’s still here, he still…”

“If I’d just assaulted him, I don’t doubt he’d get over it.”

“That’s stupid –”

“No,” Kakashi says, slumping back down to lie supine. “Some things are forgivable, others are not.” He speaks over Naruto with a strange smile spreading like a cut across his face. “You won’t forgive me either.”

“For giving me Sasuke? I’m –”

“Not everything is about Sasuke.” He sighs, still smiling like it hurts him and he might be enjoying it. “I’m saying it now so you can decide if you’ll forgive me or not.” His voice comes almost pitying, “Naruto. I killed your mother.”
Naruto’s thoughts have caught on fire.

Kakashi’s expression, his light distracted voice, never changes. “I don’t mean that I was peripherally involved like Sasuke. Ah, he never really explained, did he? No, I see he didn’t. But when he says he was involved, he means he obeyed orders to kill some guards while she was kidnapped. He’d done the same thing a hundred times, he had no idea who the victim was.”

“What did you do?” He’d expected Kyuubi, but Kyuubi doesn’t come. This is Naruto’s rage, Naruto’s desolation, Naruto’s denial.

“I slit her throat.”

Sasuke’s hand lands on Naruto’s shoulder, heavy as the hand of God, keeping Naruto still.

“Why did you do that?” Naruto says, and still it’s his own voice.

“I suppose I must have wanted to.”

Sasuke’s fingers tighten, locking Naruto into place. “I always assumed Tsunade arranged for her to die.”

“She overlooked the kidnapping,” Kakashi agrees. “And eventually she asked me to finish the job.”

“That makes sense,” Sasuke says, in a pleasant measured voice. “Kushina couldn’t have done it without Minato knowing, and Jiraiya’s a useless drunkard. I figured it didn’t turn out as she’d hoped and she cut her losses.”

“Maa, probably.”

“And the efficient way to get someone in and discreetly tie up the loose ends was to have an exorcist do it.”

“That was my conclusion.”

Sasuke’s thumb curls inside the hollow of Naruto’s clavicle. “Orochimaru showed me some photos. There wasn’t much left of her, towards the end. He said she asked to be put out of her misery.”

“She did,” Kakashi agrees.

“That’s not an excuse,” Naruto snaps.

“That’s not an excuse,” Kakashi says. “Tsunade told me to do it, Yui told me to do it. That wasn’t why I did it. They didn’t make me.”

“Orochimaru with his fucking pictures, he was – he was deep in this.”

“Yes,” Sasuke says, as if he’d expected Naruto had always known that, as if Naruto could bear thinking of it. “He didn’t lend me out lightly.”

Naruto starts to cry. He swallows and sniffs but he can’t stop, the tears keep coming, and the snot, he draws in great hulking breaths. Collapses in on himself, ends up with his face pressed into Sasuke’s chest, crying like a little kid. That whole-hearted, desperate crying that knows no end, that
you have to give yourself up. He’s been so angry, at Kyuubi, at Sasuke, at himself, but he has no anger for his.

“You’re such an idiot,” Sasuke mumbles, rubbing Naruto’s head and neck. “Such a worthless little weakling.”

Naruto nods, crying too hard to speak. Maybe Sasuke too had thought there’d be rage: not just grief, just breakdown desolation.

He cries until he can’t get air and throws up all over Sasuke.

“Che.” Sasuke holds his sodden shirt away from his body, leaning forward to press his mouth against the nape of Naruto’s neck, half kiss, half bite.

Naruto’s just hulking now, tears leaking like rain.

Sasuke tugs at the neckline of Naruto’s shirt. “Up.” He keeps hold as Naruto gets up and stumbles after him into the nearest full bath. Sasuke turns on the taps, pulling off his vomit-splattered clothes.

“Get over yourself, you worthless little shit,” he tells Naruto rather gruffly, wiping the traces of vomit off his body before stepping into the tub. When Naruto makes to follow him, he puts a hand on his chest, nodding towards the puke clinging to Naruto’s jeans. Naruto undoes the button with shaking fingers, kicking them off, and is finally allowed in the water, in Sasuke’s arms. This is – Sasuke trying to take care of him, maybe.

But Sasuke kicks him away quickly, making him sit at the opposite end of the tub, albeit with their legs intertwined.

“Don’t get snot in the water.”

And Naruto can laugh then, finally, a stupid broken little laugh. He wipes his nose with the back of his hand, reassured by Sasuke kicking lightly at him. “You’d be all…”

“I’d have found out a long time ago.”

“Yeah,” Naruto says on a sigh. Sasuke chose not to find this out, as did Naruto himself. If it had been Sasuke’s mother, Sasuke would have chosen differently. “And you’d be all avenger about it.”

Sasuke leans back, eyes half closed: showing off his long lashes and the killer eyes underneath. “We can kill Tsunade if you like.” Nobody could doubt that he means it.

“No.”

Naruto breathes out, sinking deeper into the water. Sasuke turns off the tap just before it starts spilling over the edge of the tub. “That’s not what I want.”

Sasuke nods. His head tilts minimally, lips open and throat exposed: an unsubtle offer. Naruto squeezes his ankle in affection and gratitude, but doesn’t take him up on it.

“I just…they’re my family. And it’d be so hypocritical, when they did it because – it’s disgusting and wrong but they think they did it for the greater good. Like how they – when they handed you over to Orochimaru. And they were still my family after they did that to you. So how can I denounce them now? And how can I not?”
“Didn’t your mother believe in sacrificing for the greater good?”

“Kind of. Yeah.”

Sasuke looks thoughtful. “Would it have been better if he didn’t kill her?”

“What the fuck do you mean?”

“She was minced meat. There would’ve been no recovery.”

“I could’ve –”

“Tch. Even with the best anti-rejection meds, you know shifter/human donations always end in rejection. Otherwise the lot of you would be living in hospital cages.”

“You’d come break me out,” Naruto says. Sasuke raises an eyebrow, and Naruto shrugs. “Not keen on other people stealing your property, are you?”

“Mmh.” The seal on Naruto’s stomach throbs with the force of Sasuke’s possession. Sasuke’s voice comes neutral, perhaps searching, “You miss her.”

“Mmh. Yeah.”

Even this is foreign to Sasuke: the people Sasuke’s lost, he’s lost in ways that don’t allow for them to be missed. Everything about them that could’ve been missed, after all, were only lies. And if Sasuke had believed them, more fool him.

They’re still in the bath, the water cooling, when Tsunade enters the room. Naruto feels himself freeze, animal in headlights, fight or flight pounding through him.

She’s never been one to beat around the bush. “I understood from Kakashi that you’re under the impression I had Yui assassinated.”

The world slows down. “Are you saying you – didn’t?”

Tsunade sighs, rubbing at her forehead. The powder gives under her fingers, revealing a wrinkle, two. “I’m saying I’m surprised you were so quick to believe it.” She slants a look towards Sasuke. “Though perhaps I shouldn’t be.”

“Just, enough,” Naruto says. “Did you or didn’t you?”

Tsunade looks sad, and she looks tired, but she doesn’t hesitate. “I did.”

And Naruto already knew that, he did know, so why is his stomach knotting up now? But his innards are waging war on each other, bowels crawling like snakes.

“I see,” he says. “I can’t trust you anymore.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“You wouldn’t have done it,” Naruto starts, fumbling his way towards certainty, “if she’d been a shifter?”

“No, I wouldn’t.” Tsunade agrees. “She wasn’t one of us.”

“I don’t accept that,” Naruto says. His hand fists around the edge of the tub, still human so the metal
doesn’t bend under it. “That kind of racist bullshit – I will never accept that.” A world where the humans turned on Mum because she didn’t scorn shifters, and the shifters let them because after all she was only human.

“I wish the world was different,” Tsunade says. “But it’s not. I wish I could say I regret it, maybe I even do regret it, but regret is a pointless emotion. It doesn’t get you anywhere.”

It’s horrifying that this is possibly the first time Sasuke’s been entirely in agreement with her.

“How does Dad not know this?”

Tsunade makes a face like a shrug. “He would if he let himself.”

“I see,” Naruto says again. It’s a Sasuke thing to say, but Naruto can’t be himself right now. He feels like he’s drowning.

He can’t doubt that Sasuke’s contemplating letting Kyuubi out again – locking Naruto in the cage until Kyuubi’s trashed out the worst of his dark feelings – but in the end he kicks lightly at Naruto’s knee and tells Tsunade she should leave.

Naruto’s very glad of that, pathetically glad, because he couldn’t stomach another betrayal, right now. Doesn’t have the emotional resources to forgive Sasuke for another Stonehall.

Sasuke nudges his knee again, commanding his attention. “Start drawing power. Time you learnt to exorcise properly.”

“How?”

Sasuke shrugs. “If you start burning, we’re already in the water.”


“No,” Sasuke cuts him off. “Start off softer.”

Naruto kicks him in retaliation. “Fine. Ave Maria, gratia plena…”

xxxxx

Naruto’s asleep. The emotional overwhelm has cut tired lines into his face, swollen into bags under his eyes.

He did all right with Virgin Mary. All right for a lowly exorcist without crusader potential.

He should be better.

Sasuke will make him better.

The first sacred sword tailored for Naruto is well on its way. Sasuke eventually surrendered his gaming controller to Gaara in order to focus on it, after Naruto had calmed down enough that Sasuke could leave him be.

He sinks the blade into the back of the stuffed chair, next to Naruto’s face, so they can get used to each other.

Gaara gives him a sceptical look. Sasuke raises an eyebrow, but Gaara doesn’t challenge him. He
seems to have accepted that Sasuke’s at least better for Naruto than the absence of Sasuke would be.

In view of Naruto’s upset, Sasuke warns Kiba, whose fingers are sticky like those of a child, “If you touch it, you’ll lose your hand.”

Sasuke has other things to take care of.

Kakashi’s room is just as he left it. Rendered dusky by the old window glass, smelling faintly of copper and innards.

He barely notices Kakashi himself, because there’s Itachi.

As always he’s untouchable, fundamentally out of Sasuke’s reach.

It’s a good computer, Itachi’s face moving smoothly and uninterrupted by pixels at the other end of the video call. “Ah, Sasuke.”

His face dies, sculpts itself into a death mask like Itachi’s. Always a step behind. “What.”

“Articulate as always,” Itachi says, mild as warm milk. He did that sometimes, when they were little, warmed milk for Sasuke at night. Sasuke got sick – their mother said later that he was lactose intolerant, that they both were. But Itachi’s never let his body have any say in what he does, and determined that Sasuke too would overcome this weakness of the flesh. Sasuke had been glad. He hadn’t wanted the ritual to stop, or for Itachi to find him weak.

“If there’s something you want to say to me, say it.”

Itachi smiles thinly. “Isn’t it rather that you want to hear things from me?”

“Chigau.”

“Sou ka na.” But there’s scorn now, more evident. Like Orochimaru, Itachi will interpret the Japanese as a failure. “What is it you would like to hear from me, Sasuke? Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa?”

“I’m touched you’re prepared to break the ninth commandment for me.”

“You disappoint me.” Itachi sighs. “I’m only surprised you’re not disappointed in yourself.”

“You disappointed me too. What’s your point?”

“The truth, then?”

“The truth.”

“Well. It was a matter of Matthew 18:9.”

And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire.

“I don’t understand.”

He remembers something Sakura read once, one of those texts she returned to: but he was only young and stunned at how much the world could hurt him.

“You were an impurity,” Itachi tells him. “Mother and Father always knew.”
“That’s enough, Itachi,” Kakashi says.

Sasuke says, “And yet you acted like you loved me once.”

“That was unclean,” Itachi says. “I did love you, that is the great shame of my life. It brought me perilously close to sin. I couldn’t let it infect me as well, this – lowness. This filth.”

“So you gave me to Orochimaru. Where I belonged?”

Itachi smiles thinly again. “Can you say I was wrong? Have you not thrived in that nest of inequity? At least this way you could be useful, without tempting anyone else into sin.” He slants a look at Kakashi. “Well, perhaps that was too much to hope for.”

“One would imagine,” Sasuke says, in a curiously bloodless voice, “that if I was such a sinner, Uriel would have abandoned me.”

“The Lord works in mysterious ways. One day we shall all be burned clean of our human failings.”

“You could’ve just killed me.”

“And let you stain my hands? No, I acted for the greater good. You should be grateful to be chosen as an instrument for the Lord’s will.”

Sasuke laughs, the laughter that came to him when he unlearnt crying. “You couldn’t do it. This impure human love that stains your soul, you couldn’t kill it. Brush up on your Isaiah.”

*Hell from beneath is moved for thee to meet thee at thy coming: it stirreth up the dead for thee, even all the chief ones of the earth; it hath raised up from their thrones all the kings of the nations. All they shall speak and say unto thee, Art thou also become weak as we? art thou become like unto us? Thy pomp is brought down to the grave, and the noise of thy viols: the worm is spread under thee, and the worms cover thee. How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations!*

It made Itachi go pale once, that verse. He’d stiffened, and pushed Sasuke off his lap.

“Even Pharisees may quote scripture,” Itachi says in the present, “but they shall not enter into Heaven unless they are cleansed and redeemed.”

Sasuke sinks to the floor. It surprises him, in a distant way: his knees give out. He feels absolutely nothing, but his legs will not carry him.


That’s the thing with electronic communication. A press of a button can prevent Itachi getting the last word.

Kakashi hauls him up, deposits him on the edge of the bed. Touches his face, until Sasuke looks at him, and he lets his hand fall. “That’s the worst he’s been in a while,” Kakashi says. “Even the Council’s talking about deprogramming.”

“If by the Council you mean Hanabi Hyuuga.”

“Maa, I think Fugaku would quite agree. Orochimaru would no doubt be amused.”

“Stop.”
“Hmm?”

“This – stop.”

“Sasuke…”

“You lied to me.”

“No.” Kakashi insists, lifting Sasuke’s chin until he meets his eyes. “I betrayed you, yes. I never lied
to you.”

Sasuke feels his death mask face move, converging into the grin of a skull. “You lied to me every
second you looked at me.”

But Kakashi too can be relentless. “You chose to believe me.”

He has trouble even sitting upright now. His bones don’t work right. They cramp and melt around a
searing light that cauterises him from the inside out. “It didn’t feel like a choice.”

Kakashi touches his face again, in that way he’s had since Sasuke was little.

Sasuke falls back on the bed. It’s only partly a conscious decision. His spine gives out, like his legs
gave out: the only choice is which direction to fall.

Kakashi leans over him, fingers stroking through his hair.

“Is that it, then?” Sasuke sneers. His voice comes powerless. “You want to indulge in some sins of
the flesh?”

Kakashi’s fingertips burn against his neck. “Not like this.”

Sasuke stares dully up at the ceiling. Uriel rages under his skin, burning away anything vulnerable,
incinerating all the hurt parts of him. It’s like he can feel his soul turn to ash inside his body.

Kakashi snatches his hand away, his fingers red with burn damage. “You’re using too much. Calm
down.”

But Sasuke is calm, now. There’s nothing left that can be upset.

He sits up, lays a finger against the bandages covering Kakashi’s left eye. He contemplates pushing
his finger deeper, spearing the eyeball, letting it boil in the foreign socket.

Kakashi sighs, “Sasuke. We’ve all let you down so hard, haven’t we?” He leans forward, fearless of
the finger against his eye, until their foreheads connect.

“I let you,” Sasuke admits.

“I don’t think that’s how betrayal works.”

“We were two people involved in everything we did.”

Kakashi makes a noncommittal sound, stroking his hair again. Sasuke removes his hand.

“Things have been unfairly difficult for you,” Kakashi starts, and then stops.

“Not really.”
“Hmm?”

“The common denominator is me. All these people are upstanding citizens otherwise. It’s only I who make them be otherwise.”

“That’s not true.”

“You fucking other kids behind my back? Selling them? No, funny, I didn’t think so. We got – involved, because I went up to your room and started blowing you.” He leans back, disconnecting their foreheads. “Mother and Father were good parents to Itachi. Itachi is stainless.” He smiles the skull smile again. “Even Orochimaru – I made him do things.”

“You were eight years old,” Kakashi tells him rather sharply.

“Eight years old and already corrupting crusaders left and right. Satan must be so proud.”

“Sasuke.” Kakashi catches his face again, holds it trapped between his hands. “Everything I did with you, I did of my own volition. That’s my responsibility, not yours.”

Sasuke hisses at him, letting his face burn the trapping hands until they release him. “I’m not choosing to believe you anymore. Fuck off.”

xxxxx

Naruto wakes up feeling rather empty, which he decides is at least partly hunger; at least partly something he can immediately fix.

In the hallways adjoining the kitchen, Sasuke’s accepting a takeout bag of what smells like sushi. “Pay him,” he tells Naruto.

“Hmm?”

“I don’t have any money.” He says this with the carelessness of someone who’s always been provided for, who’s never needed money.

The delivery boy becomes visibly distressed, but calms down when Naruto scrounges up some notes. “Keep the change. Thanks for coming out here.”

Sasuke inspects the bag, toying with a dainty piece of salmon.


“I felt like sushi,” Sasuke cuts him off, his voice blank and his face too. “So I ordered it.”

“I meant why don’t you have any money?”

Sasuke shrugs, licking stray rice off his fingers. “They took my wallet when they locked me in that princess tower for you. I never got it back.”

“Fucking Genma.” He finds an appropriate credit card and hands it over, gives Sasuke the pin code.

Sasuke looks at it as though he doesn’t understand what it is. “Am I taking handouts from you now?”

Give me strength, Naruto thinks. What’s your deal now? “If we’d paid indulgences for all the demons you’ve exorcised since we bonded. How much would that have been? Millions, right?”
“Yeah.”

“Yeah, so.”

Sasuke’s phone rings. He answers it without looking at it and his face goes white as crematorium ash. Pain explodes in his – in his metal foot, which is impossible.

Naruto rips the phone out of his hand, hears Orochimaru’s heavy, dragging voice whispering in gleeful, tender Japanese. “Fuck off forever!” He breaks the phone in his hand, which Sasuke will maybe be angry about, but – Sasuke grabs for him, breathing with difficulty. One hand locks around Naruto’s shoulder, the other fists his face. Naruto steps forward quickly, taking Sasuke’s weight, because he can’t stand on that foot.

Phantom pain, it has to be phantom pain, because there’s nothing else it could be.

Sasuke’s pupils are blown and desperate. “Tell me you need me.” It’s a ragged order, the order of someone stumbling out of the desert after forty days demanding water.

“I need you.”

“Tell me you’ll never – ” He breaks off, almost gagging on air. “Tell me – tell me…”

“I’d die before I let you go. I love you.”

Sasuke crashes their mouths together with painful desperation, full frontal collision teeth and his tongue dragging over Naruto’s.


Sasuke’s shaking badly, like his body is experiencing difficulty maintaining its integrity. Light burns through his skin here and there, turning flesh into ash.

Naruto attacks the blocks across the bondbridge, pushing at them to let in more of Kyuubi’s healing, and more importantly more of Naruto’s unhinged love.

Kyuubi’s claws shred Sasuke’s shirt, shreds the skin across his back too. Tries to cut away the suicidal hysteria, carve off the urge to self-immolate and disappear. Hot bloods spills over his hands. Sasuke’s shaking abates a little.

“I want you with me always, do you get that? I’ve loved you since we were little kids.”

“Yes,” Sasuke says. His lashes descend, all distance and avoidance. Gradually he stills. “Before – you knew me before I was…dirty.”

“What the fuck,” Naruto hisses, grabbing Sasuke’s face, lifting it, giving him another hard kiss, close-mouthed now. “You are not dirty.”

Sasuke pushes him abruptly away, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. His fake foot still throbs, he has to catch himself on a sidetable not to topple over when he tries to put weight on it.

“Who the hell said that to you?” Naruto demands. “It’s fucking absurd.”

Sasuke leans his head back against the wall. The pulse in his throat pulsates violently. “Maybe I’ve corrupted you too.”

“No,” Naruto tells him, crouching on the floor so Sasuke will be able to sit down too. “I’m not
Sasuke has a smile like Kakashi’s, the smile like a wound. “The bonding, Stonehall – after Stonehall. You’d never have done that if it wasn’t for me.”

“If it wasn’t for you – I can’t even imagine my life without you. I don’t want to. You’re the best part of it. I – it wouldn’t even be my life, without you, because I wouldn’t, you know, I wouldn’t be me. I’d just be this – this hollow person, with something missing. I’d do other things. Maybe worse things. I just – I want you. I’ve wanted you since we were five years old. Uriel too - he's wanted you even longer, right? You were born his chosen, and he’s - well, pretty particular about uncleanness, so. What, Itachi thinks he knows better than an fucking archangel of the Lord who's pure or not? I just – you’re it. Okay? For me, for Uriel too. You know?”

“You want me,” Sasuke repeats, in this low childish voice. He wipes at his mouth again, rubs his sleeve against it until his lips are red and sore. “If I didn’t – I don’t want…”

“Then you’re still it for me.” He crouches forward, touching Sasuke’s closest leg. Bad call: metal under his fingers, and Sasuke screams. “Shit! Sorry!”

Sasuke leans back again, chest heaving, his face streaked with sweat so it looks like he’s been crying.

“Sasuke. You have to get that I love you aside from wanting to fuck you?”

Sasuke draws in a deep breath. “So did Itachi, once. So he said. But maybe he didn’t. He – to Orochimaru. I guess he knew what I was good for.”

“You’re good for anything you wanna be good for,” Naruto says, moving until he’s sitting beside Sasuke, on Sasuke’s good side so he won’t mess up the prosthesis again. “You’re the best person I’ve ever known. I’ll always know that, even when you don’t.”

Sasuke doesn’t exactly believe him, but he doesn’t exactly disbelieve him either: the bond doesn’t allow for that.

Naruto reaches for the dropped sushi bag, putting it in their laps and rescuing a random roll. “I don’t get why you always tell me to dip it in soy, that just makes it all salty.”

Sasuke looks tired, but not desperate anymore. “Ramen’s salty.”

“Ramen’s the good kind of salty.”

Sasuke makes a weak gesture towards a piece of egg sticking to Naruto’s chin: shorthand for not taking gourmet advice from someone who can’t even chew with his mouth shut.

“I changed my mind about Kakashi,” Sasuke finally says. “Kill him if you like.”

Naruto blinks, nudges his face briefly against Sasuke’s shoulder. “I never wanted that.”

“You’re so naïve sometimes.”

“Mmh. I, um. I decided to be Hokage after all.”

Sasuke reaches slowly for a piece of shrimp, shredding it with his nails until there’s almost nothing left before he puts it in his mouth. He looks at Naruto sideways in a manner that means: continue.

“I always used to say I wanted it, you know, when we were little. I just – it was like shorthand for
wanting people to pay attention, to mind about what I thought. Then when I grew older and I realised, all that administration and diplomacy and everything, it’s not really my thing? And it’s really for you to mind what I think that matters… So Konohamaru could be Hokage, and I could help him out and be, like, some sort of security person or whatever. But then, now. What I found out about Mum. I can’t accept it. This we or them, this – this ingrained structural racism. And Kono’s a sweetie but he won’t be able to root this out. So I’m gonna do it. Okay?”

“I’m racist too, you know, according to your logic,” Sasuke tells him, considering a piece of avocado. “But okay.”
Take Only What You Need from Me

Sasuke sleeps heavily but badly, fully dressed and ensconced in the duvet, which is rolled tightly around him. Naruto’s allowed in the bed – possibly indeed welcome in the bed – but dressed as well and with his own separate blanket.

Sex – any touch – is more firmly off the table than it’s been since just after the bonding.

They both have nightmares, which bleed into each other, filthy and sickening as sewage spillage. Naruto dreams of Mum dying, which he’s done a thousand times before, but he’s never before seen family members – Tsunade, Kakashi, Dad – pour her into a meat grinder, turn her into minced meat.

Sasuke dreams of being – Sasuke wouldn’t call it this, but they’re dreams of being raped. *I know what you’re good for,* Orochimaru tells him, only sometimes he turns into Kakashi, or worse: into Itachi.

Never into Naruto, though, never even into Kyuubi, but Naruto’s too tired, too cranky and hurt and hollow, to really take that in right now.

It’s still entirely dark outside when they leave the bed behind for energy drinks and sparring. Sasuke looks like an unholy spirit, clammy pallor and panda rings, and catching sight of himself in a dark window, Naruto’s not faring any better.

They’re absolutely viciously awful to each other, these hateful barbs and nasty hits, and the stale taste of sleeplessness and over-caffeinated, empty carbs.

Sasuke says Naruto can stop whining about his stupid worthless mother, who anyway believed in sacrificing people for the greater good – wasn’t she ashamed that she wasn’t prepared to give you up to Orochimaru for world peace? Well, she died for her convictions at last, didn’t she.

Naruto says at least his mother didn’t give anyone up, she never could have, and whatever stupid shit she said, she died for it, that’s enough. At least she loved him, unlike your mother – that’s a real monster, giving a kid to Orochimaru.

Sasuke smirks that thin awful smirk and says even his mother still knew he was too good for Naruto.

It would maybe be a little less grindingly horrible if any of it had been anything less than the truth.

Sparring is difficult and frustrating, because Sasuke doesn’t want to be touched.

“All right, fine,” Naruto says, the umpteenth time Sasuke’s avoided attacking in order to avoid contact. “Let’s work with the sword instead. It’s about done, right?”

“Right.”

They retrieve the blade from the stuffed chair, and Naruto watches it come alive in Sasuke’s hands, glowing brighter and brighter as Sasuke pours blessings over it.

“They retrieve the blade from the stuffed chair, and Naruto watches it come alive in Sasuke’s hands, glowing brighter and brighter as Sasuke pours blessings over it.

“Here,” he says finally, gruffly, pushing it into Naruto’s hands. “Let it get used to your energy.”

The blade fits his hand: fits him. Its power pulsates, adjusts, as it aligns with Naruto’s.

Still Sasuke doesn’t seem very pleased. “You need to be more – angelic.” He throws open the windows. “Out.”
“Um.”

Sasuke slants a look at him. “Scared?”

It’s a playground dare, so Naruto chooses to take it as a joke, and sticks out his tongue. “In your dreams!”

All the same it’s Sasuke who climbs out first, confident that the air will carry him, sixteen stories off the ground. While Naruto’s confident that he could stop his fall and heal whatever injuries he sustained, it’s very new to believe he can walk across the sky.

Sasuke likes it better up here in the chilly dawn sky, and so does the sword. Naruto starts humming, *Think of the happiest things, it’s the same as having wings*...

It’s a very good sign that Sasuke seems amused.

It’s an even better sign that he catches Naruto when Naruto slips and starts to fall – Kyuubi doesn’t like sharing Naruto’s body with Uriel, and lashes out at the angel energy, even though that’s incredibly self-destructive when it’s Uriel keeping them from plummeting to the earth.

When they eventually climb back in through the kitchen window, Sasuke’s cheeks are flushed from the cold so he doesn’t look so sickly pale anymore. “How did I do?” Naruto asks cheekily. “Will you make a crusader out of me yet?”

“I’ll make a new sword. I’ve got a clearer idea now what you need.”

“Yeah? Awesome.”

He puts on music: a clear sign to leave them alone, and a way to avoid being overheard by too-close shifters. He fiddles through songs, looking for something Sasuke will find acceptable, and finally resigns himself to *Ode to Joy*, which is very much Sasuke’s kind of music. If you grow up with psalms and church organs, the classic don’t seem so pompous or inaccessible.

Sasuke’s boiling tea water while Naruto whisks pancake batter when Kakashi ambles in, presumably looking for coffee.

Sasuke does that thing he does sometimes: cutting himself off, shutting down. He was moving his foot impatiently, not quite in time with the music, he was looking at Naruto with different expressions on his face. Now suddenly he’s entirely still and cold and calm and collected, like a little stone.

“Morning,” Kakashi says, getting a coffee cup from the cabinet above the sink. He stands too close to Sasuke, closer than Sasuke wants anyone right now, but Sasuke doesn’t react.

“Morning,” Naruto echoes. “What the – what the hell are you doing?”

Kakashi shrugs, starting the coffee machine. “I assumed either you’d attack me then and there, or you’d wait until I was fully recovered. Either way, I don’t think now’s the time.”

Naruto had planned to say something angry, something admonishing, but what comes out in a small voice is, “Did she suffer a lot?”

“Yes,” Kakashi says, courteously not looking at him. “Not for long, though.”

“They had her for days.”
“They weren’t very professional,” Kakashi tells him. “Not the thugs who were actually there. They can’t have started really torturing her until ten-fifteen hours before I got there, or she’d have already been dead.”

“Is that – is it hard to keep someone alive, if you torture them?”

“Yes,” Sasuke says.

“Right. Okay.”

He wants…he’d like Sasuke to look at him, maybe touch him.

Sasuke suddenly throws the saucepan of boiling water at Kakashi.

Kakashi hisses in surprised pain.

Sasuke stares at him, breathing a bit hard but still utterly expressionless, as if he were perfectly in control of himself.

Kakashi bends to pick up the saucepan, and puts it back on the stove. Sasuke shudders away from him.

Kakashi cups his face, and Sasuke stills. It’s a more thorough stillness than before, bone-deep and resigned. His shoulders are relaxed, his lips lax, his eyes dead.

Naruto grabs Kakashi’s wrist, just short of breaking it. Kyuubi growls in his throat. “Get off him.”

Kakashi lifts an eyebrow but lets his hands fall from Sasuke’s face.

“You need to go,” Naruto tells him.

Kakashi looks to Sasuke, but Sasuke’s ignoring them. He takes the saucepan – it’s still hot but he takes it carelessly, his fingers red and blistering as he pours more water into it.

Kakashi neither struggles nor cooperates when Naruto physically removes him from the room.

“How dare you,” he says, and the words are unwieldy and cliché but he can’t find any other ones. “After whatever the hell you said to him yesterday…”!

“Itachi said some rather unfortunate things,” Kakashi says, speaking mildly and lightly with this faint undertone of ironic amusement, as is his habit. “I don’t believe I did.”

“Itachi – and, and what the hell, you just let him?”

“There’s no talking to Itachi when he gets stuck on a tangent.”

“So you shut him up.”

“Isn’t it rather funny – you’re upset with me, or Sasuke’s upset with me, because I made the decision for him when I brought him to you. Now you’re angry with me because I let him make his own decisions how to handle Itachi.”

Naruto blinks. Kakashi’s missing the point, missing it so fundamentally that Naruto doesn’t know where to begin explaining it to him. “You don’t fucking stand by and let someone hurt him for the hell of it.” He sighs. Then it strikes him: “When you brought him to me. You said you owed Dad. It wasn’t because – it wasn’t because he’d looked after you when you were a kid. You owed him for
Mum.”

Kakashi seems surprised, the same way Naruto reckons Sasuke would be surprised: surprised that there was ever a moment when this was not obvious to Naruto. “I’ve repaid him with interest for anything else. You have to know he wouldn’t be Hokage without me?”

“No, I hadn’t thought about that.” He shakes his head, shakes this off. “You need to go. Seriously. You’re setting him off, right now.” He doesn’t wait for an answer, going back inside the kitchen and closing the door quickly after him, in case Kakashi decides to try and follow.

The new water’s boiling. Sasuke has his hands pressed to the saucepan.

Naruto tugs him around, into his arms. Sasuke stiffens for a split second, before clinging so hard. His fingers carve into Naruto’s flesh, he presses his face into the juncture of Naruto’s neck and shoulder as though he means to burrow it inside Naruto’s body.

Naruto mutters nonsense in ear, hugging him back just as hard. Kyuubi’s claws, burning and cutting, drag over Sasuke’s skin, just short of torturous overstimulation.

While Sasuke’s hands have healed, the smell of severe burn injuries lingers. It’s a very good thing that at least on a medical level, Kyuubi makes selfharm a nonissue.

Sasuke leans so heavily on him that it might be a presentiment to phantom pain, to his foot being unable to bear his weight: Naruto hoists him up on the kitchen table, standing between his legs and stroking his neck, scratching his spine.

Sasuke finally looks at him, the same way he looked at him yesterday, when he said, *Tell me – tell me –*

“I’ve got you,” Naruto tells him. “You belong to me. I love you.”

Sasuke still looks like a ghost: awful and desperate. He kisses Naruto hard and deep.

Naruto kisses him back, but softly, careful not to escalate. “You’re who I’ll always choose. Who I absolutely have to keep. I love you. If you could just let me – if you’d just feel it…”

Sasuke’s fingers knead his back like cat paws. “Not you – just Kyuubi.”

Naruto nods, their faces brushing, Eskimo kisses. This is the most difficult thing he’s ever done. Letting Kyuubi take over, so that when Sasuke eases away the blockages, the only love, the only certainty, Sasuke can feel is Kyuubi’s, not Naruto’s: and yet not letting Kyuubi move his body, not letting Kyuubi touch Sasuke.

Sasuke stiffens, as if struck by lightning. Slowly, slowly, in minimal increments, he steadies and untangles them.

Naruto can’t let himself kiss him, so rubs their noses together again before stepping back. “I think the pancake batter’s ruined.”

“I don’t like pancakes.”

“I do!”

But Sasuke’s losing weight again, so Naruto takes care to make the disgusting old man breakfast foods that Sasuke likes. It’s a careful balance, gauging how much Sasuke feels capable of eating and
stealing just enough food from his plate that the remaining amount matches. Usually Sasuke has a healthy, even competitive, appetite, but the last few days – after Stonehall – he hasn’t been eating well. After a childhood of Itachi and his goddamn religious fasts, Naruto knows Sasuke associates hunger with purity.

Sasuke’s pulled himself together though, quickly and ruthlessly, and is steady and sure once more.

“I was thinking,” Naruto says. “We should talk to Tsunade. Decide on our route.”

Sasuke nods. “I need to settle things.”

“So we go home,” Naruto says.

“Yes.”

Naruto nods, grimacing at a spoonful of nut porridge. “Then Tsunade can stay here and keeps things stable. But we’ll lay out the route with her, take care of the stuff that’s on our way?”

“Sure.”

“So I’ll talk to her now. You wanna come?”

Sasuke shakes his head.

“Okay.” Naruto presses a kiss to the side of his head. “Are you gonna hurt yourself?”

“No.”

“I’m glad.”

Sasuke gives him a tired, cynical look. “I’m fine.”

“Okay,” Naruto says vaguely. “Except you’re not?”

“Neither are you.”

“What are you talking about? I’m awesome.” He scoots over, until he’s in Sasuke’s lap.

“Being fine and being awesome are two very different things.”

“Mmh.” He rubs his cheek against Sasuke’s unwashed hair.

“You’re pretty calm about your mum.”

“Mmh. I just – they’re still my people, and it’d be such a mess for everyone if I – it wouldn’t make anything better if I turned on them.”

“I never thought you’d work with people you didn’t trust.”

Naruto shrugs. “I work with Kyuubi all the time.”

Sasuke makes a little sound like a chuckle, and Naruto kisses above his ear.

Sasuke’s read the same *Paradise Lost* paragraph five times when Kakashi sinks into a stuffed chair. Sasuke’s sitting on the window ledge, a few metres between them.
“My plane leaves in a few hours,” Kakashi says.

“Why would that interest me?”

Kakashi shrugs, lifting a hand to touch the gauze over his left eye. Sasuke’s eye. “I hadn’t expected this.”

“You pulled out the spokes of the seal. I don’t like owing people.”

“You owe me nothing.”

“No, I’ve paid my depts.”

“I owe you, probably more than I can ever repay, eye or no eye.”

Sasuke has nothing to say to that.

Kakashi leans back in the chair, looking tired and sick, and stomach-turningly familiar. Sasuke can barely remember a time when he didn’t know this man, didn’t consider this man family.

“What would you have liked me to do?” Kakashi finally asks. “You feel I messed up, I feel I messed up. But I really – perhaps that’s what so frustrating – I don’t know what I should’ve done instead.”

Sasuke’s not going to say: you should’ve kept me for yourself. You should’ve never allowed anyone else to lay hand on me.

“It’s too late for that.”

“Maa, I suppose it is.”


“I’m not convinced forgiveness is always very relevant.”

“You need to catch your plane.”

“Oh. Yes, I suppose I do. I’ll see you around, Sasuke.”

xxxxx

It starts out very simple. It’s a Tuesday, they’ve stopped in New Suna, the fourth largest city in the country.

Sasuke’s perched on the windowsill, in bleak but warm light and just above a sheer drop. Looking at him, Naruto thinks of a crow chick balancing on the edge of its nest, rather hoping to fall, confident that then it will finally fly.

“I’m gonna go see Ito.”

“Hn,” Sasuke says, still looking out. The window’s open, Sasuke’s fingers resting in the air.

“Hey,” Naruto calls softly, reaching out to fit his palm against Sasuke’s. Sasuke has beautiful hands, with the long tapered fingers of a pianist or a thief: large knuckles and delicate bones, silky skin broken by coarse calluses.

Sasuke finally looks at him, not expressionless but not with an expression Naruto can really decipher.
Naruto keeps playing with his hand, dead serious suddenly, fitting and refitting their fingers, stroking, intertwining.

“I called Orochimaru,” Sasuke finally says.

Naruto tries not to stiffen – but Sasuke’s thoughtful and rather spent, at least partly because of some heavy exorcising: he’s stable again, and fiercely determined. “Oh?”

“He was asking about Kimimaro,” Sasuke says. “I explained.”

“Why he went nova when you told him...?”

“That I’d take care of Orochimaru.”

“Ah,” Naruto says, resting their foreheads together. His instinct is to kiss Sasuke, but Sasuke still doesn’t want to be touched sexually.

Sasuke huffs at him. “Ito.”

“Mmh.” He swallows Kyuubi’s growl, brushing his cheek briefly against Sasuke’s chin before stepping away.

A few days ago, Sasuke would’ve probably come with him.

A few days ago, Naruto would’ve been late, because he could’ve touched Sasuke.

Today he steps into Ito’s study perfectly on time. During their last tense conversation, which was mostly putting words as a shield between themselves and the unspeakable things, Tsunade tried to impress on him the importance of this man. A major player in the human government, active mainly in the capital but with his powerbase here in New Suna.

I know, Naruto told her, I know.

He’s familiar with Ito, who speaks now warmly and competently. Naruto has to deflect the matter of exorcising – he hasn’t done that again where anyone could possibly see, not until things are sorted with the exorcists – and obviously Ito can’t be best pleased about Stonehall, but for a politician, he’s always been reasonable, even kind.

It’s only when they’ve wrapped things up and shook hands that things go wrong.

Ito starts to say how he’s glad Naruto’s being so reasonable, overlooking these old indiscretions – obviously Sasuke’s in a better place now, and the past should stay in the past, all very sensible and admirable.

It hits Naruto – that’s what it feels like, like he’s being hit – Sasuke’s dismissive night-time voice back in Rock, *There were a very few very high-up humans.*

Naruto had said how there were all these rumours about Orochimaru pimping Sasuke out.

*I bet you've never even slept with a human.*

*Not by choice.*

“Oh no,” Naruto says, his voice oddly light and far-away.

Sasuke doesn’t even recognise Ito. Naruto had him on video chat before they arrived in New Suna,
and Sasuke passed by and didn’t react, didn’t recall ever seeing Ito before.

Maybe he’d been drugged, when it happened: God knows he must’ve been impaired in some way, or he’d have maimed any human who dared lay hand on him. Seal or no seal, Ito wouldn’t have walked away from that encounter unscathed.

Ito’s talking again, in that familiar voice that’s always sounded so reasonable, so well-meaning. Naruto’s beyond listening.

He takes a step forward, and Ito’s never seemed afraid of shifters but he backs up now, presumably towards an alarm button.

That won’t save him.

“…but to kill someone in cold blood, Naruto, you have to have a killer space inside you. A panic room in your mind where you go to do it. You have Kyuubi, you’ve been able to do so much in the heat of the moment, but that’s different. The sort of mind you need to kill in cold blood, you don’t have that.”

Naruto smiles at him, an expression that hurts. “No, but you see, the thing is – Sasuke does.”

Naruto steps into it now, that panic room from which to kill in cold blood. It’s cozy, homey, a place where Sasuke’s been a lot of time, has lived much of his life. Naruto knows he’ll kill Ito and when he does it’ll feel good. He’ll feel safe.

xxxxx

For a long moment, Neji hardly recognises Sasuke. For almost as long as he’s known him, Sasuke’s magic has burnt in a tight circle just under the seal: now suddenly it envelopes him, a full-body halo that sings and hisses.

Sasuke’s perched on a window ledge, ostensibly reading something on a tablet but his body drawn tight with the desire to fall backwards, out into the sky. He’s calm, but not in a peaceful sense: this is the shut-down calm that Neji recognises, that Neji himself has retreated into and lives his life inside.

The mongrel beast is nowhere around.

Finally Sasuke looks up at him. He’s never been one to play these subtle power games, about who looks first, speaks first. “Neji.”

“Hello,” Neji can at last permit himself to say. He steps closer, drawn inexorably to the light of Uriel’s presence and the familiar smell of Sasuke’s underwashed hair. “You’re using too much.”

Angel light simmers and boils under Sasuke’s skin, flowing like magma along his veins. It’s not uncommon to draw on this much power in threatening situations, since the divine grace will ward off attack, but to do it longterm breaks down the human elements of an exorcist’s body, eats its cells.

Sasuke smirks. “I find myself healing well of late.”

Neji takes that in. It’s a filthy thought he hasn’t wanted to entertain, but he can’t say it’s unexpected, and Sasuke’s always been more pragmatic about these things. “Speaking of, where’s your pet fox?”

Sasuke looks momentarily distracted, presumably focusing on the bond. “Playing guard dog, it seems.”
“Indeed,” Neji starts, but Sasuke stiffens, an expression of fond exasperation crossing his face. “What has he done?”

“He’s not very good at killing people in lukewarm blood,” Sasuke says, still with that odd combination of annoyance and – and affection. Mikoto was right: Sasuke needs away from the mongrel. “Let out Rafael.”

The door opens behind them. Armed humans, who open fire – presumably before recognising Neji, but they must know who Sasuke is.

Rafael rushes to the surface, and Neji thinks, too late, too late, because the bullets are already flying towards them.

Uriel’s wings, already half extended, snap open, an implacable shield.

Neji’s untouched, and sees with shock that Sasuke’s bleeding. This makes no sense, because Uriel would shield Sasuke before he shielded Neji, but there is indisputably blood trickling down Sasuke’s face.

Sasuke smirks, reaching up to pull a bullet out of his cheek. The metal smokes in his hand, this tiny thing that should’ve killed him. “I trust you’ll bear witness that these humans attempted to harm a crusader.”

There’s no argument, can be no argument. They all know the punishment for this.

“I bear this witness before God.”

The humans are still firing when the purgatory flames of God’s vengeance devours them.

...for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me...

Pari was blacklisted, left to the demons, for the sin of not adequately protecting the exorcist sent their way. New Suna has actively sought to kill two crusaders.

It’s distasteful, but it has to be done. Fortunately Sasuke seems very amenable to carrying out New Suna’s punishment. To Uriel, after all, has been entrusted the vengeance of the Lord.

It’s cleaner than Revelations, a sanitary purging filled with light, but equally final. Soon they will see dense smoke rise from the land where New Suna stood, like smoke from a furnace: the outcry against the city so great, and their sin so grievous that nothing else can be done.

Sasuke moves slowly to begin with, in order to – Neji doesn’t want to think this, but it must be to let Naruto and his entourage understand what’s happening and flee – but picks up speed gradually. They walk through the streets as angels of death. Sasuke smites New Suna, and utterly destroys all that they have, and spares them not; but slays both man and woman, infant and suckling.

At last they walk out of a ghost town. This morning New Suna was a thriving city, sheltering millions of lives. Hours later there’s not a living soul within its walls.

Sasuke has immolated and erased, cleansed it of its human taint.

There are a few thousand refugees outside, and Sasuke seems content to leave them be, but policy dictates no loose ends, so Neji purges them. That includes a few shifters: Sasuke only stops him when they’re reaching Naruto’s group, a firm hand on Neji’s arm permitting no further movement.
In the past, with the seal, this would have been Sasuke asking Neji to spare them. Now, with the seal gone, it’s an order.

Well, Neji supposes the result would’ve been the same either way.

Then there’s Naruto, reckless and disgusting, grabbing onto Sasuke as though he has a perfect right to. Neji looks forward to seeing his hands burn off, only they don’t.

Naruto ignores him completely, the same way Neji ignores the rest of the shifters.

“Sasuke! What have you done?”

Sasuke smirks. He’s come alive again, come out of the stillness of death. “It’s a little embarrassing to still be best known for a massacre I committed when I was nine. Time to step up my game.”

Naruto shakes him, wild-eyed, and Sasuke lets him, seeming on the verge of laughter.

“Sasuke, Jesus fucking Christ, this is fucked up!”

“They shot me, you know,” Sasuke tells him, more collected now, brushing Naruto’s hands off but not stepping away from him. “Shot at Neji, too. They knew what would happen.”

“Oh. But why – that doesn’t make any sense!”

“They didn’t know their place,” Sasuke shrugs. “Anyway if you hadn’t been so messy killing Ito, if you hadn’t let him call for help…”

“He had to die,” Naruto snaps. “The way he talked about you – like he thought I’d understand what he’d done…!” He looks more uncertain now. “You really didn’t remember him?”

“He was just a tool,” Sasuke says. “He didn’t matter.”

“He gave you to humans?” Neji demands, shuddering with disgust at this final defilement.

No wonder Sasuke’s so open to the mongrel’s advances, if he’s already been soiled by humans.

Sasuke shrugs. “Sometimes.”

“I’m glad we purged them,” Neji says. “Filthy beasts. Sinners the lot of them.”

“These cleansing laws are barbaric,” Naruto argues. “Punishing the people actually attacking exorcists – fine, that’s necessary. But everyone else!”

“The laws keep the world safe,” Neji says. Exorcists are a finite resource, the one effective shield against a demon invasion that would otherwise swallow the world, while humans are always replaceable.

“I’m so sick of this greater good bullshit!” Naruto erupts.

“What’s done is done,” Sasuke interrupts. “Stonehall won’t seem so bad now, either.”

“That’s not…!” Naruto starts, but he’s not very relevant anymore.

Above them the sky darkens.

“Shit,” Naruto says, turning a fraction later to look at the heavens as they burst open, demons spilling
through. He seems to understand the same thing Neji understands: that while Sasuke’s monstrously powerful, he’s exorcised a lot lately, and he just purged New Suna. Wiping humans, ironically, requires more energy than fighting demons, and while Neji won’t allow Sasuke to be harmed, he won’t protect a shifter.

Rafael glows under his skin, exerting control: keeping the demons away from himself and Sasuke.

Naruto runs back to his friends, who are really very close, tugging Sasuke with him.

Drained or not, Sasuke wipes the sky clean.

But there are more demons already coming, and then the world grows colder: a devil emerging.

Naruto, absurdly, starts chanting, *Confiteor Deo, omnipotenti*... Even more absurdly, the light of grace comes to him. Neji surmises that Sasuke must’ve marked him as a sacred sword, turned him into a conduit for Uriel’s power.

Naruto procures a blade from somewhere, a blessed one, and locks his fingers around the handle, erecting a shield over the shifter group. Demons can’t get through, the weaker ones are even exorcised by contact, but the demons aren’t the problem.

Sasuke remains outside the shield, staring at the devil.

Naruto says something, but Sasuke shake his head, obliterating a new wave of demons. The way his lips move, it’s possible he says, *Neji will protect me*.

When Neji beckons to him, he comes.

He stares at Neji in that way he has, fierce and demanding, accepting no excuses. It’s the look Neji thrills to and fears, the look that makes him feel alive despite his best efforts.

“Sasuke, be reasonable.”

“Reasonable is for weakling and cowards.”

“You can’t take on a devil yourself, not after everything else.”

“So help me.”

“I will,” Neji says. “I’ll help *you*.”

“Fuck you.”

Neji tugs him back around. “I’ll take care of it. I promise. I’ll just let nature have its course first.”

The devil is moving towards the shifters, and something shifts in Sasuke.

Light burns in him, but he doesn’t have enough left. He could take more than one devil, Neji’s sure of that now, but purging a city demands so much energy... as much as exorcising three or four devils, maybe even five, when it’s a city this size, and if rumours are true Sasuke took out at least one devil yesterday.

Still, the devil breaks through Naruto’s shield, and Sasuke ascends, ripping free of Neji’s clutching hand.

Naruto’s safe then, and the rest of the filth, because Sasuke forces the devil away, but he ends up
back on the ground very shortly, and it takes much longer than it should for Uriel to burn away the
demon taint shadowing his face.

Neji pulls him up. “See sense!”

Sasuke turns to him then, with that look in his eyes that Neji fears but is addicted to, the look that lets
him now he’s alive because it burns. Sasuke’s voice comes forceful but low, intimate. “Neji please.”
Then Sasuke kisses him, the way Neji’s always wanted Sasuke to kiss him: as if he wants it the same
way Neji wants it, as if he’s desperate. “If you don’t,” Sasuke whispers, fingers curling around Neji’s
neck, “I’ll kill you.”

“Sasuke…”

“Please.”

In the end, Neji’s never been very good at denying Sasuke anything, not even the life of a mongrel
beast.

Below him, Sasuke appears to knock Naruto unconscious and order the rest of the shifters to take
him away: they run towards a car.

Sasuke himself remains, wiping any demons that appear.

Neji turns to the devil, feeling himself smile after all.
“Come with me,” Neji says. He wouldn’t normally let himself say this – wouldn’t normally be able to say this – but he just exorcised a devil, after Sasuke turned to him, asked him to.

“I can’t.” Sasuke kicks off his muddy shoes, rubbing his feet dry on the ugly carpet. They’ve taken shelter in one of the houses on the outskirts of New Suna. Until an hour ago, it was occupied, seemingly by a family. Children’s jackets hang in the hallway, half-empty plates clutter the kitchen table. “But I’m coming back soon.”

Neji nods, shedding his coat and sinking onto the coach. It’s a wide, luxurious thing, almost a bed. Light still trembles in his fingers, molten and heavy.

He’s never faced a devil alone before, and isn’t – this is humiliating, but Neji’s never been stupid enough to let embarrassment stop him drawing the relevant conclusions – he isn’t sure he would’ve managed if Sasuke hadn’t taken care of the surrounding demons. If he’d been rested, he’d have been fine, but he’s been through some heavy exorcisms earlier this week, and today he needed Sasuke.

Sasuke too sits down, his hip resting lightly against Neji’s calf. Neji sits up properly, which brings him very close to Sasuke. “I’m supposed to bring you back.”

“You’re supposed to do a lot of things.”

“Ah,” Neji says. Sasuke smells of angelfire and sweaty skin, an impossible combination like ash and dew. Neji knows he tastes the same. “Was this a setup, then?”

Sasuke shrugs. “I doubt it. The Council can hardly have counted on me purging New Suna, and if I hadn’t, a single devil wouldn’t have mattered.”

“I was referring to my instructions to bring you back with me. They can’t have expected me to succeed, unless they’re underestimating you greatly.” He recalls Hanabi saying, off-hand, that Sasuke’s far stronger than he. At the time, he hadn’t believed her.

“I’m not sure,” Sasuke says. “But it’d mean taking on me and all the shifters, so it’s unlikely anyone would count on you succeeding.”


“Naruto’s trying. The others don’t want to let him, until they’re sure the demons are gone. They’re much deeper in the city.”

“He doesn’t force his way free?” Neji wouldn’t have imagined Naruto capable of that, but then there was Stonehall, which proved that Naruto’s far stronger than a shifter should be allowed to be.

“He doesn’t want to hurt them when he knows I’m fine.”

“I see.”

But that’s a lie. He doesn’t see at all, because his eyes fall shut as he tilts his head, sharing Sasuke’s breath, taking it greedily into his own mouth. Their lips brush lightly as angel wings, until he angles his head more, pressing harder.

“Ah,” Sasuke says. “I see.”

Follow Me into the Dark
“Ah?”

“If you thought of it as doing something for me or as making a bargain with me.”

“I –” He was going to say, I don’t know, but Sasuke takes control of the kiss, taking Neji’s jaw in his hand and tilting his face until they’re kissing properly, a deep filthy kiss, and Neji’s arms come up around Sasuke’s neck, they’re pressed chest to chest suddenly. Neji never feels like a teenager except in moments like this, undone by contact, with not just another boy but with Sasuke.

Sasuke tips him backwards until he’s sprawled on his back on the coach. Sasuke kneels over him, undoing his buttons and stroking circles over his chest.

Neji draws in a deep breath, smelling sooth and copper and mud, and Sasuke. “We should shower.”

“We’d better get this done before Kyuubi gets here,” Sasuke tells him, licking a hot stripe up his ribs.

Neji’s back arches involuntarily. This is what he hates about sex, what terrifies him: his body is unmastered, like a hoarse you thought you’d broken in that suddenly runs free and wild.

He sits up again, kissing Sasuke, wet greedy kisses that leave saliva running down his chin, urging Sasuke to unstraddle him and spreading his own legs.

“Hmm?” Sasuke says, eyebrow raised and a headache frown intermittently twisting his face.

“It’s Kyuubi, right? He doesn’t like what we’re doing?”

“No,” Sasuke says, not without amusement but not without bitterness either.

“And if I fuck you, he’ll go insane. It matters to him, right, he thinks it matters who’s penetrated?”

“He does,” Sasuke agrees, undoing Neji’s trousers without looking. “But I’m not gonna be able to get it up, so.”

And Neji was going to speak, but Sasuke pushes him back down, sinking his hand into Neji’s underwear. He drags his thumb in circles around the wet tip, sucking on the fingers of his free hand.

There’s no time to speak before Sasuke has his mouth around Neji’s erection and his fingers teasing up Neji’s arse, and speaking becomes entirely impossible.

They’re just about done, Sasuke wiping his mouth and tucking Neji back in, when Neji senses the approach of Kyuubi – not a demon, but unclean energy much stronger than it should be.

“Stay here,” Sasuke tells him.

Neji’s ashamed to obey him, to let Sasuke once more walk away from him.

xxxxx

Kyuubi’s pushing Sasuke so hard into the wall, the bricks are being displaced, the wall starting to cave.

Sasuke curses at him, and Sasuke’s mouth smells of Neji’s sperm.

Kyuubi claws that out, forcing his fingers into Sasuke’s mouth to scrape away the traces of Neji, flaying Sasuke’s tongue, the insides of his cheeks.
Sasuke spits blood and bites him, crunching finger bones between his teeth, but Kyuubi’s hand regrows too quickly for that to matter.

He nuzzles Sasuke’s throat, wanting to replace the purged smell with his own. He pushes his tongue into Sasuke’s mouth, licking up all the traces of blood. Sasuke’s belt snaps open in his hands.

“No,” Sasuke says. There’s a brief, terrible struggle. Sasuke’s elbow – Uriel’s elbow – comes down, breaking through Naruto’s face, exposing his brain. “I fucking said no!”

It takes everything Kyuubi has to heal that, to keep Naruto alive despite the angelfire sparkling across the surface of his brain.

“I know,” Naruto says, his grip shifting until he’s just holding Sasuke, face buried in Sasuke’s shoulder, arms so tight around him his ribs creak. “I’m sorry.”

Sasuke too changes, fists relaxing on Naruto’s shoulders.

“I really freaked out,” Naruto whispers. “He really – Kyuubi really – we both really fucked up. I didn’t think you’d – how could you – why would you do that!”

“If this situation should occur again, Neji needs an incentive to save you. This way, he knows there’s something in it for him.”

“I didn’t think – you didn’t want –”

“I didn’t want to do this either,” Sasuke snaps.

“But he…”

“He couldn’t force me if he tried,” Sasuke tells him impatiently, resting his chin against the crown of Naruto’s head.

Naruto’s voice comes little and lost. “How could he not know that you didn’t want…?”

“You’ve done it when I haven’t particularly wanted to.”

“You were all right with that.”

“I was all right with this too.”

Naruto looks up at last, catching Sasuke’s eyes. “So now…with me?”

“If you’re too hurt to heal yourself, if we need the bond reinforced, I’ll fuck you.”

“But otherwise –”

“If that’s how you want it,” Sasuke starts furiously.

“No! I’m happy you wouldn’t just – that you only want this if you want it – augh, I’m not making sense – I just want –”

“You make sense,” Sasuke tells him, his fingers catching proprietary and familiar in Naruto’s hair. “I won’t have you taken from me.”

Kyuubi erupts inside him, inflamed and crazed. Every particle of his body strains for more, his cock aching and twitching between them. He rubs his cheek against Sasuke’s. “Lock him up, okay?”
Sasuke looks at him in question, in maybe surprise, but trusts him in this. Uriel grabs Kyuubi by the scruff of his neck and locks him tight inside his cage.

Naruto can breathe out. He still wants Sasuke, he always wants Sasuke, but it’s a want he can control. He presses a brief kiss to the side of Sasuke’s jaw before stepping back. “What the hell did Itachi say to you?”

“That I made him unclean.”

“What?”

Sasuke smiles humourlessly. “Apparently I’m his gateway to sin.”

“That’s crazy.”

Sasuke shrugs. “According to human criteria, Itachi’s insane.”

“I – really? Does he know that?”

Sasuke rubs at his mouth, which is whole again, healed. “He hears voices. One voice at least, telling him what to do.”

“Lucifael.”

“Yeah.”

“Uriel doesn’t talk to you.”

“No. They’re not supposed to talk. If you start hearing them – you’ve taken in too much, you should’ve already gone nova.”

“He’s not really human anymore.”

“No,” Sasuke says again. “He’s shedding his humanity the way you’re only supposed to be able to when you go nova. But he’s too strong, so he survives.”

Naruto takes his hand and starts walking. Sasuke looks at him in confusion but comes along. “You’re not unclean,” Naruto tells him. “If Itachi sins, that’s on Itachi. That’s got nothing to do with you.”

“I want it to have something to do with me.”

Naruto squeezes his hand. “Hmm. Yeah. ‘One wants to be loved, failing that’ – um…”

“One wants to be loved, failing that admired, failing that feared, failing that detested and despised. One wants to evoke in people some sort of sentiment. The soul shudders in the face of emptiness and seeks connection at any cost.”

“Hah, Sakura will have us graduating after all.”

“Sakura?” Sasuke says blankly.

“Oh. Yeah, I guess Kakashi always liked … what’s his name again? That author bloke.”

“Hn.”
“We’re just – leaving Neji?”

Sasuke shrugs. “He’s a big boy, he can find his own way home.”

This is probably for the best, because Kyuubi’s already straining so hard, the bars of his cage are bending.

“xxxxx

“You said he was doing better,” Temari hisses.

Shikamaru makes a placating gesture. “He was.”

“We’re fine,” Naruto cuts in. “Also we can hear you.”

Temari sighs, pushing her empty plate away. “Fucking ghost town. Fucking exorcists.”

“This was kind of my fault,” Naruto admits. “I killed Ito.”

“Why?”

Naruto reaches for his own plate, filling it was spaghetti and chicken raided from some dead family’s pantry. They’ve taken shelter in a random house that must have been the home of a big, wealthy family just hours earlier. “He needed killing.”

“Right,” Temari says. “Jesus, I just got back here – I just convinced Shino bloody Aburame to stop being so against non-shifters, now I’m thinking he’s got a point.”

“You got messy with Ito?” Shikamaru cuts in. “Here, watch this.”

Temari and Naruto both lean over, watching the news footage on Shikamaru’s phone. It shows Sasuke and Neji in a room, and then Ito’s men rushing in and opening fire on them. A bullet must’ve graced Sasuke’s face – Sasuke must’ve let it – because there’s a wound, blood splattering on Sasuke’s collar. Then there’s the terrible light, which envelops the shooters and grows, swallowing the city, extinguishing all its life. The reporters are talking about Sodom and Gomorrah, and quoting God’s commandment to smite Amalek: to utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.

“Jesus,” Temari mutters again. “He was right though. It does make Stonehall not look so bad.” She snorts, spearing a piece of carrot with her fork. “But of course there’ll be no condemnation of this.”

Shikamaru shrugs unhappily. “I wouldn’t be surprised if there’s shifter condemnation. If Naruto hadn’t killed Ito, his men wouldn’t have had this unfortunate misunderstanding that necessitated the purging. Whichever way the wind blows, it’s shifters getting rained on.”

“Did you at least kill Neji?”

“Neji,” Sasuke interrupts, returning from his shower, “saved your lives.”

Temari snorts. “Not of his own volition, not from what I saw.”

Sasuke pulls out a chair, stealing some of Naruto’s food. “Do you imagine I hypnotised him?”

“Would you have helped us?” Temari asks. “If Naruto hadn’t been there, would you have stepped in for us?”
“Generally?” Sasuke asks, chewing thoughtfully on a piece of chicken. “I guess. Why not?”

“How heartening.” Temari snaps, reaching for the wine bottle.

“Keep talking, maybe you’ll change my mind,” Sasuke tells her dryly, on the very edge between teasing and threatening.

“Could we not,” Naruto says. Kyuubi’s beating against the insides of his head like a migraine, desperate to break out of his cage.

It’s shit timing, all of it. Temari had finally got Shino onboard, not that he probably needed much convincing after Stonehall, and then this. Shikamaru was actually something like friendly with Sasuke, but Shikamaru minds so much about humans and won’t make that effort anymore, not genuinely, and then Sasuke will close off again.

Sasuke was all right, *they* were all right, only then Itachi fucked everything up, and now Sasuke would rather barter blowjobs with Neji than let Naruto touch him.

He wants him mum, desperately and desolately, as he hasn’t in years. He understands, understood even when he was little and she was still alive, that she wouldn’t have been able to deal with this, but he wants her all the same, with the aching ardency of a child.

Failing that, he wants Dad, Tsunade, Jiraiya, Kakashi, but he can’t have them anymore either.

Sasuke puts his hand on the side of Naruto’s face, cold bony fingers and Kyuubi suddenly soothed. Naruto takes a selfish chance and pulls him closer, half into Naruto lap. Sasuke yawns around a mouthful of pasta and rests his head on Naruto’s shoulder. “You should rest up,” Naruto mumbles. “We won’t have Neji around if there’s another devil tomorrow.”

“There have been too many of them lately,” Shikamaru says.

“Orochimaru’s faction is slacking,” Sasuke says. He’s finished most of Naruto’s serving and drops his fork in the empty bowl. “They’re making a statement.”

“How much worse will it get?”

Sasuke shrugs. “A lot, probably. They won’t be bothered about a few millions humans.”

“A few million – ”

“The planet’s overpopulated anyway. They’d see it as a good thing if the human population was halved.”

“The humans would turn on them,” Shikamaru says.

“Really? Because their alternative is the human population being cut down to zero. Everyone in this world lives at the mercy of exorcists.”

Temari empties her glass. “We should team up with the humans and keep the fucking exorcists enslaved.”

Sasuke actually laughs. “Good luck with that.” He stretches a little. “I’m going to bed.”

Naruto understands from the way Sasuke looks at him that he’s invited along, and slams to his feet. “Night, guys.”
Sasuke’s chosen what appears to have been the bedroom of a teenaged daughter, and is in fact, now that Naruto’s looking for it, wearing what must be her pyjamas. Naruto can see why, because he too notices the obvious resemblance to Sakura’s room: stuffed animals next to thick books, cheap makeup and expensive bags. It should be upsetting to be in what might just as well have been Sakura’s mausoleum, but it’s oddly comforting. Sasuke toys with a perfume bottle that, indeed, smells the same way Sakura did in seventh grade.


“I killed several million people.”

“You really don’t feel bad about it.”

“No,” Sasuke says, lightly but firmly. He puts the perfume away but his fingers already stink of it. “I enjoyed the purging. I’m not going to lie to you about that.”

“I don’t want you to lie to me.”

“But you want me to regret it.”

The world tilts under Naruto’s feet, until it feels like he’s going to fall off it. “I told you before, I don’t want you to feel like shit. But I’m not – I don’t want you to feel bad, but I also don’t want to you massacre millions of people and think it’s fine!” He makes a frustrated gesture, like he’s trying to throw his emotions away from him. “It’s all fucked up. You feel like shit about all these things you shouldn’t, when you haven’t done anything wrong – and then you feel fine when you’ve done all this fucked up shit and you should feel bad!”

“Hypocrite.”

Naruto stares at him in bewildered challenge.

“If I hadn’t brained you, would you have stopped?”

Naruto freezes.

Sasuke snorts, settling on the bed. “You don’t exactly seem crushed about it.”

“Nothing happened.”

“No,” Sasuke agrees. “And if New Suna had been able to defend itself, nothing would’ve happened here either.”

Naruto swallows, swallows the urge to vomit or scream.

“Another wave of demons, or before the seal was gone, so I couldn’t have held you off – you’d have done it.”

“No,” Naruto says desperately.

“Last time I tried to kick you off of me, you just broke my leg.”

Just after Stonehall, when Naruto/Kyuubi triggered Sasuke’s brainbleed: when Sasuke couldn’t stop him. He did do it.

His voice catches and shakes. “I’m sorry.”
Sasuke shrugs. “It’s not that big a deal.”

“But it is.”

“After you burnt your hand, in the infirmary – you told me to stop. I didn’t. Which by the way, I stand by that.”

“This is fucked up.”

“This is who I am. I purged New Suna, I’d do it again. I fucked you when you told me not to, I’d do that again too. If you don’t –”

“I do,” Naruto cuts him off. “I do, of course I do. I just… I want it to be less fucked up.”

“Che. Good luck with that.”

“I don’t need luck,” Naruto mutters, chucking his jeans and jumper and getting into the bed too – slowly, cautiously, checking if he’s allowed. It’s a rather smaller bed than they’re used to, with only one duvet.

Sasuke turns towards him, nestles into his arms the way Naruto likes best, curled tight and close with his face pressed to Naruto’s heart. “I mean it,” he mumbles. “Don’t do anything.”

“I know,” Naruto mumbles into his hair. “I won’t. I promise.”

Sasuke makes an unconvinced little noise but nevertheless presses closer, slipping his hand under Naruto’s tshirt to curl against his back. “You can put out the tails if you want.”

“Yeah?”

“Mmh.”

So Naruto curls his tails around Sasuke’s legs, and Sasuke shifts and sighs, falling asleep very quickly. Naruto remains awake, feeling like someone’s fisting his heart, squeezing it to pieces inside his chest. He does what Sasuke allowed when he was awake: strokes Sasuke’s back, outside the borrowed shirt, kisses his hair.

The most horrifying thought of all is that Sasuke would probably be neither surprised nor particularly upset if Naruto fucked him in his sleep, as long as he didn’t wake him up doing it.

When he finally falls asleep, Naruto dreams of the girl, who stands at the foot end of the bed looking improbably like Sakura. I know, Naruto tells her. We killed you. I’m sorry, I am, I’ll try to do better. But I did the best I could. I choose this – I chose him, I’ll always choose him. No regrets.

He wakes up from Sasuke waking up, clutching at Naruto’s chest like a great big owl, a panic bird: weight and claws and heavy, helpless breathing.


But it wasn’t, of course. All Sasuke’s worst nightmares are memories.

Sasuke makes this wet, strangled sound and pulls Naruto roughly on top of him, breathing hard and clinging harder.

“Let him out,” he hisses into Naruto’s ear. “I don’t want to think.”
“Sasuke, no. Just let me…”

But what Naruto wants doesn’t matter. He can fight all he likes, like Sasuke could fight all he liked when his brain was bleeding, but it makes no difference. He goes in the cage and Kyuubi gets out, and what happens after that, Naruto can only imagine.

Still, when he wakes up in the morning, Kyuubi subdued to a purring warmth in his stomach, everything seems curiously fine. He’s naked, but the bed is relatively orderly, the room untouched.

Sasuke’s nowhere around, but Naruto can feel him downstairs – a fractured, shaky presence, but no less stable than he was yesterday.

Naruto ambles into the kitchen to find him drinking tea from a gigantic striped cup. The silence of the room is oppressive, hostile: unnatural when there are so many occupants. It’s a good thing, probably, that they left Gaara with Tsunade, or this would be an even more volatile mix.

“Hey,” he mumbles, reaching out to touch Sasuke’s arm. He only just brushes Sasuke’s elbow before Sasuke steps away. “What’s wrong?” Because Sasuke welcomed his touch just a few hours ago, grabbed for him greedily.

“That was just a momentary,” Sasuke starts irritably, cutting himself off.

A momentary weakness.

The cup breaks in Sasuke’s hand, ceramic slicing open his palm and fingers, tea sloshing into the cuts. It’s not a serious injury, so Kyuubi doesn’t heal it: he’s uncomfortable with the monstrous light of Uriel and likes to hold back on the healing, trying to remind Sasuke of his place. Sasuke looks at the cuts with detached interest, flexing his fingers to deepen them.

He doesn’t draw on Kyuubi, but there’s something fundamentally inhuman about the face he eventually lifts to meet Naruto’s – Kyuubi’s – gaze. Red eyes stare into red, magic and challenge sizzling between them.

Naruto leans forward slowly, a movement better suited to a fox than to a human body, and catches Sasuke’s bleeding hand in his mouth, licking it clean and whole.

Sasuke stares down at him, at his hand inside Naruto’s mouth, which shouldn’t be able to fit it. Naruto could close his jaws so easily, snap the wrist off. He thinks of Tyr and the Fenrir wolf, and drags his tongue along the closing cuts, fangs scratching against the skin of Sasuke’s arm.

Finally Sasuke curls his fingers, plucking Kyuubi’s canines from his jaw. He scratches up his hand badly when he pulls it out of Naruto’s growling mouth, but it’s filled with triumph: bloody fangs.

In fluorescent light and the smell of someone else’s kitchen, they circle each other. There’s a brief furious tussle, half physical, half energy.

“Enough,” Temari finally snaps, and Naruto straightens up on the remembrance that they aren’t alone.

“Haha, yeah, sorry. Is there any food?”

Shikamaru points towards the counter, and Naruto starts slathering jam on toast.

Sasuke looks rather miffed, but at least he’s eating again, shovelling in eggs and wholegrain.
Naruto draws in a deep breath, trying to find his zen centre or whatever, and slings a tail around Sasuke’s thigh. “You can’t do that,” he says, and his voice finally comes calm. “Like last night. I told you no. You can just let him out whenever you like.”

“Unless you can stop me, yes I can.”

“That’s not how I want us to be.”

“Tough shit.”

“No. Just – fucking no. That’s not how we have to be with each other! I don’t – I don’t want to hurt you, I don’t want to force you into anything, and I don’t want you to do that to me either.”

“People want things,” Sasuke tells him. “That doesn’t mean they can have them. It doesn’t change how the world is.”

“But it changes who people are. Which is – which is what decides how the world is too. Sasuke. I need you to listen to me.” He closes his hand around Sasuke wrist.

Sasuke spears it with the breadknife, cutting through Naruto’s hand and his own arm. Hissing in frustrated pain, pulling the knife out, Naruto understands that Sasuke’s doing the same thing he did when he didn’t want to think anymore and let out Kyuubi: replacing emotion with sensation.

“I’m not going to be some fucking self harm mechanism,” Naruto sneers at him.

*People don’t self-harm just to hurt themselves,* Sakura told him once. *They do it because they feel it helps: they do it to feel better.*

It’s not like Naruto’s never taken a crazy daredevil risk, taken a chance that would inevitably end in him getting hurt – in atonement, in rage, in an insane adrenaline rush. But still…

Sasuke wanders away to look out the window, the morning sun gilding his outlines. “We’ll be passing by some other towns on the way back. I could hurt other people instead.”

“No!” Naruto erupts after a frozen moment. “What the hell, no way! We will have no more purgings!”

“I can arrange a pretext if you like.”

“Bad enough you did it here.”

Sasuke turns towards him with a smirk. “They started firing of their own volition.”

“But you decided,” Shikamaru cuts in, speaking in this quiet furious voice that Naruto’s never heard from him before. “You let yourself be hit. You could’ve dodged, killed the shooters, and swept the whole thing under the rug.”

“Of course I could.” Sunlight moves over his face, bleaches out the humanity. “As Neji would say, it’s the law.”

“What’s the law and what’s the right thing to do are bloody different things,” Naruto says. “We decide the laws – we, the people. We can change them.”

Sasuke shrugs, playing with another knife. A real one, this time, one of his own, which blurs nimbly between his fingers. He cuts himself every now and then, just little paper cuts really, but they must be intentional because if he focussed he could certainly avoid them.
“If you have to hurt someone,” Naruto says, stepping up close, “then hurt me. I can take it.”

Sasuke plunges the knife into Naruto’s stomach with sudden astonishing violence, gutting him like a fish. Angelfire spills over the blade, bleedover from the power trembling through his hands, spreading like poison in Naruto’s innards.

Naruto falls to his knees, pressing his bowels back inside his abdomen with his hands. They remain frozen for a long moment until Kyuubi’s managed to patch him up. “Feel better now?” Naruto asks.

“A bit.”

“Good,” Naruto decides, struggling upright. He reaches for his abandoned toast with determination.

Sasuke nods vaguely at him and walks away, back upstairs.

“Jesus Christ, Naruto,” Temari erupts. “This has gone a long way too far.”

“He’s not doing well,” Shikamaru says. “You have to see that.”

“We’re fine.”

“No, you’re fucking not, and don’t you lie to me,” Temari snaps. “I’m on your side, but I need you to be on our side, too. You’re with Uchiha, I get that, but you got to admit he’s not fucking stable right now. Something has to give.”

“I’ll get it sorted.” He rubs at his face. “Itachi really fucked him up.”

“He should be over it by now.”

Naruto’s never made anyone physically shrink back this fast before. “He spent the first fifteen years of his life being told he wasn’t fucking wanted, and what? You think he’s just going to suddenly believe he is? Fuck you.”

“Fine. Just deal with it. We still need to finalise details on the itinerary. The press will be swarming, too.”

“We’re not talking to be press. Best case, they don’t even see us. I’ve got the itinerary.”

“You finished it?”

He shrugs, one of those acquired habits, something he didn’t do before the bond. “Sasuke did.”

Shikamaru at least looks politely sceptical, but it is a good route.

Naruto finishes another few slices of toast, empties the milk cartoon, and follows Sasuke upstairs. He’s back in the dead girl’s room, on the phone with fucking Neji.

But he finishes the call almost at once Naruto enters. “My mother called,” he says blankly, before amending it to, “She told Neji to call. She’d like to see me.”

“We can’t go back like this,” Naruto says.

“I need to do what I need to do,” Sasuke tells him.

“But right now – ”
“I’m going. Whether you come along or you try to stop me or whatever, that’s your business. It won’t change anything.”

“Okay,” Naruto says, sinking down on the bed to retie his shoe laces and leaning a bit against Sasuke’s side. “I’m coming along. Someone needs to remind you to be your best self, you bastard.”
Bring You to My Hell

Dad looks younger, Naruto thinks. It’s a shocky thought, that they seem suddenly not to belong to different generations anymore. The time to finally act has wiped years off Dad’s face, while Naruto feels so tired, so worn down. Sasuke’s lifted him up so many times, has dragged him out of his abysses, but Sasuke’s sinking now and Naruto has to find a way to pull him up before they both drown.

Konohamaru too has changed, visibly aged. Some of that blithe confidence has been eroded away, and the remains of it have hardened like a scab. He’s warier around Sasuke, noise scrunching up at the scent of brimstone and angelfire.

They’re reaching breaking point.

“I’m going to finish your sword,” Sasuke tells him, slipping away from the crush of shifters. Naruto nods, counting it as a win that Sasuke bothers telling him where he’s going. He returns Dad’s shoulder clasp before sinking to his knees and opening his arms for Konohamaru.

So they stuff their faces, they sleep, they get caught up. Naruto seeks a moment to speak with Dad properly – about Mum, about Stonehall, about Sasuke – but it never arrives. And Sasuke still is so strange, so distant. All he’ll say is: it’s time.

In the end it’s Kakashi who comes, in the morning the next day.

He too presents himself differently, seems a stranger: very much an exorcist, with nothing left of the runt Dad took under his wing. There are no placid smiles or sarcastic looks, only the inhuman countenance of an emissary of the Lord, of Gabriel’s chosen.

He walks past Dad and the others, and Naruto follows, until he can close the door behind himself and Kakashi and Sasuke.

Kakashi shrugs off the solemnity, throwing himself into a chair. He chucks a scroll at Sasuke. “The Council’s summoning you. They want to see you today.”

Sasuke negligently eyes the scroll. “They’re kindly asking for my presence?”

Kakashi shrugs. “You know what they’re like.”

Sasuke acknowledges this with a grunt, throwing the scroll into the fire place.

“It’s obviously a trap!” Naruto protests, when he understands that Sasuke intends to go.


“They’re probably going to attack you,” Naruto points out.

“I doubt it,” Kakashi interjects.

“If Itachi wanted me dead or locked up or whatever, he’d come get me,” Sasuke says. “There’s nobody in the world could stop him.”

“Orochimaru – ” Naruto starts.

Sasuke smirks faintly, this strange expression at odds with how he feels, as though his face doesn’t
know how to express his emotional state. “I did promise Kimimarou I’d take care of him.”

“This is bullshit,” Naruto says. “I’m coming too.”

“Lower orders of people are forbidden entrance to the Council,” Kakashi drawls. “Luckily for you, these rules were written hundreds of years ago, when shifters didn’t count as people at all.” He takes something from his coat pocket and throws it at Naruto, who catches it on reflex and realises he’s holding an elaborately carved metal collar attached to a chain. “A crusader may bring a collared pet.”

“You’re shitting me,” Naruto says. “You want me to put this on?”

“Not particularly,” Kakashi says. “I’d prefer you stay out of this entirely. But without that you physically won’t be able to enter.”

“I exorcised better than Ino!”

“Quite, but you’ve got more filth than purity in you, as the sensors will see it. Don’t interrupt me, if you had more of Uriel in you than Kyuubi, you’d die. So you’re not getting in without the choker. Silver lining, Ino tells me it’s retro chic.”

“Fuck it. Fine.” He closes the collar around his neck, hears it click shut with this final sound, and feels his insides torn by hostile heavenly light. Kyuubi bares his teeth, wanting to rip and tear and fight free. Naruto holds him back: there will be time enough for fighting.

“You ready?” Kakashi drawls, and Naruto bites his lip and nods, shooting off a quick text to Dad.

They leave through the window, alighting on the ground and getting into Kakashi’s car. All the way Kakashi makes meaningless conversation, in that numb drawling voice. Sasuke stares out the window, fingers tapping against the glass. Naruto takes his hand and Sasuke lets him, acting like he doesn’t notice. Maybe he doesn’t.

The building they slow down in front of is a highrise like any other, glass and concrete and mundanity. The Council used to reside in churches, maybe to an extent they still do, but this is far more practical. Kakashi parks in the underground garage and they take the lift up. There are no codes or locks, hardy any guards: the doors open under an exorcist’s touch, and will stay locked for any other. It’s all very minimalist and industrial, worlds away from the lavish ostentation of old school cathedrals.

Just before they step off the lift, Sasuke grabs the end out of the chain out of Naruto’s hand and closes Kakashi’s fingers around it. “Look after him.”

“Sasuke,” Naruto protests, but Sasuke ignores him, staring down Kakashi.

“You said you owe me. This is how you repay me. If you don’t, I’ll kill you first chance I get.”

“All right,” Kakashi says simply, and as Sasuke walks on ahead Naruto feels the chain tighten to strangling, keeping him back. He pulls at the collar, tries to protest, but it allows him no speech.

Out in the corridor, out of Naruto’s reach, Ino meets Sasuke with a nervous smile and starts leading him away.

“Let’s stay very calm,” Kakashi says. “I’m responsible for you now, that means no stupid risks.”

“Arsehole,” Naruto gasps out, able to talk now he’s stopped trying to walk.
“You can’t look after yourself here,” Kakashi says, “and Sasuke will be busy protecting himself. So you’re stuck with me. That means being very, very careful.”

“Fuck you.”

“Not really in the mood, but thanks for offering. Now either you do what I say or I’ll drag you back home, and I’d really rather not leave him without backup. Do we understand each other?”

Naruto nods, mute and mutinous.

Kakashi keeps him on a short leash, allowing neither speech nor excess movement and forcing him to sit in one of the pews towards the back of the assembly room. The space is huge and bright, the entire southern wall made of reinforced glass and the floor as mosaic of saints spelling out *ad maiorem Dei gloriem*. The blessed pillars lining the walls pound through Naruto’s head, suppressing magic. Presumably they’re a peace-keeping tool, a sort of collective seal on the power of those present.

The air is light, like in a painting, as if Heaven’s closer to this room than to the rest of earth.

Sasuke’s scruffy trainers stop on God’s name, smearing it with pavement filth.

There aren’t too many people, barely any of the elders – presumably Mikoto intended it to be more of a family gathering than a Council session. She’s standing with Fugaku, a few metres away from Sasuke: the closest she’s been to him in years.

She’s irrelevant, because approaching Sasuke from the opposite side is Orochimaru.

It’s been years since Naruto saw Orochimaru in the flesh. He has that lightheaded burnt feeling like right after he heard about Kakashi killing Mum, like his brain is boiling.

Sasuke’s calmer: all the parts of him that Orochimaru can burn have burnt already.

“Easy,” Kakashi mutters.

Naruto stares at him.

Kakashi sighs. “These things are always anticlimactic. There’s no resolution to be had.”

“But then –”

“I understand that,” Kakashi says. “I’m not sure Sasuke does.”

Naruto turns from him, drawn back to Sasuke, so focused he almost forgets the collar burning against his throat.

“Shinigami-chan.” Orochimaru comes to a halt quite close to Sasuke, his robes within reaching distance. His colouring is disturbingly similar to Sasuke’s, and they share so many gestures, so many little ticks: look so obviously related. There can be no denying that this man, this monster, is Sasuke’s family.

“What do you want?”


“There’s nothing of yours here.” The seal, hidden under Sasuke’s collar, is dead and gone, but Naruto feels the echo of its phantom throb. It sears through his shoulder, goes deeper than bone, all
the way into his soul.

“You’ve always been mine.” Orochimaru says this indulgently and patiently, as though reminding Sasuke that the sky is blue. He looks then over Sasuke’s shoulder. “Mikoto-san, it really is time. I hate to be a cliché, but if you don’t tell him, I will.”

“No,” Naruto moans, straining against the collar, trying to claw it off and just shredding his own neck.

It’s the first time he’s ever seen Mikoto look anywhere near discomfited.

Fugaku draws his sword.

Orochimaru’s one of the strongest crusaders in the world, chosen by the archangel Samael, but he’s arrogant and his defences will have been brought down by the pillars, and he can’t heal much better than a human.

Fugaku would’ve killed him, except Sasuke steps in between them, shielding Orochimaru from the blow.

Fugaku stares at him in what seems more fury than shock as the sword slips between Sasuke’s ribs and slides deep into his chest, skewering his lung and continuing into his heart.

Blood beads on his lips, but he reaches up and pulls the sword out, healed within a matter of seconds. Kyuubi strains, almost drained, but Sasuke’s safe.

“Traitor child!” Fugaku spits.

Sasuke doesn’t dignify him with a reply. He looks at Fugaku the same way he looks at shifters, as someone utterly beneath him, as someone who doesn’t register as a person.

Orochimaru smiles. “Shinigami-chan…” His proprietary fingers are only just touching Sasuke’s arm when Sasuke snaps around, bringing the sword down.

Orochimaru’s defences are up now, in so far as the pillars will let them, but in Sasuke’s hand the sword comes alive as it didn’t for Fugaku, neutralising them. It’s a good blade, and cuts cleanly through flesh and bone.

Orochimaru’s hand falls to the floor. Blood spurts from the stump, spraying Sasuke’s shirt and face. “Don’t you fucking touch me.”

This is when Itachi enters the room.

The tension rackets up so abruptly, Naruto forgets how to breathe, feeling himself strangled by the collar, by his inability to act. He hears himself whine, Kyuubi’s whine, a tone too high to be perceived by human ears.

It’s Hanabi Hyuuga who steps in. “You maybe want medical attention.” Orochimaru hisses as she undoes her belt and ties it in a tourniquet around his stump.

If Orochimaru was greedy for shifter healing before, he’ll be mad with desire for it now, because that’s his dominant hand and it will never grow back. All the same the way he looks at Sasuke is covetous, desirous – and proud. “In a moment,” he says.

“No, really,” Hanabi insists. “With all respect for this touching reverse Skywalker moment, let’s go
“Indeed,” Itachi says.

Orochimaru smiles thinly. “By all means. I suppose it is rather a private conversation, Mikoto-san.” He bends forward a little, stump pressed to his chest, and whispers something in Sasuke’s ear.

“I’ll come find you,” Sasuke says.

“I look forward to it.”

Sasuke smiles his shark smile, lips red with Orochimaru’s blood and his eyes red too, the red of Uriel’s hellfire fury. “Likewise.”

“By all means, Hanabi-san,” Orochimaru says. “Lead the way.”

“Go,” Itachi repeats, Itachi about whom Hanabi once said, I’d rather have Orochimaru. Itachi’s insane. Naruto had been angry then, but he gets her now, as Kakashi drags him forcibly from the room. He yells in protest, claws catching in the floor, leaving scratches in the stone, but Kakashi pulls him inexorably away.

He’s on his knees, the collar so close to cracking open, to letting him run back to Sasuke, when the world shifts: Sasuke’s thrown the bond wide open, and Naruto collapses.

One to ten, Tsunade asks her patients, how much does it hurt?

Sasuke’s good days are a seven, maybe once in a while a six. Naruto treasures the glimpses of him below a five, like right when the seal broke, and Sasuke barely knew how to even interpret feeling happy. He lives at a nine, and has built his walls to account for that – burnt so much of himself away and salted the earth to prevent anyone else taking it from him or using it against him – but the first cracks are appearing now, and Sasuke has to function to survive this … but Naruto doesn’t. Naruto’s outside and has Kakashi to look after him, and so Sasuke pushes everything into the bond: all the darkness, all the suffering, all the twisted suffocating hatred.

Naruto lies on the floor with a collar around his neck, crying soundlessly and clawing at the flagstones, the bond so open he might as well have been looking through Sasuke’s eyes. Way back before Rock, Sasuke told him, You can’t help me, Naruto. You can’t even help yourself.

In the present, inside the room Naruto’s been locked out of, Sasuke lets his sword-hand fall, a show of defiance rather than submission. Fugaku turns away, actually walks away from Sasuke and towards the exit.

Sasuke lifts the sword without turning, holding it against Fugaku’s throat. “A lowly exorcist raising hand against a crusader.”


Sasuke herds Fugaku with the sword, backing him against one of the pillars. When his back hits it and begins to sink into it, Fugaku starts struggling. There are curses and prayers, impotent threats and untenable promises, but his words aren’t worth anything to Sasuke. “Please – I’ll love you, I’ll forgive you – I see now I was wrong…”

Uriel opens the pillar, and closes it around Fugaku.

Fugaku will be devoured by it, his magic drawn out to power it. He’ll spend years going nova in
agonising increments.

“You didn’t mind,” Sasuke says to Mikoto.

“He’s a grown man. He knows the Law.” Mikoto sighs. “He’s always been weak.”

“Yet you chose him,” Sasuke points out.

“He was deemed to have good genes. We all have to make sacrifices for the greater good.”

It’s not really a secret that Mikoto has spent her life with and spread her legs for a man she despises, for the greater good of siring Itachi.

“What a disappointment I must’ve been,” Sasuke snaps.

Only that’s not true anymore, it can’t be. Itachi and Kakashi peaked early – Kakashi indeed was a stronger exorcist in childhood, since Gabriel’s power is now constantly being drained to keep his demon wound in check – but with the seal gone Sasuke too is the kind of monstrously strong crusader who appears only a handful times in a thousand years.

“No,” Mikoto says. “You were simply the cross I must bear.”

“Mother,” Itachi cuts in. “It really is time he was told. I’d thought he would realise on his own, but he’s never been able to understand.”

“Cut to the fucking chase,” Sasuke snaps. Killing his father pacified him momentarily, but the red rage is rising again.

“Well,” Mikoto says, visibly choosing not to admonish him for swearing. “Orochimaru was correct in a sense. You arguably always have been his.”

Sasuke blinks, as if hoping the world will make better sense when he opens his eyes again.

Mikoto continues, “We were never sure. Fugaku and I were trying at the time… But Orochimaru at least was always certain that you were his.”

Naruto’s already lying on the floor, but he feels his knees buckle all the same.

Sasuke swallows. “A paternity test only takes a second.”

Mikoto smiles this tired cynical smile. “If Orochimaru was right, Fugaku would’ve strangled you like a rat. I wouldn’t have his soul condemned and our name dragged through the mud over you.”

“That’s why you didn’t abort me,” Sasuke says. “You’ve hated me since the moment I was conceived, but you wouldn’t sully your soul over me.”

“Of course.”

“You wouldn’t risk scraping out a lump of cells, but selling a live child to Orochimaru, that’s all part of God’s plan?”

“Oh, Sasuke. You bear so much original sin. At least in this way you could do penance and serve your purpose according to God’s will.”

“My purpose,” Sasuke repeats, in this terrible inhuman voice. “You suffered through nine months carrying this sin inside your body, raised me for eight years, so I could fulfil my godly purpose being
fucked by some paedophile!"

“Peace always comes at a cost.”

“Right,” Sasuke says, calm again because decided, frozen over. “That’s true.”

Mikoto smiles, that closed-lipped meaningless smile that’s always been her default expression.

“You’re not going to ask?”

“If I’m a rape baby or you actually wanted Orochimaru? I don’t care.”

“Good,” Mikoto starts, but Sasuke stops her, closing his hand around her throat.

He hasn’t touched his mother in more than seven years. He fists her neck now, fingers tensed to rip out her throat. “I know you’ve saved your soul all these years, but it will all be for nothing. You always told me, didn’t you, how it’s a mortal sin to die without going nova? And this is how it will end for you. No glory, no salvation. I condemn you.”

And all the scars are open now, the world a raw and skinless place, one long fall into the dark. All Sasuke’s worst nightmares, all the worst things ever said to him, are true.

“Enough,” Itachi says. “We shan’t waste her.”

And Mikoto, gagging for air on the floor, is once more irrelevant.

Itachi has caught Sasuke’s wrists, holds them up above Sasuke’s head in a gesture of surrender. His hands might as well have been the hands of God, and Sasuke’s struggle is a token effort.

“She told you,” Sasuke says. “That was the evening you decided to give me away.”

Itachi had left the room loving him, keeping him safe, and had come back cut off from him, and nothing was safe anymore.

“It wasn’t why I did it,” Itachi says. “But I’d been contemplating, and it made the necessary choice clear.” He transfers Sasuke’s wrists into one hand, lifting Sasuke’s chin with the other. Sasuke struggles for real now, struggles with everything he has, but Lucifael holds him still.

Naruto howls, soundless and desperate. Gabriel holds him in a strangling grasp, he bites through the chain but can’t get up, helpless and useless, so bloody useless, as everything ends.

“It made it clear,” Itachi explains, “that you were poison. Temptation, the road to sin. That the love I bore you wasn’t godly love for mankind as a whole, the love for my neighbour, but of a rebellious and personal bent. It would lead me from God. You were placed in my life as a trial, as an unclean thing to be turned away from, to be cut off and cast away.”

Naruto can’t move at all now. The light of an exorcist’s end glows in Sasuke, and eats through Naruto eagerly, greedily.

“Repent, and serve your penance, and you too shall earn God’s forgiveness, and be cleansed and made pure.” Itachi makes the sign of the cross on Sasuke’s face, touching a burning fingertip to Sasuke’s forehead, mouth, cheekbone, cheekbone. He holds Sasuke’s head still, Lucifael’s fingers a purgatory claw through Sasuke’s mind, as he repeats the touches with his mouth.

Uriel burns brighter than the sun. Naruto’s soul catches fire: Sasuke’s going nova.

It rises and rises through Naruto’s mind, Uriel’s obliterating angelfire clashing with Lucifael’s, and
this wasn’t how it was supposed to end.

xxxxx

When Naruto can see again, the fire has died out, leaving this blackness, this emptiness. It takes him a long time to understand that he’s seeing the small of Kakashi’s back, that Kakashi’s slung Naruto over his shoulder. Naruto screams and struggles, wild and incoherent.

Kakashi curses and quickly throws him inside the car, finally twisting around to deliver a paralysing blow that leaves Naruto sprawled out across the backseat floor. “We have to go,” Kakashi tells him.

“We have to go back!” Naruto roars.

Sasuke’s gone from him.

He’s not dead, Itachi stopped him going nova – and the sickening thing, that Naruto must be grateful to Itachi, for saving Sasuke’s life when Naruto couldn’t – but he’s completely gone from Naruto.

Sasuke’s shut the bond down before, but then at least there’s been an awareness of something blocked off: now there’s only emptiness, his mind locked into itself.

“Itachi won’t kill him,” Kakashi says, driving very fast. “He won’t even seal his magic, it’s too close to heresy. He will kill you.”

“I can look after myself,” Naruto snaps, trying to lift his arm – to open the car door, so he can roll out – and failing miserably. Kyuubi’s too traumatised by the near nova experience to heal him. “He needs me. I have to help him.”

“You can’t help him,” Kakashi says without turning around. “But he needs you alive. That’s the only thing he wanted from me, and I’ll be damned if I can’t give him that.”

Naruto roars, a wordless, near-bawling sound.

“The worst they’ll do is put him through some penitence. He’s had much worse from Orochimaru, don’t worry. Itachi won’t let him die.”

“Why not?” Naruto grounds out, in a much smaller voice now. “The things he said to him…!”

“Che. If Itachi could stand the thought of Sasuke dying, he’d have killed him years ago. He only gave him to Orochimaru because he couldn’t face killing him.”

A colder fear starts in Naruto, spreading from the base of his spine and icing his brain. The hot despair has burnt itself out, and he’s wallowing in the ashes now. “Will he – the way he talks, about how he loves Sasuke in this unclean way, that Sasuke leads him into temptation – fucking bullshit, fucking arsehole – will he –”

“I fucking hoping not.” Kakashi breaks sharply in front of the Sabaku building. “Silver lining, if he does he might kill himself afterwards. Save us all some trouble.”

Sasuke might well consider that a good trade.

Kakashi gets out of the car, and reaches in to pick Naruto up, slinging him over his shoulder again.

“Fucking arse,” Naruto grumbles, hanging limply. “I have to go to Sasuke, don’t you understand, something’s happened, something bad, I can’t feel him – let me down – please, please – Kakashi, I’ll never forgive you – please…”
He finds himself abruptly deposited in Dad’s arms.

“‘He’ll try to run back,’” Kakashi says. “‘Do not under any circumstances let him. Any of them will wipe him on sight, and Sasuke can’t protect him now.’” He sighs. “‘I believe Itachi’s sealed the bond.’”

Naruto keeps talking, begging Kakashi, offering him anything – forgiveness for Mum, whatever he wants – threatening him too, Kyuubi will rip him to shreds, he needs this too badly for anything else to matter, there’s nothing he wouldn’t do, nothing he wouldn’t give…

“I’m heading back,” Kakashi says. “I’ll get him.”

Mikoto’s wrapping a cashmere scarf around her neck, covering finger bruises so deep, Sasuke’s nails have cut through her skin in red half-moons. Itachi’s sitting at a table, fingers caught in a rosary.

“What have you done?” Kakashi asks him.

Itachi smiles tolerantly. “He’s fine. In fact, better than he’s been in a long time. We might say he’s been cleansed of some of his darkness.”

“I want to see him.”

“Be my guest. The doctor’s on his way, but do look in on him.”

As Kakashi walks down the familiar hallway, it seems as though gravity has shifted, as though he’s walking on the moon, the movement alien and strange.

Then he’s pushing open the door, and Sasuke’s sitting on a hospital cot, pyjama trousers pulled up as he examines his prosthesis. The room’s empty, Sasuke’s things gone. There’s only a water carafe and a mirror, lying discarded on the bed next to Sasuke, who looks at him now without recognition.

“Hello?”

Kakashi quickly closes the door behind him. “Sasuke?”

“Mmh, apparently.” He shifts on the bed, abandoning the study of his left foot. “You’re not the doctor.”

“No. I’ve never been very fond of sick people.” He sinks into the visitor’s chair closest to the bed. “I’m Kakashi.”

“She didn’t mention you,” Sasuke says.

“Hmm?”

“My mother.”

“You remember your mother?”

“No,” Sasuke tells him impatiently. “But since she’s a woman of the right age visiting me and we look extremely alike, I’m presuming she wasn’t lying about being my mum.”

“Do you remember anything at all?”

Sasuke makes a cut-off gesture, still moving in these abrupt soldier’s stops and starts. “It’s only my episodic memory that’s fucked.” He smirks. “Which, I do remember that’s how traumatic amnesia
works.”

“All right,” Kakashi says. “You know about the world, that’s convenient. You don’t know about you, well – that might not be entirely inconvenient either.”

“I know me,” Sasuke snaps. “I just don’t – remember about my life. I’m not some bloody tabula rasa.”

“Good,” Kakashi says.

“Good?” Sasuke repeats suspiciously.

Kakashi smiles back at him. “I know you too. I rather like you. So that’s good.”

Sasuke surprises him by smiling back. It’s a smirky kind of smile, but far more open and far more easily coaxed than Kakashi’s learnt to expect. Sasuke’s mouth is swollen, and a cut opens and bleeds when he smiles. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, exposing bruises on his wrists. There are more of them on his throat, bigger and darker.

Itachi’s never been physical with him before.

Sasuke slips off the bed and stretches, seemingly trying out his body and pleased with the results, thought part of that might be painkillers. Uriel’s light shimmers under his skin, in the way of a powerful crusader at ease with his magic. He turns his back on Kakashi to look out the window, and after a little while Kakashi gets to his feet and joins him.

It’s new, that Sasuke would let a stranger stand behind him. Of course, if Sasuke had grown up unsealed, he wouldn’t have had to learn that that’s dangerous.

“Where are we?” Sasuke asks.

“Didn’t your mother tell you?”

“And now I’m asking you.”

“We’re in one of the Council’s buildings. King’s Street 27.”

That appears to be what Mikoto told him as well, because Sasuke accepts it without comment. “How did this happen?”

“I couldn’t tell you. Last I saw you, you remembered everything. That was a few hours ago.”

“Demon?”

“No. There have been – internal exorcist tensions.”

“Oh.” Sasuke looks at him with new interest. He also quickly scans the room, clearly searching for weapons.

Kakashi holds out his arms. “Take what you like.”

Sasuke lifts an eyebrow, but he obviously remembers where weapons are secured on the exorcist uniform, deftly pilfering Kakashi’s arsenal.

“You don’t trust your mother to arm you?”
“She doesn’t like me.” Sasuke shrugs, the same one-shouldered shrug that his body remembers, even if Sasuke’s forgotten the reason for it. He smiles up at Kakashi, a sudden blinding, arrogant grin. “You do.” He sores, pulling down the neckline of his hospital shirt to expose the seal. “Also there’s this.”

“Can I?”

Sasuke nods, and Gabriel brushes his fingers over the marked skin. The original seal that Orochimaru placed to dampen Sasuke’s magic is gone, has turned into white scar tissue. But above it there’s a different seal, fresh and sharp in the crisp calligraphy lines of Itachi’s penmanship.

Kakashi’s more concerned with the dark handprint burnt into the skin right over Sasuke’s heart.

“I was right,” Kakashi says. “He’s sealed off the bond.”


“You met him?”

“Just briefly. He turned around in the doorway, we never spoke. What’s this about a bond?”

“You’re mate bonded to a shifter.”

“What? No. There’s no way. Why would I possibly…”

Kakashi shrugs. “There were reasons at the time. But of course Itachi considers it toeing the line of heresy, so he’s sealed it off.”

“That doesn’t make sense. It’d be far cleaner to just kill the shifter.”

“He’s politically important. Also your friend.”

Sasuke’s openly sceptical, but focuses on more pressing matters. “Inter-exorcist strife. Tell me.” Finally, his hand goes to Itachi’s handprint, but it doesn’t seem to hurt him.

Kakashi explains about the factions, about the tension over the shifters, the denouement of the civil war. He omits any mention of Orochimaru, of Sasuke’s role in any of it.

Sasuke takes this in, one hand going once more to his prosthesis.

“You’ve had that since you were nine,” Kakashi says, testing the waters by poking Sasuke’s arm. Sasuke swats at him, but lightly, in what could be considered encouragement as easily as admonition. Kakashi ups his play and pokes Sasuke’s nose. Sasuke scowls at him, showing his teeth. Kakashi takes his hand away, letting his fingers brush lightly against Sasuke’s cheek as he does.

It’s a shock like sunrise in the middle of the night to realise that Sasuke’s drawn to him.

“What?”

Kakashi tilts his head sideways, turning the eye patch towards Sasuke. It’ll be ready to come off soon, but for now it’s an excellent shield. “I imagine Naruto would’ve suggested you get rid of it and grow yourself a new foot.”

Sasuke librates one of the knives he nicked and cuts across his own palm. Blood wells, and the cut doesn’t close. “I don’t have shifter healing.” He snorts. “If that wasn’t already obvious.”
“Not anymore. But you did before Itachi sealed you.”

“Hn.” He wipes his hand on the sheets, secreting the knife away again. “How will it affect him, the seal?”

“I don’t know,” Kakashi admits. “He was alive and kicking after Itachi did it, I imagine he can deal with it for a little while.”

“Hn,” Sasuke says again, more thoughtful now. He falls back, resting on his elbows. “Why wouldn’t I have got a flesh foot?”

Kakashi shrugs. “You’ve always been stubborn.” He smirks. “Also let’s be realistic, you’re so reckless with it, you’d probably need a new one just about every week.”

“Tch.” Sasuke kicks at him lightly with the metal foot. “We just met. Don’t act like you know me.”

The underlying tension is real enough, but the words are mostly teasing.

“I’ve known you since you were ye tall,” Kakashi points out, holding his hand out at waist height.

“And have you also been hitting on me since I was ye tall?”

“Not quite that long.”

Sasuke smirks back at him, and it comes to him with the strangeness of a revelation that if he leant forward, if he caught Sasuke’s jaw in his hand and tilted Sasuke’s mouth up, there’s a chance Sasuke might let him. If he said, Trust me, Sasuke might. Kakashi’s never believed in second chances or do-overs, but Sasuke’s living one, this impossible Sasuke made new and shiny, with all his possibilities and all his betrayals ahead of him. Kakashi thinks again, as he’s done so many times, that Itachi’s an idiot. That Kakashi would have never, never given this away. WW4 would’ve been a fair price to pay, to keep this Sasuke.

Sasuke sits up straight as someone knocks on and then opens the door.

“Sasuke,” Mikoto says, “I’ve brought Doctor Nakamura. Kakashi, perhaps you’d like to come with me. I believe Itachi wishes to speak with you.”

He shares a look with Sasuke – this strange, unspoilt Sasuke, every broken promise honoured – and stands. “Sure.”
“I never saw this coming,” Kakashi admits. He’s leaning his elbows on the balcony railing, a beer bottle hanging from his fingers. “Though I suppose I should have.”

“I feel the same,” Itachi says. “I cracked his head against the floor – relax, I let the beast heal him before I sealed it off. I suppose that was just the excuse he needed to forget what he couldn’t live with.” He sighs. “I doubt it’ll be permanent.”

“Probably,” Kakashi mutters. “He’s stubborn like that.”

“But now,” Itachi says, “he can serve God. He’s a strong crusader, and we’ve had too many devils appearing lately.”

“Talk to Orochimaru about that,” Kakashi says.

“I don’t like politics.”

Kakashi shrugs. “You’re the only one he’ll listen to.” He stares into the sun until his eye aches. “Do you want to fuck Sasuke? Is that what this is all about?”

“You know I’ve taken celibacy vows.”

“Yeah, and I don’t really get that, honestly. Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the Earth… Isn’t it your sacred obligation to spread your crusader genes?”

“I’ve donated sperm, if that’s what you’re worried about,” Itachi points out mildly.

“More than I wanted to know.” He stretches his back. “Just tell me you weren’t thinking of Sasuke when you did.”

“What are you accusing me of?”

“You have to know what it sounds like when you say your love for him was impure and he tempted you into sin.” What it looks like, when Sasuke wakes up with defensive wounds and no memory.

“You have a filthy mind.”

“Incredibly,” Kakashi agrees. “But I can’t say incest’s ever been one of my turn-ons.”

“You grew up with us. You know perfectly well I never touched him that way.”


“I doubt we shall ever see eye to eye when it comes to Sasuke.”

“Now that’s something we can agree on.” He empties the bottle, wiping foam from his mouth. Cocking his head to the side – is Itachi wearing a hair shirt under his suit? “Are you planning to keep him here?”

“I suppose he can reside in whichever facility he prefers.”

“Nakamura has to be done by now,” Kakashi says. “Let’s go see if there’s anything amiss.”
“He was fine.”

“You did crack his skull hard enough to induce amnesia.”

“I’m sure Nakamura-sensei will clear him, but by all means, let’s go.”

When they return indoors, Nakamura’s gone, and so is Sasuke.

“Itachi.”

Itachi shakes his head and continues to Mikoto’s study. “Mother. Where’s Sasuke?”

Mikoto looks up from her computer. “Orochimaru retrieved him.”

“Did Nakamura-sensei drug him?” Itachi asks mildly.

“Not at all. Why wouldn’t he go with his godfather?” She gives Itachi a look of consternation. “It’s better if you’re not exposed to him.”

“When?” Kakashi snaps.

“Not quite two hours ago.”

“Right. Are you coming, Itachi?”

“Perhaps this is for the best,” Itachi says.

“Right,” Kakashi repeats, and runs.

Why wouldn’t Sasuke have gone with Orochimaru, when Kakashi deliberately didn’t warn him. In trying to cherish a Sasuke who’d never been betrayed, Kakashi betrayed him.

He runs through the air and on the ground, and then drives very fast.

Two streets away from Orochimaru’s compound, he almost runs over Sasuke, hitting the breaks so abruptly the car skids onto the pavement. He throws open the door, gesturing for Sasuke to get in. Sasuke only hesitates for an instant before throwing himself into the passenger seat.

Kakashi reverses quickly, driving away at speed, but can glean no pursuers.

“Are you all right?”

Sasuke nods. Uriel’s light burns and erupts under his skin, so whatever happened, he’s not sealed. There aren’t any new wounds, either, not that the worst damage Orochimaru dealt him was ever really of the physical kind. His shirt’s ripped, exposing the new seal and the scarring underneath.

Kakashi cranks up the heat and drives in circles, and eventually the strangling tension bleeds out of Sasuke.

“I don’t know if I killed him or if I just crippled him,” Sasuke abruptly says.

Kakashi overtakes another car.

“He tried to – I’m not sure if he meant to seal me or – either way I wasn’t going to let it happen. So we fought.” He breathes out, rests his hand on his leg, close to where the knife sheath is.

Kakashi can imagine it perfectly, and knows all too well that this could never have happened, had
Sasuke remembered his past. He’ll have gone with Orochimaru, who won’t have had to fake having an interest in him or liking him, whose magic and gestures will have made him appear familiar, made him appear Sasuke’s kin.

Orochimaru, Kakashi figures, will have been eager to get matters under control before Sasuke remembered to oppose him, and is used to Sasuke being conditioned to consider himself powerless in relation to Orochimaru: to a Sasuke whose magic was last unsealed when he was eight, to a Sasuke who only hours ago stepped in between Orochimaru and a death blow, shielding him with his own body.

But this Sasuke has never learnt to expect, much less accept, violent advances, and has no emotional ties to Orochimaru. Is in full possession of his very considerable magic, and won’t have hesitated to use it. Orochimaru will have just been a dirty old man, a powerful but aging stranger who reached for Sasuke’s marked shoulder and was dealt with accordingly.

It’ll have happened simply and suddenly, without any of the epic trappings expected: he imagines Sasuke and Orochimaru in a kitchen, a messy and direct struggle as angelfire met angelfire, and Orochimaru burnt.

The irony curls in him like a claw, balancing on the very edge of painful and pleasurable.

“Mother suggested I go with him,” Sasuke says.

“I gathered.”

“I’m not going back to her.”

“Of course not.”

Sasuke rubs at his forehead under the guise of pushing his fringe away. “I should’ve made sure if I’d finished the job, but people were coming, and I wasn’t sure how they’d take it. So I left. But he was too injured – he’ll never be well again. He won’t be able to come after me.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. He had it coming.”

“Mmh.” Sasuke relaxes further, his eyelids rather heavy. It’ll have taken a lot out of him, burning Orochimaru. Exorcist fighting exorcist is a pure power struggle, a contest of raw strength where the weaker eventually breaks under the onslaught and starts to burn, and Orochimaru’s incredibly powerful. “Where are you planning to take me?”

“To Naruto.”

“Naruto?”

“Your….friend, boyfriend…I’m not sure how you think of him these days.”

“The shifter I’m bonded to.”

“Yes,” Kakashi agrees. “You were staying with him before you lost your memory.”

“Really? Huh…”
Kakashi shrugs. “I don’t know that you had anywhere else to go, but he couldn’t have forced you to stay.”

“I’m an Uchiha crusader. How could I not have anywhere to go?”

Kakashi doesn’t like to tell him this, but if Orochimaru had been only a little less impatient to have his Shinigami-chan back, Kakashi’s misguided attempts to protect Sasuke could’ve ruined him. “It’s not the first time your family’s given you to Orochimaru.”

“Hn.” Sasuke’s expression is cautious, considering, but fundamentally cold. Their betrayal can’t hurt him anymore.

“Go to sleep,” Kakashi tells him. “Naruto would die before he let anyone harm you. And I promised I’d look after you.”

Sasuke remains wary, but by the time Kakashi parks in front of the Sabaku building, he’s fallen asleep. Kakashi hefts him carefully, and Sasuke only wakes up enough to grumble at little, hiding his face in Kakashi’s shoulder.

xxxxx

For all Kyuubi’s monstrous strength, Minato’s never once worried about Naruto going beastmad. Unlike so many inner beasts, Kyuubi has the power to speak to Naruto, to constantly reassert his desires, but Minato’s never doubted Naruto’s ability to resist, to argue him down or shut him out. The risk of it is suddenly imminent.

Sickeningly, they’ve been forced to use the exorcist chain, in addition to the reinforced steel manacles and the drugs already administered. Still Naruto’s trashing and howling, far beyond speech. His eyes are red, with nothing human left about them, and looking at Minato they don’t see a family member or even a person, just an obstacle to be torn through. Minato can’t doubt that Naruto would bring him down and rip open his stomach to feast, should the chains give. Already some of them have broken under Kyuubi’s berserker assault.

“Minato.” Kakashi’s voice, from outside the seven-layer steel door. Kyuubi’s ears prick up.

Tsunade called a few days ago, said how Kakashi had been borderline dying and apparently told Naruto he’d slit Yui’s throat on Tsunade’s instructions.

You must have known, Kushina told him. And there was no surprise, no hint of it, only this dark resignation like sinking into a swamp, so she must’ve been right.

If he’d been younger, if the wound had been fresher... but principles and even revenge are privileges of the very, very powerful. Even Naruto hasn’t severed ties with Kakashi, though possibly Sasuke’s got something to do with that.

He stands and unlocks the door, letting Kakashi in. When he turns back around, Naruto’s far more aware, sitting up in an approximation of a human position. “Sasuke,” he hisses, the word a mangled, feral demand. Minato only understand it because he already knew what Naruto was going to say.

“He’s here,” Kakashi says. “He’s fine.”

Kyuubi bleeds out of Naruto’s face, struggling and flaring but ultimately defeated by Naruto’s relief. “Why isn’t he here? I still can’t feel him...!”
“He’s asleep in your bed,” Kakashi says. “Itachi confirmed he sealed the bond, but he hasn’t touched Sasuke’s magic. Mikoto tried to give him back to Orochimaru – Sasuke’s not sure if he killed him or just crippled him, but he is sure he damaged him too badly to be followed.”

Minato kneels beside Naruto to undo the chains, and Kakashi unclasps the horrible collar. Naruto rips the last of the restraints off, so filled with impatience, with movement, he seems already to be running.

“Naruto,” Kakashi says, when Naruto’s already pushing the door open. “He has no memory.”

“What?” Minato demands.

Kakashi shrugs. “He woke up a few hours ago in the Council building. He remembers nothing before that.”

Naruto runs, skidding corners and almost breaking through walls.

But Kakashi told the truth this time: Naruto opens his door with sweaty hands, and suddenly everything is calm, and normal, and safe. He can breathe again.

He shuts the door behind him, and Sasuke’s right here, lying fully dressed on top of the covers, face smushed into Naruto’s pillows.

Naruto settles on the floor, resting his arms on the bed and his head on his arms, staring at Sasuke without daring to blink. He smells sharper now, with the bond deactivated, smells more of Uriel.

“Hey, bastard,” he mumbles. “I’m so glad you’re back. God, I can’t lose you. Just the thought of it – I was going mad, actually mad. Sasuke…”

But at least Sasuke wasn’t trying to commit suicide. He expected to die, but that wasn’t the point of it: he didn’t start going nova to kill himself but to kill Itachi, to regain his own worth by finally being able to stand up to Itachi. That’s not the action of someone who truly doesn’t want to live…

Kyuubi strains and somersaults inside Naruto, and Naruto’s so used to this being okay, he doesn’t put much force into stopping the tails. One of them winds itself around Sasuke’s wrist, and Sasuke sits up abruptly. Light burns under his skin, illuminating up the dark room and incinerating the tail. He stares at Naruto, all haughty demand and no recognition.

“Um, hi,” Naruto says, and can feel himself smiling, hopelessly wide and smitten. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you. God, I’m so happy to see you.”

“You’re Naruto.”

“Yes.”

Sasuke makes an odd face, at once searching and certain. He’s bruised up but not too badly: not as much as Naruto would expect after a fight with Orochimaru. “You – feel like mine.”

Naruto’s whole body heats, his heart rate picking up. “I am. But, um. You probably mean this – can I?”

Sasuke makes an impatient gesture of assent, and Naruto pulls up his shirt, revealing the seal on his stomach.

“Yes,” Sasuke agrees, fingers out in the air between them but not quite touching Naruto’s skin.
“That’s mine.”

Naruto nods, sitting down on the bedside. “You wanted to be able to exorcise without burning me.”

“How well did it work?”

“Pretty well. You took out a couple devils – it hurt a bit, but I was fine.” He swallows, smiles this smile so shaky it feels like an earthquake across his face. “I just – Sasuke. I thought I’d lost you, I…!” He erupts forward, catching Sasuke in his arms. Power flares in Sasuke, sharp and deadly, but either some part of him recognises Naruto after all or he’s less kill-hungry than he used to be, because Naruto doesn’t burn. It just stings a little, as they collapse on the bed, Naruto’s arms tight around Sasuke and his face buried in Sasuke’s neck.

Sasuke seems… okay. Almost – almost normal. But Naruto remembers what he felt when Sasuke opened up the bond, the raging darkness like he was drowning in the sewers of hell. That’s a constitutive part of a person, that doesn’t go away with some memories…

“You’re getting snot on me,” Sasuke complains, pushing at him, and Naruto forces himself to sit up away from him, wiping his nose on his sleeve.

“Ugly crying is a touching sign of trust?”

Sasuke snorts, Sasuke who’s recognised Naruto as his. “You don’t need help being ugly.”

Naruto sticks out his tongue. “Lucky you’re such a pretty boy, it balances out.” He sobers. “On your shoulder…”

“Mnh.” Sasuke’s shirt was pulled askew by Naruto’s pounce, and Sasuke tugs at the neckline now, revealing a new seal. It doesn’t bother Sasuke the way the old one did, there’s irritation but no resentment when he looks at it. It burns Naruto’s eyes. “Kakashi tells me Itachi sealed off the bond.”

“Someone must have,” Naruto says. “I can’t feel you anymore.”

“I don’t heal, either.”

“You don’t? It’s not – they’re not exorcist wounds?”

Sasuke shakes his head. “Cut myself a few hours ago.” He holds up his palm, and the faint red line of the cut is still plainly visible.

“Fuck.”

“We should be able to do something about it. I clearly got rid of one seal already.”

“You… want the bond unsealed?”

Sasuke shrugs, the same one-shouldered shrug he’s had since he was eight. “I want the healing.”

“It’s just… you’ll feel me, too. You didn’t like – you hated that.”

“Huh. I’d assumed – humans don’t feel it.”

“You did.”

“I suppose that makes sense. And if that was terrible for us – ”
“No, I – I loved it. I think you just, um – you didn’t like me in your head, so you didn’t.”

“I see.” Sasuke has that searching look again. “Why would you tell me that? You want it back, you won’t last if it’s not unsealed.”

Naruto shrugs. “I don’t lie to you.”

It’s better, in a way, than the last time the bond was blocked off, because this time Sasuke didn’t do it: didn’t mean to shut Naruto away. But he has days to live at most.

Sasuke – smiles at him. It’s an expression Naruto hasn’t seen in seven years, lopsided and simple. Naruto’s in fucking love, so in love it hurts, it feels like someone’s set him on fire and he’s happy about it. “What happened with Orochimaru?”

The smile disappears, but Sasuke’s still – Sasuke’s still all right, in a way he hasn’t been for so very long. He also still looks like a predator. “He attacked me. Must’ve underestimated me, because it didn’t end well for him.”

“He didn’t hurt you.”

“No,” Sasuke says with finality. “I was the one hurting him. He’ll never – even if he’s alive, he’ll never function again.”

Naruto breathes out. “About fucking time.”

Sasuke makes a sound of what might be agreement. “My mother handed me over to him.” He’s far more sober now. “Kakashi said I’d been staying with you. Apparently I have a troubled relationship with my family.”

Naruto snorts. “That’s one way of putting it.”

“They can’t be pleased about you.”

“No. No, um, your mum pretty much said if they hadn’t disowned you already… They think I’m like – a beast defiling you. They – they gave you to Orochimaru when you were eight. That’s when he sealed you, when you were too little to stop him. They think – Itachi’s fucked up in the head, and your mum’s not much better, they say it was some greater good bullshit to make sure Orochimaru kept the peace. Also Itachi’s a fanatic and can’t deal with loving you more than he loves God, so.”

“Che. This amnesia seems less and less traumatic.”

“I’m on your side.”

Sasuke smirks at him. “Isn’t that the same as being on the side of your own survival?”

“They…coincide.”

Sasuke snorts out a laugh, then yawns.

“You can sleep,” Naruto mumbles. “I’ll keep watch.”

Sasuke lifts an eyebrow but ultimately lies down, kicking off his rather tight jeans and pulling the blanket up instead. “Stop staring at me,” he mutters eventually, and Naruto gives an unconvincing laugh and forces himself to turn away. Only until Sasuke’s fallen asleep, then he can return to the bedside, staring at him with this helpless, hungry yearning, so God damn in love. He’s careful to keep the tails in this time, and Sasuke doesn’t wake, sleeping quietly and deeply in a bed that
probably still smells familiar, from the last time Sasuke used it.

Naruto spends the night on the floor, staring at Sasuke and dozing off. They’re both woken late next morning by Kakashi knocking on and then opening the door. “Morning, boys.”

Sasuke’s sitting up in bed, rosy and warm with sleep, so lovely it hurts looking at him and Naruto never wants the pain to end. “Morning,” he drawls, not without a hint of a smile, and it dawns on Naruto that Sasuke’s – happy to see Kakashi. Part of it is presumably that Kakashi’s Sasuke’s kind, another exorcist. While Sasuke’s obviously decided to accept shifter contact in view of his…troubled relationship…with his family, the kindest thing he’s ever said about shifters is that they’re more useful than humans.

But part of it must be, part of it has always been, that he’s happy to see Kakashi, whom he’s liked for as long as Naruto can remember.

“I’ve got Hanabi Hyuuga downstairs,” Kakashi says. “She’s been to Orochimaru’s. We should talk.”

“I’ll be right there.” Sasuke kicks the blanket off, bending for his jeans. Naruto can’t tell anymore, now that Sasuke’s mind has been washed clean of memory, whether he’s unselfconscious or showing off.

“See you downstairs,” Kakashi says, wiggling his fingers and walking off.

Sasuke makes a face. “Do you have a tooth brush?”

“In the bathroom,” Naruto says. “The blue one’s yours. Um. D’you mind if I shower while you…?”

Sasuke lifts an eyebrow.

“I’ll take that as no.” Naruto rubs at the back of his head. “Sorry. I’m just used to…”

“We were living together. As a – couple.”

“Well, yeah.”

“You still want that.”

“I do. But I get that you don’t know me yet.” He grabs a fresh shirt from the wardrobe. “I’ll wash off somewhere else. You just use whatever – some of the stuff’s yours anyway.”

Having washed the nights’ grime away, he finds Hanabi downstairs having tea with Temari, Kakashi lounging against a counter going through their coffee brands.

“When did this turn into Exorcist HQ?” Kiba grumbles.

“If you’d prefer to stand against the cleansers without any exorcists on your side, then be my guest,” Hanabi says.

Sasuke enters before they can escalate, and Kakashi stands up straight. “Let’s take this somewhere more private.”

“I’m coming too,” Naruto insists.

Kakashi shrugs. “Fine.”

Naruto leads them into one of the conference rooms, and Hanabi makes herself comfortable at the
head of the table. “Your timing is the worst,” she tells Sasuke. “Orochimaru’s dying – he can probably last a few weeks if nobody offs him, but he’s not functional. Which would mean you taking over Oto, but you’re hardly in a fit state to claim your inheritance now.”

“Who else did you have in mind?” Sasuke asks. Naruto keeps staring at him, drinking in the sound of his voice, the smell of his body, which is made even better by the traces of Naruto’s soap and detergent. If only he could reach out, close his hands around the miracle. He should care what they’re talking about, but all he registers is the sounds, all he cares about is Sasuke.

Hanabi sighs. “I doubt if Neji’s strong enough to call them to heel, and your mother’s built her career on being moderate.”

“Tch. Apparently I’m fucking a shifter – they can’t be that picky if they’d have me.”

“You’re Orochimaru’s chosen heir,” Kakashi points out. “Also you’re one of the strongest crusaders of the last millennium, so…”

“In retrospect,” Hanabi says, “it’s unfortunate that Kimimarou went nova.”

“Maa,” Kakashi objects lightly. “I do enjoy being alive, you know. Hmm…”

“You, then,” Sasuke cuts in, looking at Hanabi. “Michael will bring them to their knees.”

Hanabi looks speculative, mouth pursed, before she looks at Kakashi. “It’d have to be a joint effort. I’ve got the pedigree and the power, but…”

“But not the right connections,” Kakashi agrees. “And I’m far too tainted by my shifter association – but I could be a prince consort, I suppose.”

Hanabi leans her head back. “Itachi would be ideal.”

“He scorns politics,” Kakashi says. “But we’ll have to see what we can do.”

“I could –”

“This will be a very dark business,” Kakashi says, looking at her less evaluating than concerned. He says it like he maybe likes her. Sasuke doesn’t get that scoffy, vicious expression that would indicate he thinks Kakashi’s lying, being manipulative. He also evidences not the slightest sign of betrayal or jealousy. “We’ll be wading through black blood before we’ve cleaned it up.”

“I can get people in line,” Sasuke says. “If that’s what we’re talking about.”

“There’s a lot of politics in this.”

“I’ll be reorienting myself on that.”

“Like you said,” Hanabi says, “a joint venture. If Itachi won’t have the fanatics, we might be best off with a triumvirate. Well, I must be going.”

“I need to get caught up,” Sasuke says. Naruto retrieves a computer from one of the cabinets, deciding to get some breakfast – because he can leave Sasuke alone for five minutes, he can, he really can – while Sasuke goes through the latest news cycles, presumably checking everything he’s been told against the media output and hoping to fill in the blanks.

xxxxx
Kakashi returns to the coffee machine with the intention of chasing down his espresso with a latte. Itachi, who’s never cowardly except about Sasuke, calls him for the third time this morning. Halfway through his coffee, Kakashi picks up: Hanabi will be cranky if he doesn’t start selling Itachi on taking over Oto.

“...it was Sasuke’s job,” he agrees, when Itachi predictably argues. Itachi might be a genius, but he’s never been particularly creative, and he’s always been hampered by his God complex. “But now he doesn’t remember enough to do it. Yes, because you cracked his head open. Exactly. Take responsibility.”

“You can’t still be friends with him,” Naruto says, chewing defiantly on a piece of bacon, after Kakashi’s ended the call.

Kakashi rubs at his face, grinding the heel of his hand into Sasuke’s eye. “It’s deeper than that.” He offers a crooked smirk. “We’re family, you see. Like you and Tsunade.”

Naruto’s face clouds over. “That’s not the same. I wouldn’t stand by and let her hurt someone.”

Kakashi sighs, realising that his coffee’s gone cold. “To you Itachi’s just this monster. The villain of the story. He was my first friend. He gave me back my place in the world.”

“Didn’t you tell me one can love a rabid dog and still understand that it needs to be put down?”

“Didn’t you tell me you believe in giving people many chances?”

“Sasuke’s never going to have a chance if Itachi’s not put down.”

“To so very many people,” Kakashi says lightly, “Sasuke’s the monster. Mist Town, New Suna – everyone he’s killed and terrorised, and all their loved ones. Hundreds of thousands of people live in fear of him, and rightfully so.”

“Pretty much everyone thinks shifters are monsters, too. That doesn’t mean they’re right.”

“No, but the people who resent Sasuke because he’s slaughtered their families and would just as easily kill them, for just as little reason – they’re not wrong.” He shrugs. “Anyway, I owe you an apology. When you said he’d let Kyuubi out, I should’ve believed you.”

“What changed your mind?”

“You wouldn’t have massacred Stonehall unless Sasuke was in danger, and he obviously wasn’t.”

Naruto swallows. “I’m – glad you know that.”

“I have been around since you were born.”

Naruto makes an uncertain sound of agreement. Then he checks his phone, winces. “Tsunade’s back. Let’s go.”

Kakashi slouches along obediently, but has to lift an eyebrow at the back of Naruto’s head. “I have to say, I’m curious that you seem more hostile to her than to me.”

Naruto stops, fingers twitching almost into fists. But when he looks over his shoulder he’s smiling, that determined brilliant smile that Kakashi remembers so well. “In so far as you’re capable of being on anyone’s side, you’re on his. She’s not. So.”

“Isn’t she on your side?”
“No. She killed my mother. That’s not being on my side.” He shrugs, which looks odd on him because it’s so clearly Sasuke’s shrug. “Anyway I’ve got lots of people on my side. He doesn’t.”

“Hmm,” Kakashi says, taking a long sip of coffee. It could stand to be a bit more Irish, but otherwise it’s fine.

In the conference room Sasuke’s drawn his legs up underneath him, going through articles and news clips. He seems really very calm for someone who must’ve found child porn and peace treaties and news of purged cities all starring him.

The bruising isn’t the worst Sasuke’s had by a long shot, and it’s not the worst thing Itachi’s done to him by a long shot, but it’s still remarkably disturbing. It’s not really the bruising of a straightforward beating, Kakashi muses, or of an outright fight…

“Here,” Naruto says, handing Sasuke a bowl of rice porridge.

Sasuke smiles, that easy thoughtless smile Kakashi remembers from his childhood summers at the Uchiha residence. It’s still a tiny, rather sharp expression, but the simplicity with which it’s summoned is remarkable.

“You find what you needed?” Naruto asks.

“I found enough to be glad I ended him,” Sasuke mutters around a mouthful of breakfast. He turns to Kakashi, “You might’ve warned me about my family before Mother tried to give me away.”

“Maa,” Kakashi says. “I probably should’ve.”

Sasuke nods briskly. Already, one day after this strange re-forging of Sasuke’s shattering mind, he trusts Kakashi less. He digs into the porridge with gusto. “I’ve got a ton of reporters asking me about New Suna.”

“You know what happened?” Naruto asks.

“A complete purging. I believe Neji Hyuuga cleaned up the leftovers who’d fled, but I was the primary cleanser.”

Naruto picks up the discarded spoon and plays with it. “Would you do that now?”

Sasuke shrugs. “It’s part of the job.”

“You wouldn’t – enjoy it?”

“No?” Sasuke seems faintly surprised. “Where’s the challenge in purging humans?” He makes a thoughtful face. “I suppose releasing massive amounts of power is always a good feeling.”

“But killing all those people – ?”

Sasuke lifts an eyebrow. “That’s kind of psychotic, enjoying that.”

“Eh…” Naruto rubs at the back of his head.

Sasuke snorts, glancing at the computer. “With this tragedy porn background, I can see how that would happen.” He looks at Naruto, they share one of those looks they’ve always had, exclusive as a whisper in someone else’s ear. “That’s not where I am now.”
Minato knocks on the doorframe. He says, “Hello, Sasuke.” He says how he doubts Sasuke remembers him but he’s Minato Namikaze, the Hokage. He says appropriate things about being happy Sasuke’s looking well and hoping they could talk. But it’s not Sasuke who commands his attention.

Kakashi’s the same as always: really, Minato lost him a long time ago. Learning about the specifics years after the fact doesn’t change that. Also Minato has no real truck with Sasuke, which means he can’t afford to cut Kakashi loose.

Sasuke nods at him. He does look healthier, despite someone clearly having beaten him, an underlying scowling tension wiped away. He’s still stingy with his expressions, still obviously an arrogant little arsehole, but on a level that can be dealt with. He smirks a bit. “I suppose you want me to sing for my supper.”

Minato allows himself a shrug. He’s never done well with Sasuke, and it won’t do to waste this new chance. “I believe we had a mutually profitable arrangement.”

It’s not really surprising – it shouldn’t be – that instead of Sasuke, this time it’s Naruto who drawls, “Really?”

Minato makes a gesture of peace. “You wanted to exorcise – I presume you still want that? Good. We wanted demons exorcised. There was no conflict of interest there. And we provided the logistics and practicalities – housing, transport, a massive organisation.”

“Tch. To think I’d be reduced to allying myself with shifters.”

“You’re not,” Naruto points out, which unfortunately is true. He briefly brushes his cheek against the edge of Sasuke’s shoulder, one of those incredibly animal movements that strong shifters are wont to. “You were with me.”

Sasuke lifts an eyebrow. “You don’t want me looking after your pack?”

“I do,” Naruto says. “I’d love that. If you want that, that’d be – that’d be amazing. But it’d be new.”

Minato’s irritation melts away when Sasuke says, “I figured.” This, according to Kushina, is why he’s always gone wrong with Sasuke – trying to steer, to manipulate. Naruto on the other hand is being recklessly honest, and really, Naruto’s the only one who’s ever got through to Sasuke.

“Well,” Sasuke says, turning from Naruto at last. “It’s not like I mind exorcising.”

“That’s good to hear. Has there been a decision about the succession in Oto?”

“I’m working on Itachi,” Kakashi says.

It’s not actually a bad idea, for all Minato inwardly shudders. Itachi’s insane, but he would never lower himself to move against shifters, and certainly no fundamentalist would dare stand against God’s favourite son.

The conversation, halting as it is, is interrupted by Tsunade’s arrival. Naruto stiffens, his face closing down.
Tsunade gives him a quick once-over. “You must’ve realised I’d be called back quickly when the bond got sealed off.”

“Yeah,” Naruto agrees. “I’m not surprised.”

“Good. Then you also understand that I’ll need to examine the seal and its effects.”

“No,” Sasuke cuts in. “There’s nothing you could tell me about the seal, and you’re not touching it.”

“I am a doctor.”

“You’re a shifter,” Sasuke dismisses.


“He let you examine it?”

Sasuke looks at Kakashi in question, and Kakashi shrugs. “You didn’t trust me a lot. You see, I brought you here. For Naruto”

“I know,” Sasuke agrees. “I was there.”

“No, before. The day you were mated. I didn’t ask.”

Sasuke blinks. “That doesn’t make a lot of sense.”

Kakashi shrugs, very lightly the way you do when wary of ripping open a wound. “I had to do it. Well, I felt I didn’t have any other viable options. So asking would’ve been pointless.”

“If I stayed here, if I kept the bond – I must’ve been willing to come.”

“You weren’t necessarily very stable.”

Sasuke visibly reassesses his relationship with Kakashi, shutting down so many possibilities. He hasn’t moved but he might as well have taken a sharp step away, turned his back.

He’s always had that ability to cut people off, Minato thinks, to make them not matter. It’s only after they’ve broken through to him, touched under his skin, that they’re irreversibly real to him. And a shifter would have a particularly steep uphill battle, since they’re not really people to Sasuke in the first place. I’m a doctor met immediately by you’re a shifter, case closed.

“It seems a little strange,” Tsunade says dryly. “This is a white majority country. You must have encountered racism yourself.”

Being an exorcist will have insulated Sasuke from most of that, but it’s simply not possible to live life as a minority and never encounter prejudice or discrimination, and Sasuke’s very obviously Asian, in addition to being fairly obviously gay.

“Ethnic racism is baseless,” Sasuke says. “But exorcists have objectively been chosen by God, and are the one thing standing between humanity and total extermination. If white people were so genetically superior that they alone could keep me alive, it wouldn’t be prejudice anymore, it’d be fact that they were better.”

“And that would mean they were free to treat you as they please? You’d have no intrinsic value?”

“If they were genuinely superior, reasonably I couldn’t stop them treating me however they pleased.”
He tilts his head in that birdlike way, another muscle memory. “Ease up, I’m not threatening you.”
Naruto leans closer to him, diffusing but also challenging. “You chose me. I’ve exorcised.”

“Seriously? Show me.”

“I can’t anymore. Without the bond – it was always your power.”

“Naruto,” Tsunade says. “I really need to examine you. I think you understand that.”

Naruto gives a sullen shrug. “All right, all right.”

If Kabuto had still been alive, this might have turned out very differently.

But Kabuto’s gone, like Kimimarou’s gone. Both, as she understands, by Sasuke’s hand, one way or the other.

When asked, the shifters handed over Kabuto’s remains, the nova bomb he’d been turned into, presumably leery of being seen as in any way responsible for his demise. Mikoto has inspected the corpse. It took a long time, studying it from different angles, before any resemblance to Kabuto – or indeed, to a human being at all – surfaced under scrutiny.

She can’t decide if she’s surprised that Sasuke did this. He was never like that savage Sabaku boy, didn’t kill animals for the pleasure of killing, or people either, though he never hesitated when the need arose. Mikoto considers killing a waste of resources, which is a very different outlook from Sasuke’s, who finds most people useless.

In any event he was conceived in sin, was born the cross she has to bear, and there was always something twisted and wicked hiding behind his soft human features and normal behaviour. People used to point out his supposed similarity to Itachi and herself, but she’s always seen Orochimaru in him: his pallor is of a different nuance than Itachi’s, closer to Orochimaru’s corpse-white skin, his hair wilder and full of cowlicks, and his hands are shaped differently than Itachi’s, with Orochimaru’s ambidexterity.

She looks over Orochimaru’s bedroom, which she expects was in effect Sasuke’s bedroom as well.

“Mikoto-san,” Orochimaru wheezes. “Have you come to kill me?” His lips are gone, his teeth soot-stained and cracked with heat, but he still manages to sound amused.

“I came to see how you were.”

Perhaps he smiles. His face is too deformed to tell with any certainty.

“Please, inspect me at your leisure.” He makes an odd twitch, all that remains now of his graceful, grandiose gestures. “Shall I disrobe for your scrutiny?”

She lifts an eyebrow. “Are you able to?”

“Touché, Mikoto-san.” He smiles again – she decides it must be a smile – with every appearance of genuine pleasure. “In any case as I recall you were never overly fond of my undressed state.”

“Carnal pleasures are overrated.”

“What a sad epigraph for Fugaku. Such a failure as a husband, it almost rivals his failure as an
exorcist. Though I suppose nothing eclipses his failure as a father.”

“Fugaku did well at his task,” she says mildly. An organiser, a man who could make other men, stupid and arrogant men, listen and work towards common goals.

They underestimate those abilities, the legendary crusaders. But however strong Itachi or Hanabi or Sasuke may be, they can’t be everywhere, can’t run the world on their own. For a sustainable future, there is an acute need for cooperation, for utilising every individual. Someone has to feed the exorcists, someone has to house them, transport them, someone has to build weapons and train armies and maintain shields to keep people alive in between exorcisms. The humans have always understood this, and have proven themselves far more essential than people like her sons will ever acknowledge. Certainly they are to operate under exorcist rule, but humans and shifters both have roles to play: if the worm does not do its work, the earth will not be fertile, and the enormous oaks too will wither and die.

But yes, Fugaku was a weak exorcist, and no, he was not a man she ever desired. Orochimaru’s the only one who’s ever drawn sexual pleasure out of her, an unwelcome and unsettling experience she has never wished to revisit. Certainly Fugaku has been a safe partner in that regard.

But he gave her Itachi, which in the end is all that matters, or close enough that everything else can be overlooked.

Fugaku never understood that. He resented his own insufficiency, his inability to transcend the boundaries of his existence as a creature of earth next to the heavenly children. Itachi was one thing, in Itachi at least Fugaku could take pride, but the sight of Sasuke, sired by a sinner yet chosen by an archangel of the highest order, always burnt his eyes.

To the best of her knowledge, Fugaku’s distance never bothered Sasuke, whether because Sasuke dismissed Fugaku as unworthy of his interest or because Fugaku was never there with Itachi either, so his absence was expected, normal. In any event it was always her that Sasuke hungered for. Maybe that’s why he likes Ibiki’s granddaughter, maybe that’s why he’s rumoured to be fond of Kushina.

Sasuke gave her what she’d wanted from Itachi – he was a normal baby, tracked her with his eyes, yearned for her to love him. He reached for her, talked at her, felt for her, yes it was so easy with Sasuke, to evoke feelings: to make him angry and to soothe him, to make him happy and then to take that from him, she could do it by accident.

Itachi never loved her. Itachi looked through her from the start.

She’s sad to say she only truly realised this after Sasuke was born and did love her, unhesitant, unstinting, ferocious, if he’d been built for nothing else, but the contrast between them made it clear that Itachi would only ever tolerate her.

Worse, then Itachi saw Sasuke, and was enchanted.

*It is one thing*, Kakashi read once, sounding amused as he often did about the trashy books he adored, *to realise that he isn’t built for love, that affection doesn’t come naturally to him. It is another thing entirely to understand that he just doesn’t love you, and never will.*

She could’ve made Kakashi love her, she supposes, and in retrospect she probably should have. He too was normal that way, a child starving for adult attention. But she was very busy at the time, and could hardly stand even Sasuke’s clingy hands and relentless stares. Another stray… and one already soiled by his shifter association, his transparent adoration of Minato, though she’d been pleased that
Itachi made an exorcist friend at last, showed a care for anyone other than Sasuke.

In the event she lost all respect for Kakashi when he entered into his inexcusable affair with Sasuke.

“How clinical you are, Mikoto-san,” Orochimaru says. “Never a very passionate woman, as I recall.”

“How would you know? Our circumstances hardly lent themselves to passion.”

“Oh, how right you are. It was always Itachi I wanted.”

Of course it was. Orochimaru has what people refer to as Greek tastes, though as she recalls the ancient Greeks didn’t violate their boys quite that young. He’d hardly have wanted a woman, except as a way to assert power over her – but he certainly wanted her genes, the son she could bear him.

“Of course, Itachi’s quite the bore compared to Sasuke.” It shocks her that he says it with conviction, as well as greedy, lustful pride. “Ah, it’s fortunate that your religious delusions made you keep him, or I’d have had to lock you up. No prison is quite so airtight as one’s own mind, ne? And I suppose it would’ve meant war, if I’d kept you. Though it would have been worth it, to have Sasuke.”

“I’m sure he’ll come see you.”

“Oh, yes,” Orochimaru agrees. He seems happy, as if he doesn’t understand what that will mean for him.

“I’m considering what to do with your legacy.”

“It’s Sasuke’s now.”

“He’s laid no claims.”

“Why would he need to?” Orochimaru says mildly. “It was always meant for him.”

“You seem to be misunderstanding – dare I say underestimating – the current situation.”

“You seem to be misunderstanding – shall I say, catastrophically underestimating – our son. Of course, you always did.”

“Itachi casts a long shadow.”

Orochimaru snorts. “That’s what surprised me. Sasuke was the only tool that could ever let you control Itachi, and you never learnt to use it.”

They have worked together for many years, with very little unpleasantness. Orochimaru is a formidable enemy, but he operates within known rules, and an intelligent adversary is far easier to negotiate with than stupid allies. Still, of course, he can cut, and sharply.

Something of that thought must show in her face, and he’s one of the very few people who can read it. “Shall you kill me after all, then?”

“No at all. I’ll be certain to leave you alive for Sasuke.” She smiles her kindest smile, which Fugaku likes to point out isn’t very kind. “I’m not trained in torture.”

“And that way it’ll be his soul condemned, not yours?” He makes a wet, hissing sound. “It’s hard to believe you would regard him as your avenging angel.”

She smiles her widest smile, unearthing yet another expression she hasn’t worn in years. “Would it
be so strange?”

His laughter sounds like it tears things from his throat, strips burnt skin from his insides. “Ah, Mikoto-san, I chose well with you.”

She breathes out, feels light. “We’re finished with each other now. Though I believe Sasuke is not finished with you.”

“Karma’s a bitch?”

“That’s heresy.”

He laughs again, a laugh like he finds her lovely, the way stupid and shocking girls can be. “It would be a very silly god to care about that in view of everything else I’ve done.”

“So ka na.”

Still he looks at her as though he finds her charming. “I did rape you twelve times.”

“Is that how you see it?”

“You have a different – ah, you count the ones after I made you like it, too? Then I’m afraid I’ve quite lost count. Of course, with little Sasuke it was thousands of times.”

“He fought you.”

“Oh yes. He’s not a quitter, that one.”

“You never touched Itachi.”

It appears she has surprised him. “No, I kept my word to you. Who would want Itachi when they could have Sasuke? Itachi’s just an empty shell with hellfire underneath, but Sasuke… Oh, I see you find me depraved. Just look at Hatake, then, he could’ve had Itachi for the asking, but he only ever had eyes for our Sasuke.”

“I’ve long found Kakashi depraved,” she says, mild as milk.

Orochimaru looks at her with what she can only describe as appreciation. “At least he never spread his legs for a shifter, though I doubt it was for lack of trying on his part.” He makes a thoughtful face. “You know, your sacrifices for Itachi, the way you’d submit to me so I wouldn’t touch him – Sasuke made that same sacrifice, only for the Hokage’s bastard son.”

“Are you expecting to shock me?”

He chuckles, a dragging sound like snake scales over stone. “Never, Mikoto-san. Let me ask, what shall you do, now, with little Sasuke? Save him from himself?”

She tilts her head to the side, studying him for the last time. “Will you kill yourself before he comes for you? No, you couldn’t stand that. You want to see him more than you want to escape whatever torture he’ll inflict on you.”

“He’s wild at heart.”

“He’s a little barbarian and a sinner. But in this case, perhaps that’s for the best.”

She walks away from Orochimaru, with the knowledge that while he’s entirely wrong in his
valuation of Sasuke, he’s right that Sasuke’s not a quitter. Sasuke, then, will finish this. She can let him have that. It’s the only gift they’ll ever have from each other, Sasuke and she, the fact that Sasuke will kill his father.

He was a little berserker with Orochimaru, as she recalls. He’s not insane: she’d assumed he’d face the facts, submit to them. That’s not what happened, it was years of pure and senseless rage and nothing else until he started carving out a new existence for himself. She can remember Naruto saying, *You can break in a hoarse. You can’t break in a zebra.*

That one time Sasuke came home, a few months after he’d been handed over, it had annoyed her that Orochimaru had permitted it, spread his mess over her front step once more. But Sasuke exhibited no more interest in her than in the furniture, as by then she’d long since turned into background noise for him.

He banged on Itachi’s door until his hands bled and his voice had given out, and Itachi came out and told him he was dirt and he was sin, that he belonged with Orochimaru, and Sasuke’s legs wouldn’t carry him anymore. He sank to the floor and he sat there after Itachi had closed his door again. Sasuke was untouchable: the rest of them carried on around him, until Kabuto came to pick him up a few hours later.

Sasuke had been very still, had been silent the way you could drown in, but he erupted when Kabuto reached for him. He fought like something possessed, broke his own arm on Kabuto’s face, screamed and howled as Kabuto finally wrestled him into his arms. Sasuke was eight and a small for his age and Kabuto was a grown man, but that fight had been a near thing.

She’d had the carpet thrown away: thrown away the stains of Sasuke’s blood, as she’d always wished she could throw away the stain of Sasuke.

The only time for years that he was calm was when he was hospitalised, too drugged and restrained to be able to move at all, even his eyes swollen shut. Orochimaru used to sit on his bedside then, stroke his hair, his face. He was so gentle and so sweet with Sasuke, spoke his accented delighted Japanese as he explained to Sasuke that he would unfortunately have to keep beating him until Sasuke learnt to stop making him…but if that meant in the end they could sit together like this, perhaps it wasn’t so bad, hmm?

She understood from the teachers that Sasuke had grown silent, unreachable. Didn’t look at people, didn’t listen, cut himself off completely. And then quite suddenly he’d go off, having what they called episodes: screaming, kicking, tearing apart anything he could get his hands on. Himself, as a last resort.

It was never like that between her and Orochimaru. Mikoto is a rational person, and Orochimaru was, at the time, the strongest crusader in the world. There was very little to be done, and so her focus must be to move forward, to not let it touch her. For a time, this was possible.

If Itachi had been only a little older, the very idea of Orochimaru threatening him would have been laughable, but he was still shy of four when he caught Orochimaru’s eye and never understood that he was in danger. She did what had to be done to protect him, or rather had it done to her. The first time she fought back, but then after Orochimaru had made it clear what the alternative was, she stayed placid: submitted her body, kept her mind out of it the best she could. On a purely physical level, it was no worse than sleeping with Fugaku.

The problem was Sasuke.

Orochimaru had intercourse with her – to be frank, mounted and tried to breed her – sixty-three
times, spread out over about eleven months. This was something that could be moved on from, an unpleasant necessity like illness, or menstruation, or torture resilience training. The act took twenty minutes at most.

But Sasuke growing inside her was a non-stop process, an invasion that couldn’t be halted. Even when she slept, he continued to advance, right into the heartlands. She’d rather have had nine months of coerced intercourse than nine moths of that pregnancy, and there was no escape. This was for life. Her body would never quite feel like hers again.

Though it was an easy pregnancy. Even the birth – there’s no such thing as an easy birth, but it was quick. Unlike Itachi, who had lingered and resisted, Sasuke wanted out into the world.

Indeed, he wanted so much from the world, had such expectations. He tried to explore, and grow, and be loved as if he had a perfect right to it.

Of course, he learnt better.

He was taken care of, she kept him fed and clothed and trained, arranged for him to have all the education and medical care he could need. He learnt to stop talking to her, to stop reaching for her: so still under her touch, as if waiting for it to disappear, to quiet in her presence. Sometimes when Itachi had been away and Sasuke rushed out to meet him on his return, Sasuke’s voice would be raspy and strange, and she’d recall that he hadn’t been allowed to speak during Itachi’s absence.

Quite aside from her personal feelings for Sasuke, she could see he was a strong crusader, and would need to be honed to do God’s work. She could also see he was a little heretic. Not in the sense of Kakashi or Orochimaru, who quite simply do not believe, who have always known there is no god the same way they’ve known that water’s wet, that the night is dark – the same way Itachi and Mikoto have always known there is a god. She’s found Kakashi’s friendship with Itachi amusing, because Kakashi’s unable even to take religious belief seriously, to really believe that someone could truly, at the deepest level of their soul, have faith.

Sasuke just was never very interested in religion, and wouldn’t obey its rules whether there was a god or not.

So he wasn’t hers and he wasn’t God’s, and eventually the question of who turned away from whom became irrelevant: Itachi, instead, became the beloved god of Sasuke’s empty world.

She has never understood it, how Itachi could be drawn in by Sasuke’s love, but he was – arguably he even reciprocated it. He’d train Sasuke, touch him and feed him, listen to him and tell him stories. He was a harsh task master, his expectations should have been impossible to live up to, and indeed Sasuke didn’t always manage, but Itachi forgave him that. This meant that Sasuke could recite much of the bible by heart before he could spell his own name, that he learnt to kill before he learnt to talk, could exorcise on par with an adult before he could button his own jacket.

Mikoto could see it was abnormal, but Itachi preferred her to wash her hands of Sasuke, to let him keep Sasuke for his own. He even allowed – encouraged – Sasuke to sleep in with him.

She remembers mumbled voices, and her first, instantly repressed fear for Itachi’s sanity. Sasuke explaining some game he’d made up, some nonsense fantasy, and Itachi responding as though it was real, as though imaginary beings could speak…and how Sasuke grew still and frowned, curled under Itachi’s arm. Even Sasuke, then, understood what Itachi couldn’t, knew that it wasn’t real.

Mikoto had felt cold, because of course there’s a difference between an adult belief in God and thinking evil slithers through the world in the shape of talking snakes, of believing holy voices
whisper in your thoughts telling you to burn the world.

But Itachi has been chosen by God, singled out by Lucifael for his especial grace, and it’s not her place to question the divine plan.

She’d left them alone. In any event, Itachi would have permitted nothing else.

Fugaku suggested giving Sasuke away, sending him off to be fostered. It was one of his better ideas: it would’ve been better for them all, especially for Itachi.

It would’ve been a coward’s attempt to cheat their way out of a trial, of the rightful suffering of a sinner, but yes, it had been tempting.

But she couldn’t send him away. You cannot cut the sin out of your soul, and Sasuke in so many ways is everything impure about her taking external form, ripping free of her body to stare up at her with those relentless, hungry eyes. Sasuke always wanted things – people – that way, wanted them like he was starving and would devour them.

He doesn’t have that from her. Nor, she can recognise, from Orochimaru. It’s just his, this demand that the world give him what he desires, and the furious ferocity of that desire.

It reminds her of the shifter boy Sasuke’s currently letting himself to be defiled by: she’s seen it reflected in his eyes, that certainty, that desire like death. Even Fugaku has remarked on it, and claimed it’s no surprise Sasuke would allow the beast such liberties. Mikoto, in spite of Sasuke’s parental heritage and heretic leanings, had thought of better of him, had thought pride at least would keep him from shaming their name by whoring himself to a subhuman creature. Demon spawn, they used to be called, and modern biology has yet to prove the slur wrong. And what else is left for Sasuke to take pride in, but his birthright as an exorcist, his inherent and inarguable superiority to humans and shifters?

Sasuke’s always been stupid with his affections, has given his loyalty to people he shouldn’t and then not taken it back.

For a long, long time, up until she gave him up to Orochimaru, she could’ve won him back.

She never did and perhaps Orochimaru was right, perhaps that was a mistake, because Itachi too has been careless with his affections and unable to rescind them as he ought.

Mostly, she couldn’t send Sasuke away because naturally Orochimaru would have wanted him, and she didn’t want to give Orochimaru anything.

More importantly, Itachi would not have permitted Sasuke being sent away: would have gone with him, would have left her behind without hesitation to follow.

In the end, when she could no longer deny that Sasuke was corrupting even Itachi, she cut her losses. Better Orochimaru get what he wanted than that she lose Itachi, better she reveal the depths of her shame than let Itachi remain blind to Sasuke’s filthy nature.

She can still remember, in vivid and unpredictable flashes, the flutter of a child inside her. Itachi, and the breathless love that even years of his insanity and disregard has not managed to dampen. Sasuke, and the dark stain spreading through her, her body feeling ever since like a frozen, rotted corpse.

Outside Orochimaru’s compound the air smells of spring flowers and burnt flesh. She breathes in, breathes out, and walks away.
It didn’t use to be awkward to sit half-dressed in Tsunade’s examination room, in this heavy, chilly silence.

“Is this a permanent state of affairs?” Tsunade asks, in the impersonal voice she usually fails to use with her patients. “I understand if it is, I’d just like to know where we stand.”

“I don’t know,” Naruto erupts. He wants Sasuke so much – a Sasuke who knew Mum, who remembers about her death, who mocked and comforted Naruto after they found out who was behind it.

But that’s also a Sasuke who started to go nova and meant to go through with it, who tried to eradicate himself from the world…

Tsunade sighs. “Well, there’s not much I can do unless I can have a look at the seal. But there’s no way for you to function long-term in this state, so one way or another we have to break it open.”

It’s flattering in a way, that Itachi must have assumed Sasuke would immediately take steps to remove a seal that directly hurt Naruto.

But of course Naruto can’t live like this. Already Kyuubi’s tearing him apart, crazed and self-destructive with frustrated need, scratching at the inside of his skin.

When he returns to the conference room, immediately soothed by Sasuke’s smell, Sasuke turns from the computer, holding out his phone to Naruto. “Explain.”

The screen shows one of the photos Shizuo took: Naruto kneeling over Sasuke on the muddy ground, Sasuke’s face broken and bloody and rather deranged.

“We had a fight,” Naruto says. “I’d made a mistake. I – hurt you.”

Sasuke’s stare doesn’t get any less demanding.

“It was the first time you slept with me. Or, well, no, it wasn’t – we’d done it before, to make the bond, and when I burnt my hand off you had sex with me to boost the healing – but it was the first time you did it because you just wanted to. And you hadn’t been, you hadn’t liked being tied so tight to me, so I thought – I thought it was okay to leave after. I maybe wanted to, I don’t know, to show I was – that I didn’t always have to run after you. Anyway it was a shitty thing to do, and dumb. It’s fucking rude, and… well, you weren’t happy with me. So we ended up screaming at each other on the roof, and you wiped some people, and I pushed you off the roof, and – well, that happened.” He gestures at the photo, of a Sasuke starker and more strained than this Sasuke can probably imagine.

“Hn. There’s an interview, I don’t think it was published – I say I don’t want the bond undone.”

Naruto nods. “There were… pros and cons. You always liked the healing.” He shrugs, uncomfortable with everything he can’t do anymore, really realising only now how many liberties Sasuke actually allowed him. “You liked that I couldn’t lie to you.”

Sasuke sits back in his chair, eyes intense and locked on Naruto’s. “They’re wrong, you know – Kakashi and Hanabi. I wouldn’t have ruled Oto. I’d have burnt it to the ground.”


“I still could. Well, I don’t have the insider knowledge to completely exterminate it anymore, but I
could destroy it. The fanatics would no longer be a threat.”

“I’m more worried about the Council turning on us.”

“Che, the Council.”

“Itachi, then.”

Sasuke nods. “We’d probably end up with a critical shortage of exorcists as well. I’m not necessarily opposed to culling the human population by a third or so, but…”

“But I am. It’d be – they’d try to control exorcists, some countries at least. And then you’d turn the demons on them. Fuck,” Naruto groans. Kyuubi pounds in his head, a red-hot sledgehammer against his thoughts. It’s not the first time today that sharp spikes of orange energy break through his skin. It feels like that, like breaking, like they’re cutting through him.

And then it stops.

Sasuke’s fingers lift his chin. Sasuke’s close now, dangerously close. Naruto knows achingly well that so many things that would’ve been impossible before – walking casually behind Sasuke, hugging him without warning – are suddenly all right, but so many things that Sasuke used to accept – their level of violence, and sexual intimacy, and stalkerish craving – wouldn’t be permissible now.

“My old seal broke gradually,” Sasuke says. “That should work with this one too.”

Naruto understands that he must look crazy, starved and overwhelmed, but Sasuke doesn’t back down. Sasuke, really, has never backed down.

Kyuubi reaches for the seal, and Naruto can’t muster the will to stop him. Sasuke’s jumper tears open, revealing a thick slice of skin marred by the horrible seal locking Naruto out, and Kyuubi claws at it.

Sasuke hisses, and Kyuubi’s claw burns away – Naruto barely manages to pull his hand away before it incinerates, and even so he’s lacking two fingertips. With the bond sealed off, he won’t be able to heal them without cutting.

“Fuck you,” Sasuke says, pressing the torn edges of his jumper against the cut. It’s a stark, horrifying reminder that Sasuke doesn’t heal anymore, that Kyuubi might in fact have damaged him. Skin is one thing, pain and scarring Sasuke can deal with, but Kyuubi might have nicked an artery or a ligament… It seems not, though, Sasuke can move the arm.

“Don’t be such a whiner, bastard,” Naruto says. “But, um. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to cut you up like that. Can I – can I clean you up?”

“I’m fine.”

“It might help with the healing,” Naruto points out, trying not to wet his lips. God, he wants to lick. “It does for human mates.” Unlike Sasuke, a human mate can’t heal of their own volition, but their bonded shifter can choose to heal them. He might possibly be able to do that for Sasuke.

“If you cut me again, you’re losing a limb.”

Naruto nods, his jaw trembling loose, fangs erupting and he ducks forward quickly so Sasuke won’t see the saliva running down his chin. He’s so dizzy he has to grab for the armrest of Sasuke’s chair, moaning as he licks across the seal. It burns under his tongue, the skin of his lips crystallises into ash.
Sasuke tugs at his hair. “Off.” He has to actually pull Naruto off, Naruto can’t make himself sit back, but at least he manages to stop himself struggling. “Don’t say clean up when you mean lick.” Sasuke wipes excess saliva and leftover blood away with his hand, inspecting the cut by touch. “It’s not any better.”

“Right,” Naruto forces out. Words are a struggle.

“Che.” Sasuke appraises him. “Shit, you want me bad.”

“Yes,” Naruto grits out. The word tastes of blood and sooth, Kyuubi’s too desperate and messed up to heal his mouth.

Temari knocks on the doorframe. “Sasuke. Your mother’s here.”
Naruto said, *I wish he’d done it when he knew what he’d done. What it meant. You know?*

Kakashi had been able to respond with the truth, *He could do it because he didn’t know.*

Naruto had been talking about Orochimaru, but Kakashi’s reminded of the exchange now, accompanying Mikoto and Hiashi into the Sabaku stronghold. He finds some amusement in the thought that this is indeed turning into, as that shaggy shifter boy called it, exorcist HQ: the centre of power has shifted.

Mikoto moves through the shifters like a benevolent renaissance queen, kindly allowing her subjects to gaze upon her. Hiashi moves through them like a rather less benevolent renaissance king, baffled and disgusted to find himself faced with the riff-raff.

Out of the corner of his eye, Kakashi spots Naruto hanging off the Sabaku girl’s shoulder, flushed and unsteady as his friends hurry him out of sight. He won’t last much longer.

Rather confirming this, Sasuke enters the meeting room wearing Naruto’s garish and overlarge jumper, presumably to cover up bloodstains from working on the seal.

He greets Hiashi politely enough, and spares a flash of a smile for Kakashi. One of those expressions he used to have as a child, that strike you like lightning. He’s colder with Mikoto, and – fundamentally relaxed around her in a way he’s never been before. Presumably he will know for sure now that she’s his mother, but he will know it as information from a birth certificate and Google images, not in a way that matters to him.

“We don’t need an audience.”

Minato nods, and at his gesture the rest of the shifters file out. Minato himself remains, which seems to be an acceptable compromise.

“It’s time for you to come home,” Mikoto says. She’s immaculate as always, in a cream polo shirt that hides the collar of bruises from when Sasuke almost strangled her to death. If she’s been affected by her husband’s demise, it doesn’t show.

Kakashi had a similar thought seven years ago: that if she’d been affected by the loss, enslavement and torture of her youngest child, it didn’t show.

He’s honest enough to admit that this means nothing, that he can’t read her secrets on her face. He thinks, with no little dislike and no little admiration, that she’s got blood like liquid brimstone.

Sasuke smiles what Naruto calls his shark smile: half smirk, half sneer. “I’m comfortable where I am.”

“This isn’t a suitable environment.”

“That’s my call.”

“You’re a minor,” Mikoto starts, in the same mild, cutting voice she’s had for as long as Kakashi’s known her. He’s never once head her raise it, not even in battle. He has imagined it whispering dirty words to him, though that was a long time ago.
Sasuke tilts his head. “But you relinquished my guardianship to Orochimaru when I was eight.” He smirks again, that thin slash of predator teeth. “I believe he’s not in a fit state to make any decisions.”

There’s a bit of dirt under his nails and a spattering of pimples just under his ear that Kakashi would like to linger over and lick, enjoying the oily, salty taste that differs from the rest of Sasuke’s skin – obvious signs of stress and sloppiness and boyhood, which utterly fail to humanise him. With Sasuke always being compared to Itachi and then the seal, they’ve all underestimated him: Uriel’s a heavenly storm brewing inside him, lightning running in his veins.

“Some unfortunate events have occurred,” Mikoto says.

She’s making the same mistake Orochimaru did: thinking Sasuke will be easier to handle without his memories. In fact, Kakashi’s beginning to suspect, it’s quite the opposite.

“A crusader who’s attacked has every right to take whatever necessary action to defend themselves,” Sasuke says, reasonable and thoughtful as though they’re discussing exorcist law as a matter of interest.

“Indeed,” Hiashi says with relish.

Mikoto looks Sasuke square in the eye, to all appearances completely unintimidated. “Are you intending to kill me?”

“Of course not. That would be heresy.” The deepest insult of all: it would be heresy to kill her because and only because Sasuke doesn’t need to kill her in order to be safe from her.

Instead Sasuke lifts his hand, sketching an outline in the air. It looks like kanji at first, complicated swirls and slashes, but it’s something far older, and far more dangerous than that. The seal takes several minutes to finish, a glowing, aggressive design that Sasuke carries in his palm like a star plucked from heaven.

He takes a blade from his belt, one of the ones he nicked off Kakashi yesterday, and spears the seal on it.

Mikoto finally starts to stand when Sasuke stops in front of her, but it’s too late. It’s seven years to late.

Her head falls back, her face a white mask, as Sasuke carves the seal into her chest, just at the base of her throat.

“This is the seal Orochimaru bestowed on you?” Hiashi inquires with interest.

“A lesser version of it,” Sasuke says. “It can only have full effect on an unhatched power.”

Where Sasuke had nothing, outside of the self-defence release, Mikoto will at least have the magic of a lowly exorcist, of someone like Hinata or Ino. Sasuke, in her position, would have broken through it within a year. But Hanael isn’t Uriel, and Mikoto has never been reckless or desperate.

“Go,” Sasuke tells her, “and sin no more.”

This snide, elliptic reminder that she can’t even kill herself without suffering eternal condemnation is what Kakashi has traditionally thought of as Orochimaru’s cruelty, even when it’s been Sasuke exhibiting it. But that’s not as easy anymore – he has to either assume that Orochimaru has fundamentally warped Sasuke’s personality, on a deeper level than memory can affect, or he has to accept that on some level it was always Sasuke’s cruelty.
“Indeed,” Hiashi Hyuuga says. “Let’s go. There are certain matters we must attend to.”

In the corridor outside the meeting room, Sasuke disappears swiftly—the Sabaku girl leans out of a doorway, hissing at him to, *Come now, if you’re going to come at all.*

The second Mikoto and Hiashi are out the door, Minato touches Kakashi’s arm. “Itachi can unseal her, surely?”

“I doubt he will.”

“She’s his mother.”

Finally Kakashi has the impossible realisation: he’s over Minato. That’s such a stupid thing to say, and there’s nothing endearing about Minato having fits of naïveté anymore, only this dull irritation. Still, there’s history between them, and this doesn’t cost Kakashi anything: “She undertook aggressive action against a stronger crusader, and the seal won’t have any meaningful impact on her ability to exorcise. He won’t see any reason to interfere.”

“God damn it all.” This might have been cathartic for Sasuke, might have offered a certain poetic justice, but it’s bad news for the shifters, as Hiashi’s far less tolerant of what he calls inferior races than Mikoto.

“The realistic worst case scenario,” Kakashi says, “is Hiashi takes over the Council, and we don’t get Itachi to take responsibility for Oto, which means the fundies breaking out on their own. That’ll entail a lot of large-scale attacks, and when shifters retaliate, Hiashi will ally with the humans against you.”

“Does Sasuke understand that?”

“I don’t know.” Kakashi shrugs, a light and affected gesture very different from Sasuke’s sharp, masochistic shrugs. “He should be able to figure it out. But I can’t imagine that’d matter enough to him to change what he did.”

“Bloody Uchiha.”

And Minato’s just tired, just sick of all this, and Kakashi does understand, even sympathise, but it’s—it’s over. “Sasuke doesn’t actually owe you anything.”

Minato gives him an appraising look. “Neither do you. You never did.”

Easy to say now, of course, when Kakashi’s already paid his depts.

“Yui,” Minato says at last. “Did you want to do it?”

This, this calmness, is why Minato’s love can’t matter. A love that can be moved on from or forgiven, what’s the worth of that? It’s just a whisper on the wind, a transient pleasure with an aftertaste of poison, slipping like water from your grasping hands.

“It was just something I had to do.”

“I see,” Minato says, and maybe he does.

xxxxx

Naruto’s in that strange place where he’s perfectly aware of everything around him, but unable to connect. He sees the world in detail, but through this red filter, and he can’t seem to control where
he’s looking.

There’s something hard underneath him: he’s lying on a table. Correction, being held down on a table.

He’s sweating badly, and hurting. It’s the bad kind of hurt, the sort that Kyuubi can’t heal.

Then finally Temari throws open the door, and they’re safe now: Sasuke’s here. The smell of him calms Naruto momentarily, soothes the desperate strain. But it can’t halt the earthquake wrecking him, the tsunami wave of frustrated magic that tears through him.

“You need to unseal the bond,” Temari tells Sasuke. “He’s dying.”

Naruto makes this cracked sound that meant to be a laugh. He’s not going to die now. Not when he’s finally got Sasuke, and Sasuke’s finally okay, and – he tries to jack-knife up, but the hands holding him down won’t allow it, and he almost drowns in his own puke, gagging on boiling blood.

“I’m working on it,” Sasuke snaps.

Naruto believes him, if nothing else because Sasuke would never bother lying to a shifter. He’d have done it once, when he was sealed, but it will be a ludicrous idea to him now, like lying to a house pet. Naruto suddenly thinks maybe that’s what it was, that first night when Sasuke allowed Naruto to hug him – Naruto had interpreted it as Sasuke recognising that Naruto had a place in his life, but it might just have been Sasuke allowing Naruto’s exuberance the way he might’ve allowed a loyal guard dog to lick his face in greeting.

“Just let him bite,” Temari snaps. “You’re too slow.”

There’s a cold moment of palpable hesitation, but only a moment. Sasuke hoists himself up on the table, pulling the jumper away from his shoulder.

The seal glistens and taunts right in front of Naruto’s eyes, and the hands can’t hold him anymore. Naruto surges forward, snapping his jaws shut around Sasuke’s shoulder.

Sasuke hisses, sharp and loud, and claws at Naruto’s hair. Fire brims in his hand – he won’t be able to pull Naruto away, not without tearing his own body apart, but he can certainly burn him off.

Kakashi’s voice, incredibly far away: “Don’t smite him!”

That’s weird but also good, because there’s no way Naruto could survive that now, no way for him to heal himself if Uriel strikes out. He clings to Sasuke like a monstrous tick, tearing at the seal with his fangs and letting his mouth fill with Sasuke’s flesh and blood.

Sasuke’s clavicle snaps with a sharp, lovely sound.

And finally, finally, as Kyuubi’s fangs saw through Sasuke’s flesh, the seal starts to give. Awareness of Sasuke seeps back into Naruto: he’s been so far underwater that sunlight was just a hazy memory, and now he’s breaching the surface, filling his lungs with air.

He makes these gulping, sniffling noises of relief, nuzzling his face against Sasuke’s shoulder and throat.

Sasuke pushes at his forehead. “You’re done, get off.”

Naruto sits back reluctantly, fingers catching clumsily in Sasuke’s jumper. Sasuke’s clearly in a lot of
pain, his face white and his shoulder looking like nothing so much as minced meat, splintered bone poking out of torn skin. His hand twitches oddly, like he can’t quite control its movements.

Temari hands him a towel, and he presses it against the mess, whitening further. “You better fucking not have crippled me.”

“I should be able to help you now.” He leans forward, only one of those walls of holy light slams up and blocks him off. “I’m not going to hurt you! I – it hurts me too.” His shoulder tingles and burns with phantom pain, and he could cry with the relief of it, the wonderful return of shared sensation.

“Whether you mean to is one thing,” Sasuke hisses.

“Come on,” Naruto challenges. “How much worse could it get?”

Because Sasuke’s bleeding rather badly, the towel already soaked and leaking down his chest and stomach. His mouth purses. “Fine.”

The restraining light winks out, and Naruto inches forward carefully, carefully. “I wanna – I’m gonna lick. Okay? The energy will feel unclean to you, but you gotta let it through for it to work.”

“Just do it,” Sasuke snaps.

Kyuubi’s power covers Naruto’s tongue, thick and alive. He licks at the bleeding meat exposed, and under his touch the bleeding thins. The worst of the breaks start knitting up, and new skin grows. Once, he could’ve healed all of this instantly. Today the worst of it gradually fades.

Sasuke flexes his hand, apparently satisfied that he can move it again.

xxxxx

Afterwards, in the kitchen, with Naruto left behind in sullen sleep, Sasuke turns to Kakashi. “You told me not to smite him.”

“Yes,” Kakashi agrees. “I did.”

Sasuke lifts an eyebrow, half teasing, half annoyed. “You might have considered the why implied.”


Sasuke eyebrow climbs even higher. “You sound like I knew I was going to get amnesia.”

“Maa, in retrospect I think you just expected to die. You know, blaze of glory, murder/suicide with Itachi.”

“Hmm.” Sasuke’s eyes are distant, his fingers fiddling at his wounded shoulder.

Kakashi thinks how he can no longer read Sasuke, this new Sasuke, and then has to amend that thought: he hasn’t been able to read Sasuke for years. He gets it right sometimes, but fundamentally it’s like reading German novels, collecting familiar words from a mess of guesswork and getting parts catastrophically wrong, whole pages incomprehensible. “Did you mind?” he asks. “Did you want to smite him?”

“Not particularly.”

They’re standing here together, quite close and no dramatics, as if years of love and betrayal of that
love have never happened.

The Sabaku girl leans in through the doorway. “Another bloody exorcist for you.”

Neji, unlike Hanabi earlier, is visibly discomfited by the shifters. They’re both arrogant, both obviously consider themselves superior, but Hanabi’s so certain of her higher status, she has no fear of contamination or defilement.

Kakashi recalls her teasing Neji – she can be an enticing girl, with a blunt trauma kind of charm – about shifter pleasure slaves, which according to a history book Kakashi planned to nick off her at first opportunity had used to be quite the rage in certain parts of the world.

Neji’s response had been immediate and unhesitant: *Of course not. I don’t fuck animals.*

He had not been exaggerating. He had not been trying to insult anyone. Kakashi had never heard him sound so artless, or so honest.

He’d blushed furiously, as Hanabi threw back her head and laughed, but he hadn’t been able to take it back. They’d both looked at Kakashi – Neji with consternation and Hanabi with frank speculation. They couldn’t have been ignorant of the rumours about Kakashi and Minato, either of them. Kakashi had smiled lazily and winked at Hanabi, not disabusing them of the notion that he’d spent his childhood being deliciously defiled by the Hokage.

Naruto had been there too, but nobody had bothered looking at him. It occurs to Kakashi to wonder if Naruto remembers that exchange, looking at Sasuke with years of longing and Sasuke looking back with no memory of those years.

In the present Neji’s embarrassingly careful not to look directly at Sasuke. “I’m here with a mission,” he says, procuring one of the atavistic scrolls some of the elders fancy.

Kakashi breaks its seal, keeping one eye on Neji’s hungry staring just at the edge of Sasuke: at his shoulders, his feet, the tips of his hair. Sasuke’s finally catching on and directing a frown at him.

“Well, what do you know,” Kakashi drawls. “How about it, Sasuke, do you feel like exorcising some demons with me?”

“I suppose.”

“Then I suppose we’d better leave, we’ve got some distance to cover.”

“Then I’d rather not.” He doesn’t say it in front of Neji, but the tilt to his shoulder, the way his gaze slips towards the doorway, point to Naruto.

“It’s a Council order,” Kakashi says. “Of course you’re free to defy it if you like, but I’m not sure this is the hill you want to die on.”

“Jesus.” Sasuke sighs, impatient. “I thought they knew better by now.”

Kakashi shrugs. “I imagine Hiashi’s testing his wings. There’ll be conflict sooner or later, but I don’t know that this is the time.”

“Fine. Let’s do it.”

Sasuke marches out of the room. Kakashi pauses in the doorway, looking back at Neji. “Are you coming as well?”
“I’ve been assigned a different mission.”

“Ah. Too bad.” Kakashi kind of means that, because Neji’s crush on Sasuke has always been premium entertainment. He kind of doesn’t, because it can’t compare to Sasuke himself.

Unsurprisingly, he finds Sasuke back in the room where they left Naruto.

Sasuke sends him a bad-tempered look, as though Kakashi’s accusing him of something. “I didn’t let him massacre my shoulder just to leave him to die now.”

“He should be all right.”

“I doubt it.”

Naruto’s oddly pale under a violent flush, and tossing and turning like a feverish toddler. Sasuke rests his fingers on Naruto’s forehead, and Naruto calms immediately, his skin regaining healthy colour as he turns his head into Sasuke’s touch.

“Naruto,” Sasuke says, in a sharp but rather warmer voice than Kakashi would have expected. “Wake up, idiot.”

Naruto obeys with a grumble, eyes slitting open even as he sleepily nuzzles into Sasuke’s hand. The smile he directs at Sasuke is blinding.

“We’re going for a cleansing,” Sasuke says. “You want to come?”

“Like you need to ask.” Naruto sits up yawning, orange energy spilling over his arms and straining towards Sasuke.

xxxxx

All the way to the exorcism, as Kakashi drives, Naruto can’t stop talking. He’s always had so much to say to Sasuke, and there’s always been so much boneheaded, blinding conviction in him. He gestures; he laughs; he insults and argues and teases, so many expressions Sasuke won’t remembering ever seeing before but responds to as if he has, as if he knows that Naruto knows him.

It was no use, Kakashi could tell Itachi. Sealing off the bond, it doesn’t change anything. Sasuke’s still in love with Naruto, you can’t change that.

He’d say it, except he promised Sasuke to look after Naruto – the one thing Sasuke’s ever asked him for, this one thing that Kakashi will give him – and it wouldn’t be in the spirit of that promise to provoke Itachi into killing Naruto.

“Blasphemy,” Sasuke says from the backseat.

“No,” Naruto argues; smiling, convinced. “If God is as vast as that, he is above blasphemy; if he is as little as that, he is beneath it.” These will be Sasuke’s words, quoted back at Sasuke: Naruto won’t associate them with the original writer, but with grade school Sasuke.

In the rear-view mirror, Kakashi watches Sasuke watch Naruto, and for possibly the first time he thinks that Itachi’s … stupid, hampered by his extreme holiness. Itachi won’t be able to admit to himself on any level that taking Sasuke’s memory had anything to do with erasing Naruto – as Kakashi recalls, Itachi isn’t even admitting to deliberately having robbed Sasuke of the majority of his trauma. But a true genius is incapable of making errors of that magnitude, and Itachi’s the greatest genius in all the long history of mankind: both more and less than human.
And he was always jealous of Sasuke’s affections. Told a sullen kindergarten Sasuke to get along with Kakashi, started out finding the Kakashi-niisan stitch cute – until Sasuke actually did start getting along with Kakashi, developed a relationship with him independent of Itachi. Then, suddenly, Itachi took a sharp step back.

It’s a disgrace, Mikoto told Itachi, shortly before Sasuke was handed over to Orochimaru. One would think you love him more than you love God. And he doesn’t even reciprocate, does he? You’re throwing away all your gifts, all the grace bestowed upon you, throwing away your soul, for a sinful boy who’d choose a shifter over you.

This was in response to a silly childhood incident. Itachi had said he didn’t have time to go with Sasuke to – Kakashi can’t even remember what it was, some childish activity or other. Sasuke hadn’t been happy about it, but he hadn’t been unhappy either: it was expected. Then at the last minute Itachi had rescheduled and offered this information to Sasuke as a treat. Sasuke had shrugged up at him in surprise, I already made plans with Naruto.

He’d had the sense to leave quickly afterwards, even back then, to make sure Naruto wasn’t exposed to Itachi.

Sasuke’s always been possessive of the people he likes, and Naruto’s certainly no exception. They were both children of very, very important parents, so incidents were few and far between, but they did occur – and as Naruto stepped between Sasuke and rowdy shifters, so Sasuke always stepped between Naruto and over-zealous exorcists. For a long, long time, the only way Orochimaru could make Sasuke act like he wanted it was by threatening Naruto instead of Sasuke himself…

Even Itachi, it seems, can’t change this. Trying to keep Sasuke from Naruto has always been like trying to hold back the sea.

“Hn,” Sasuke mutters in the present. He slouches down in his seat, eyelids hanging low and heavy.

Naruto gives him a besotted smile sharp with Kyuubi’s teeth, watching Sasuke fall asleep. He takes Sasuke’s hand and holds it in his own, stroking it with fingers and energy. Sasuke’s eyes move under his lids, restless with dreaming, and his hand twitches in Naruto’s, but he doesn’t wake until Kakashi drops Naruto off at their accommodation.

“I could – ”

“No,” Kakashi tells him. “You’ll only hurt yourself and get in the way. Go wait in your room like a good little boy.”

Naruto pouts, but doesn’t run after the car when Sasuke slams the door shut in his face and Kakashi drives off. He just stares after them, and – Sasuke’s staring back, Kakashi notices.

“Ah, young love.”

Sasuke snorts, undoing his seat belt and climbing into the front seat. “What’s mine stays mine.”

“I doubt very much that Naruto will argue with you on that account.”

Sasuke just smirks, this incredibly young and smug expression that he probably imagines is secretive. Kakashi resists the urge to flick his nose, because he lost that right a long time ago, and parks the car. “Well then. Let’s get to it.”

Sasuke’s smirk broadens, sharpens – it reminds Kakashi acutely of Kyuubi, and it occurs to him to
consider how open the bond really is now, after Kyuubi bit through the seal. Naruto’s too antsy, too undone, for Kakashi to believe that he can really feel Sasuke, beyond a general awareness of him. But Sasuke… Kakashi can’t know for certain, but the bond may well be pulling at Sasuke, on a level too instinctual to be noticed, anymore than one notices one’s own heartbeat.

He leans on the car, watching Sasuke exorcise. There’s no need for Gabriel’s interference, and Sasuke takes such visible, vicious joy in letting Uriel emerge and sing his war songs. Kakashi can remember that, from back when being a crusader, being Gabriel’s chosen, was his whole and entire justification for existing in the world. When he had a calling to live for, and nothing else. Before he discovered that that wasn’t enough, that if the sole purpose of his life was being Gabriel’s, then his life was empty, and exorcising became a job like any other.

He doesn’t move as he discovers Itachi, walking calmly towards them up the hill.

He just say, “Sasuke”, and Sasuke turns around. Kakashi watches him watch Itachi’s approach, reading neither love nor hatred in Sasuke’s watchful, fearless face.

The last of the darkness fades at Itachi’s approach: the heavenly light Lucifael always exudes, automatically and unconsciously, is stronger than the full-force attack of many a weak exorcist.

“I would speak to you,” Itachi tells Sasuke.

“So speak,” Sasuke says.

As usual, they’re standing within touching distance. Unusually, this time Sasuke’s the one who nevertheless appears untouchable.

Kakashi takes the hint and sits in the car, offering them a semblance of privacy.

Itachi seems thoughtful but somewhat distracted, until he puts his hand on Sasuke’s shoulder, right over the seal he placed there. “You have been interfering with this.”

“You have no business putting seals on me.”

Itachi lifts an eyebrow. “You sealed Mother.”

“She tried to give me away to Orochimaru. She had it coming.”

“Ah.” Itachi agrees. He moves his hand away from Sasuke’s mangled shoulder, touches his face. “You’re not wrong.”

Sasuke stares at him, unmoved. “Don’t touch me. Did you know Mother meant to hand me over to Orochimaru?”

“She told me afterwards.”

Sasuke tilts his head back, away from Itachi’s lingering fingers. The glint of teeth between his lips suggests he could bite. “And did you come after me?”

“Did I need to? Have you not proven your worth by overpowering Orochimaru?”

Sasuke’s mouth thins. He repeats, “You have no business putting seals on me.”

“Perhaps I am testing you,” Itachi says, “as God has used you to test me. The bond is heresy, but I have cleansed you of its taint. You may redeem yourself now, you may choose better, choose to be God’s. And if you should fall now, with no ties and no memories, your fall will be conclusive. It will
be inherent, it will mean you were born to fall.”

“God alone may judge me,” Sasuke snaps.

In different circumstances, Kakashi would be amused to see Itachi looking at Sasuke the same way Naruto looks at Sasuke.

“Do you love God best?” Itachi inquires. “Is there anyone on this earth you would choose over him?”

Kakashi wonders if he could attack Itachi by slamming open the car door, or if it would incinerate on contact.

But Sasuke doesn’t need help. “Does my calling come first? Yes. Is there anyone on this earth I would choose over Uriel? No. Nobody.”

No one could suspect him of lying.

Itachi kisses his own fingertip and then presses it to Sasuke’s face. Kakashi remembers this: forehead, mouth, cheekbone, cheekbone, the sign of the cross painted in skin and saliva over Sasuke’s face. Only in Kakashi’s memory Sasuke welcomed it.

Itachi kisses his forehead, lifts his chin and lingers over his mouth, and Sasuke pushes him away. “No.” He rubs at his mouth, roughly, until the chapped skin gives and bleeds a little. “I want none of that.”

Itachi has never looked more besotted, more passionately or delusionally entranced.

Kakashi has never been gladder to see a text from the Council. He leans out of the car door. “Itachi, aren’t you on your way to handle those devils over in Glerdone? They’re expecting you.”

Itachi tilts his head the way he does when he’s hearing voices, but eventually he nods. After he’s turned his back, a long lingering stare later, Sasuke’s quick to climb into the car, his mouth pursed furiously. In different circumstances, Kakashi would enjoy telling him it looks like a pout.

“Let’s go.”

“Itachi’s touched,” Kakashi remarks.

Sasuke snorts, a sound like spitting. “He wishes I’d touch him.”

“I meant –”

“I know what you meant. Fuck it. Just drive.”

Kakashi turns on the radio and concludes that Itachi’s still searching futilely for a way to deal with Sasuke, which is unlikely to end well for anyone involved. He recalls talking to Shikamaru, years ago now, about Ino’s self-starvation, and thinks he can perhaps liken Itachi’s feelings for Sasuke to an eating disorder, which as far as he’s ever been able to understand has less to do with beauty ideals and more to do with a compulsive desire for control and purity based on self-hatred. Ino described constantly craving food, obsessing over it, being so starved she could only feel good, feel human, when she ate – but hating herself when she did, it meant she was a failure and weak. She had long stretches of time when she simply didn’t eat, and felt she finally didn’t have to be ashamed of herself anymore. Then, quite suddenly and for no particular reason, she’d break and stuff her face, uncontrollably, and in the moment it’d be the best she’d ever felt but afterwards she hated herself
more than ever, she was pathetic, disgusting, all unclean flesh. Sometimes she’d tell herself she could handle the whole thing rationally and normally, that she could have whatever foodstuffs at home without binging, could eat normal-sized portions and it wouldn’t be a big deal – but always it took so little, maybe just someone glancing at her plate, and she’d hate herself again and she had to get rid of the food.

All in all, Kakashi imagines that might not be dissimilar to how Itachi feels about Sasuke: he has long stretches of time when he has nothing to do with Sasuke, and presumably tells himself he’s finally transcended this last human weakness. Then he breaks and gorges himself on Sasuke’s presence, and subsequently hates himself even more, and projects that on Sasuke. Again and again he’ll have told himself things can be normal, they can be normal, Sasuke could be in his life and Itachi wouldn’t obsess, he wouldn’t sin. But the desire to sin would be there, under his skin, and the opportunity to indulge must be removed, it must, or it would cost his soul…

It doesn’t make a lot of sense to Kakashi, but then Itachi doesn’t make a lot of sense, and for all Itachi’s ascetic tendencies he’s melodramatic at heart.

xxxxx

Naruto feels the exorcism less this time, and yet is hurt worse by it. Once – two days ago! – Uriel could’ve run through his veins too, burning but marginally safe. Now he only feels pain, something alien tearing at him.

But it wasn’t a huge infestation. For two crusaders, it was quickly dealt with: indeed, Naruto can’t figure out why the Council bothered sending them, except Google finally tells him Ibiki Morino has family in the area. Hiashi will be keen to keep up his good relations to Morino, after his…coup, or whatever you should call it.

Naruto shifts, holding his breath as the movement feels like his intestines might spill out through his stomach.

Hiashi’s coup, which was made possible by Sasuke dealing with his mother.

Kabuto tortured far beyond any personhood, Orochimaru dying a slow and painful death, Fugaku dying a very different but equally slow and equally painful death, Mikoto sealed and so locked into a life of humiliation and suffering that can only end if she condemns her soul… Cruelty comes naturally to Sasuke, he takes revenge like he was born to it. Naruto thinks how Sasuke will be able to observe his parents’ torment for years, without having to expend any further energy on it himself, and there’s no need for secrecy or excuses when everything he’s done is quite legal.

He rolls over on the couch he’s lying on, fingers scratching and pressing against the seal. He’s alone in their quarters, though since the exorcist magic has faded by now it shouldn’t be long until Sasuke and Kakashi return.

The people who presently enter the room, though, are human.

Naruto drags himself into a sitting position, rubbing the cooling pain sweat from his hands. “Hi?”

Human leaders, who introduce themselves and tell him the situation in Rain County has erupted again. Naruto sighs, disappointed but unsurprised: Tsunade can’t control Gaara, who’ll have regarded Stonehall as less of an atrocity and more of an inspiration.

Inevitably, the horse trading starts. The humans seem to believe this is the perfect opportunity to revisit some agreements, and apparently prefer negotiating with Naruto over approaching Dad.
Naruto presses a hand to his stomach, pushing back against the last bright jolt from the seal. He thinks of Kakashi, of Tsunade, of Dad’s face at Mum’s funeral. He’s tired of compromise, of overlooking what can’t be forgiven.

And these people, as Sasuke keeps reminding him, are only human. They’re easy to dominate, now that Naruto’s prepared to do it.

“But you see,” he breaks in, “I’m done.”

They go quiet.

Part of him has always known that he can do this. Make people shut up, make people obey.

He hasn’t wanted to.

He still doesn’t think it’s ideal, but he’s done with looking the other way, with conciliatory, with sacrificing and bending their necks for a hypothetical common good that never materialises.

“Gaara’s establishing shifter rule in Rain? That’s great.” He lifts a hand, still greasy with pain sweat and his own blood, keeping them quiet. “You haven’t done so well ruling us. Let’s see if we can do better. I’ll even let you have voting rights, when we’re ready for elections.”
More than one of the human spokespeople are actually shuddering away from Naruto, exhibiting the submissive terror or any prey, when Sasuke opens the door behind them.

God, he smells so good. Kyuubi somersaults through Naruto’s abdomen.

He smirks at Naruto, quite brightly, almost a grin. The humans hold no interest for him.

“Are you in agreement with this?” one of them demands, and starts giving a fairly garbled explanation of Naruto’s previous input.

Kakashi looks increasingly tired and haughty; Sasuke looks increasingly amused. His haughtiness can’t really be improved on.

“If the only way the humans can accept me is when I make myself smaller, if I’m leashed and muzzled, then I’m done,” Naruto says, and again the humans fall silent. “It’s time to stand up. If you want to cooperate, that’s fine. But if you don’t, that’s also fine.”

“BEAST,” one of them starts.

“It’s war now,” Naruto says, grinning Kyuubi’s grin at him. The smell of their fear elongates Kyuubi’s fangs. “There’s nothing holding me back from exterminating them anymore.”

Again the humans turn to the exorcists. Kakashi seems prepared to speak, to smooth things over, but it’s Sasuke who says, “Fair enough.”

“E-excuse me?”

“Shifters have all the characteristics of an excellent servant race. They’re clearly superior to humans in that regard.”

“That’s not the view of the Council,” Kakashi drawls.


“Let’s talk this through,” Kakashi sighs. It’s the kind of sigh that Naruto recognises from Tsunade, the kind that means: I need a drink. “This way.” He herds the agitated humans out, and Sasuke snorts, coming to kneel in front of Naruto.

“How did you hold up?”

God, he’s close now, steadying himself with one hand on Naruto’s knee. “Fine,” Naruto says, and the word’s this embarrassing hoarse growl, his throat rasping dry and his mouth full of saliva.

“You’ve got blood on your fingers,” Sasuke points out. “I’m assuming you weren’t actually ripping out any human throats before we got here.”

Naruto manages a laugh, and this too is hoarse and inhuman, really just a sound of desire. “Bled a little. It’s fine, it’s already healed.”

Sasuke lifts an eyebrow, and for a long breathless moment Naruto dares to hope he’ll lean forward and lift Naruto’s shirt, too. Unfortunately he gets to his feet, moving towards the kitchen area to rummage through the fridge. It feels a little like he takes Naruto’s intestines with him, like he’s ripped
them out by turning away.

“There should be ramen,” Naruto says.

Sasuke scrunches up his nose. “That’s insulting.”

“That’s awesome. Could you maybe put some on for me?”


Naruto remains on the couch, partly because his stomach still hurts and tingles, partly because Kyuubi would use any movement as an excuse to throw himself at Sasuke. He needs to call Dad or Kushina anyway, explain where he is and what he’s said to those humans.

Dad won’t agree with him, so calling Kushina would be the coward’s way out. It turns out, though, that she’s the one answering Dad’s phone, which means he can wander around the flat slurping up ramen and talking to her and ogling Sasuke in relative peace.

“I’m very, very sorry about your mother,” Kushina tells him, and he rubs at his eyes until the tears stop burning and believes her. Knows that she means: I’m not sorry she’s dead, but I’m so sorry how it happened.

By the time he hangs up he’s wandered into one of the empty offices, and looking out through the half-open doorway sees Sasuke still in the kitchen with Kakashi. Whatever they had, it smells disgusting – Sasuke’s typical boring old-man food, and Kakashi’s frightening culinary experiments.

As far as Naruto can tell, they’re flirting outrageously.

The world goes briefly black around him, and it comes to him only gradually that it’s because he’s squeezed his eyes shut so he won’t have to look through the blood red filter of Kyuubi’s deranged desire to slay and mate. He’s very tired, and everything hurts, and he – goes away without saying anything, collapsing on the double bed in the closest bedroom.

It’s not like he didn’t know Sasuke didn’t choose him.

It’s not like that makes it hurt less.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

xxxxx

He’s half asleep when Sasuke enters, shooting into a sitting position and blinking desperately against the light from the bedside lamp as Sasuke settles on the bed. Sasuke’s eyebrow and the corner of his mouth quirk up.

Naruto stares at him in mute appeal, mute demand.

Sasuke makes a gesture towards his stomach. “You don’t look great.”

“I told you, I’m fine.” This time Naruto lifts his shirt, exposing the design burnt into his flesh and deeper, into his soul. The lines of it, which glow when Sasuke exorcises, have faded now, just white scratches against tan skin. The bleeding has long since stopped. Naruto can still smell a hint of scorched flesh, but Sasuke’s human nose won’t catch that.

Sasuke stares into his eyes for a long moment, then pokes him in the stomach. The seal heats briefly under his finger, but Naruto hardly notices because all of him heats up.
Distracted, a little desperate, he hears himself burp.

Sasuke makes a face as though caught between amusement and disgust. The smell of regurgitated beef flavouring fills the air.

After a horrible, red-faced second Naruto laughs, rubbing at the back of his head before reaching for one of the complementary mints left on the bedside table.

“I figured you’d be vegan,” Sasuke remarks.

“Not like there’s any beef in beef flavoured ramen,” Naruto points out. Sasuke assumes things about him – Sasuke thinks about him, Sasuke cares enough to draw conclusions about him…!

Sasuke snorts, deciding on amusement. “Fair point.”

Naruto curls up, towards Sasuke. “Why would you think I’m all anti-meat?”

Sasuke shrugs. “Seems like you. Feeling sorry for animals, wanting to save the environment, all that.”

“I was,” Naruto discloses, “for, um, a week maybe? But I had to eat all these beans and shit instead, and they made me fart like crazy, like constantly. Also Kyuubi hates not getting meat. I’ve got more important stuff to fight with him about.”

Sasuke lifts an eyebrow, pulling up a pillow and making himself comfortable. “Like if you’re going to jump me?”

“Are you,” Naruto swallows, licks his lips. “Are you flirting with me?”

“If you have to ask, then no.”

Naruto makes a flailing gesture at the cruel unfairness of this, not quite coincidentally edging closer to Sasuke. “I thought,” he bites his lip, looks up at Sasuke almost shyly, legs pressed to his chest so his erection won’t be too obvious. “I thought maybe you fancied Kakashi.”

It’s so strange to be able to say this, without Sasuke getting upset in the least. “In different circumstances, I might have.” His face shifts, looks suddenly more like the old Sasuke. “But I’m with you, aren’t I?”

“Yes.” Naruto almost can’t get the word out, he means it too much for his conviction to fit into the single syllable. “Yes. You’re with me.”

Kyuubi’s tail curls quickly around Sasuke’s wrist, but gently this time, or as gently as Kyuubi’s capable of. It seeps into his skin, inside his arm, and tickles against Uriel’s light.

He can fucking see Sasuke’s pupils expand.

Naruto reaches for him, letting his fingers brush lightly, clumsily against the edge of Sasuke’s jaw. Kyuubi roars in his ears, but Naruto ruthlessly kicks him into the cage.

He stops.

It would take so little. He could tilt his head, lean an inch closer. There’s every indication that Sasuke would let him, Sasuke’s whole face a challenge waiting to be met.

Which makes no sense, because Sasuke’s never been one to get close to people lightly, for all he’s a
teenager and no longer has any sexual trauma holding him back…

Sasuke’s mouth quirks again, not quite a smirk, not quite a sneer. “Is this one of these things were you only want it if I do it for the right reasons? Because then you don’t really want it at all.”

Naruto all but growls. “Oh, I fucking want it. But I don’t –”

“If you really want something,” Sasuke tells him, “then you want it no matter what. There’s nothing could keep you from it.”

“What have you ever really wanted?” Because what Sasuke says is true, cuttlingly true, Sasuke might be talking about Naruto’s bond craving as easily as about his own quest for his magic, but this Sasuke has only existed a few days. He doesn’t remember, surely he doesn’t…

“Power. Freedom. Revenge.”

“Sasuke!”

Sasuke’s mouth forms a strange, rather sour shape. “Itachi’s not as good as he thinks he is. I remember things when I dream. When I – I remember some things.”

Naruto’s mouth quivers, he’s not sure if it’s about to grin or bawl. He cups his hand around the back of Sasuke’s head, fingers tangling in his hair, and presses his mouth to Sasuke’s, sliding his tongue between Sasuke’s parted lips. Sasuke’s teeth rasp against his tongue, a long uncertain moment, until Sasuke angles his head, deepening the kiss.

Naruto groans in relief and desire, straddling Sasuke’s thighs and winding his arms around him. Finally, finally, back where he belongs.

Sasuke’s hands settle on his sides, just above his hips.

Naruto tugs at his hair, making Sasuke tilt his head back and give Naruto room to suck his throat. His tails feather over Sasuke’s arms, teasing along his legs, and Sasuke’s flesh heats quickly under his touch.

He snorts at Sasuke, trying to get air and repress the insane urge to insist how he’s wanted this, how he’s needed this, lived for this, since he was five, how there could never be anyone else. “Is this really something you should be doing with a member of the servant race?”

Sasuke smirks at him, stroking up his thighs. “That just means it doesn’t count.”

For a fleeting, horrible second Naruto wonders if Sasuke might actually see it that way. Like Sasuke’s the white man and Naruto’s some black woman in a colonised country, there to be used and discarded. Someone who doesn’t count, weightless in Sasuke’s world.

Naruto abruptly tugs at him, and with the bond so diminished Sasuke’s almost as weak as a human. It doesn’t even take a second to have him spread out on his back, Naruto kneeling between his legs. “That’s only if you do the fucking, isn’t it?” He grins a grin midway between teasing and ugly. “What if you get all sullied…”

Sasuke smirks back at him rather patiently. “I’ve been chosen for elevation by the Lord God. Nothing in this world can sully me.” His face hardens. “Anyway this is my body, it’s mine to do with what I wish. And you’re mine too, to do whatever I want with. Aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Naruto mumbles. “God, Sasuke…”
He makes short work of Sasuke’s shirt, ripping it off like the worst kind of shifter cliché, rubbing his face all over Sasuke’s torso. He’s too caught up for the handprint over Sasuke’s heart to give him more than a momentary pause.

Sasuke gives him a breathy sound not entirely different from a laugh, and it’s all a little bit like a heart attack. Then Sasuke shifts, locking his legs around Naruto’s hips and using the leverage to get Naruto where he wants him. His hand sinks into Naruto’s sweatpants, curling around his dick.

Naruto’s movements, never smooth, turn into more of a rutting. Sasuke grins up at him, flushed and breathing rather hard. He spits in his other hand and pushes that one too into Naruto’s trousers, leaning up to kiss along Naruto’s jaw, under his ear.

Naruto comes embarrassingly quickly, which is nothing new.

Sasuke smirks up at him, freeing one hand and giving it a thoughtful lick. Naruto groans, desperately aroused despite just having climaxed, and skids down the bed, tugging down Sasuke’s jeans. This Sasuke, so much the same and yet clearly more trusting – or perhaps just more arrogant – doesn’t protest Naruto opening his mouth around him. His fingers dig into the mattress, his hips shifting impatiently as Naruto sucks. No finesse, no technique, just this alacrity, this ardour.

He leans back just before Sasuke comes, letting Sasuke’s ejaculation hit his face. He licks his lips, catching droplets.

Sasuke gives him an incredibly weird face. Not displeased, though. “You’re crazy.”

“I like being marked,” Naruto mumbles, falling down to lie with his face pressed to Sasuke’s shoulder. “I’m yours.”

“How very humble.”

Naruto shrugs, letting his hand creep over Sasuke’s stomach, until he’s embracing him. “You’re mine, too. It equals out.”

“You’re not coming on my face, if that’s what you’re asking.”

He laughs a little, unbearably fond. There’s so much lost, so much of their life just wiped away, and yet so much regained, so much that they could never have had any other way. “I know.”

Sasuke sits up, refastening his jeans and cleaning his hands on his ruined shirt. When he stands, Naruto clings to his belt loop, still sprawled across the bed. “Don’t leave me.” He tries to say it playfully.

He remembers, with startling and awful clarity, a turning point when he was twelve. It was a few months after he’d been sent to boarding school, and he’d tried to return a hundred times already. This night was different.

He’d spoken to Sasuke, and something had been wrong. There hadn’t been any bruises on him, or no more than usual, but for the first time Sasuke had sounded beaten. In retrospect, Naruto connects it with the jenga evening when Sasuke first invited Orochimaru’s touch, when Sasuke’s world was finally so empty that he’d look to even Orochimaru to fill it.

So Naruto had to get back.

Obviously Dad had beefed up the school’s security, and every other time he’d tried to escape, Naruto had been caught.
Correction: had let himself be caught. The alternative had been killing the guards, people who were just doing their job, loyal shifters, some of whom he’d known his whole life. He wasn’t strong enough to escape them without doing them permanent damage, and always before that had stopped him, he’d screamed and fought but these had been a child’s tantrums. Ultimately, he’d let himself be returned to the dorm, to spend another night trying to find a better way, a plan that didn’t hinge on sacrificing someone.

But the balance had shifted. Sasuke couldn’t wait.

The guards, of course, were under orders not to hurt Naruto. They could rough him up, they could restrain him and sedate him, but they weren’t allowed to cause him serious injury.

Naruto killed them all. He begged them to stop coming after him, to let him leave them alive, but they wouldn’t, and so they died.

He sliced open their stomachs, pulled out long sticky ropes of intestine. He twisted their heads off. He ran them over with their own car.

Six of them died, and he almost, almost made it to Sasuke, before Asuma grabbed him by the scruff of his neck, and Naruto was sedated before his feet even left the floor. He was so close he could see Orochimaru’s building, so close he could smell Sasuke – people always told him this was impossible, but Naruto was always sure he could, had been from the start – and it was all in vain.

He tried, afterwards, to regret what he’d done, but the only thing he was able to regret with sincerity was letting himself get caught. He’d have killed Asuma too, if he could, and he wouldn’t have been able to regret that either.

In the present Sasuke lifts an eyebrow. “I’m going to brush my teeth.” He tugs loose easily, obviously never doubting his ability to do so. He glances at Naruto over his shoulder, “If you want me to come back, clean up the bed.”

Naruto sticks his tongue out, alive again, rescued from despair. While Sasuke’s gone, he kicks the sperm-stained blanket under the bed, and finds a bathroom to clean up in. Then he sits in the bed, antsy and over-eager, hunched over as though in growing pains, something hot and aching inside his bones, until finally – Sasuke in the doorway, and Naruto’s world regains its equilibrium.

Sasuke’s changed to flannel trousers and a tshirt, and is frowning at his phone. “Do I know a Sakura? She seems to think I go to school with her.”

“Mmh, yeah, we’ve all been in the same class since kindergarten. She’s Ibiki Mornio’s granddaughter.”

“Hn. Convenient.”

“Yeah,” Naruto breathes, edging sideways to make room for Sasuke on the bed. The city was expecting two exorcists, and so has prepared a two-bedroom suite. Convenient, indeed. It’s feasible for one of them to sleep on the couch, but the beds are easily large enough for two, and Sasuke doesn’t seem tempted to share with Kakashi.

He sits down on the bed, writing something on his phone.

Naruto stretches, wiggling like a seal under the duvet. “That stuff you said before. You can’t mean that. You were joking.”

“Hm?”
“About us being a servant race.”

Sasuke lifts a quizzical eyebrow. “It’s the law of man and God.”

Naruto sits up abruptly, duvet pooling in his lap. “Then it’s time we change the law! I keep telling you, society is the work of man. If something’s wrong, it’s up to us to change it!”

Sasuke tilts his head, ostensibly in question. It’s been called a bird-like gesture, but Naruto thinks now that it’s the gesture of a hawk, of a predator bird. It looks more like Sasuke’s old way of tilting his head, from before Orochimaru cultivated it into a softer, more submissive gesture. “An obedient dog is treated well. A dog that turns on its master is put down. Why would it be desirable for that to change?”

“I’m not a fucking dog!”

“Of course not!”

“I am a shifter.”

“You’re different. You’re – _mine._” Sasuke’s perfect composure cracks open, and Naruto thinks how that was the first thing Sasuke knew, that Naruto belongs to him.

“I’m yours,” Naruto agrees. “That’s not – I’m not your fucking dog.”

“Don’t be stupid! You’re a person.”

“Every shifter is.”

Sasuke shrugs, as though this is of comparatively little importance. “I’m not suggesting any cullings. I’m simply pointing out that one exorcist is worth the entire human population.”

“An exorcist like Orochimaru?” Naruto snaps. “Like your fucked up family? Jesus, Sasuke, you’ve killed your fair share of exorcists!”

“They needed killing.”

“Yes,” Naruto agrees, though the word cuts. “They did. That’s my point.”

“I judged them, I killed them. A human doesn’t have that right.”

“Sasuke, fucking don’t. People have value. Yes, fine, exorcists are better at fighting demons, sure. That is _not_ the only value a person can have!”

“Every other value they can generate is contingent on the value exclusive to exorcists. How long would the world last, if exorcists stop performing their duties? The most generous assumption ever made is ten days! Exorcists fight and die every day. If they stop, life will cease to exist. It’s not even just that every living creature will die, their souls will bedevoured. Torn apart, barred from any afterlife except the agony of sustaining the evil that killed them. Tell me again how a non-exorcist could ever be of equal value.”

“It’s not by choice that we don’t help! We do the best we can. We weren’t – I don’t know why we weren’t chosen!” The things he could have done, if he’d been a child of God…

Sasuke saves the world. That’s Sasuke’s destiny, his privilege and his burden. Naruto’s busy changing it, making it something worth saving. He tries to explain this to Sasuke, whose expression softens and then sharpens again but all differently, in interest not attack.
“We’re never going to see eye to eye on this,” he says, but it’s not a challenge, right now.

“The world can be better,” Naruto says. They’re sitting close now, hunched towards each other. His cheek almost brushes Sasuke’s. “We can do better.”

“Look, I’m not going to start any random purges, but if people don’t toe the line, they need to be taught their place.”

“We all need to work **together.** To be a team. Common goals, common rules. There has to be a system in place to prevent exorcists abusing their power, too. The kind of shit Orochimaru got up to – that can’t be allowed. He’d need to be sealed or something. That way he could still be useful, but he couldn’t hurt anyone. Exorcists and non-exorcists need to collaborate to make things work.”

“It sounds a whole lot like you think exorcists need to start giving away their power for free.”

“Being a team is give and take!”

“And I see what the exorcists would give. I don’t see what anyone else can offer, except what they already do, as servant races.”

“How can you not realise that that’s a bloody disgusting way to look at people!”

“It’s not like I demand any great sacrifices from anyone. I don’t even need to be paid to exorcise. But I’m not taking orders from people who can’t contribute.”

“What kind of world do you want?” Naruto demands, fingers scratching against the cotton of Sasuke’s tshirt, itching to fist in it. “Because we’re going to make the best world we can. Make it something worthwhile, something really fucking worth saving. So people want to save it. Not to get power, or in exchange for anything, but just because it’s the right thing to do.”

“God, you’re so stupid.” But he says it rather kindly, as if Naruto’s stupidity is something revolutionary and wonderful. “I’m going to die for them, you know. All of us, every exorcist, sooner or later we all die for humanity. Not just the humanity you want to think about – not just the good people, the ones who contribute or make inventions or art or take care of each other. But all the dregs too, criminals and terrorists and selfish, small-minded people who never helped anyone. They’ll get to live, because I die.”

Naruto inches forward that last finger’s width, pressing a kiss to Sasuke’s mouth. “I love you.” His fingers curl softly in the hollow of Sasuke’s clavicle. “We’re going to do this together. We belong together.”

“Even if I’m this terrible racist dictator? Even if you have to choose between me and your pack?”

Naruto swallows, not quite inadvertently drawing Sasuke’s bottom lip into his mouth. “If I had to choose, I’d pick you. If it’s you or the rest of the world, humanity can burn. But I don’t! If you’d just behave like a decent person for fucking once…!”

Sasuke makes an impatient gesture. “What are you doing to do, try and enslave exorcists? They’ll never cede power voluntarily.”

“I’d prefer if it didn’t come to that, but if they won’t listen, we might have to deal with a conflict.”

Sasuke sighs. Naruto bites on his lip, but he doesn’t move away. “Itachi alone could exterminate every shifter in the world.”

He pushes Sasuke back against the headboard, lays a claw softly against his throat.

Sasuke stretches, baring his throat and his teeth. “Then you’d die too.”

“I might decide it’s worth it.”

“And what would Itachi do to you then? Your soul would be devoured before you had time to die. He’d give the entire shifter race to the demons.”

Naruto sits back on his heels, suddenly terrified to have to continue this conversation. But Sasuke can’t be lied to anymore. “I think you’re kind of misunderstanding Itachi.”

“No. You don’t get it.”

“Look, Itachi’s –”

“I told you, I remember things when I dream. I know Itachi.” He gives this strange, bitter smile. “I remember loving him.”

“Sasuke…”

Sasuke bites his lip, but doesn’t allow himself more than a moment of hesitation. “He’s my brother, right? Not…”

“Not?”

“I don’t know, the way he touched me wasn’t…”

Sasuke claws at the seal, and something shifts. Sasuke’s fingers on his shoulder might be symbolic, but Uriel tears at the seal from the inside, forces the ruptures in it to widen.

The incredulous, indescribable thrill must show on Naruto’s face, because Sasuke frowns at him. “I liked it better when I knew you couldn’t lie to me.”

Naruto takes his hand and squeezes.

The way Itachi touched Sasuke, just before Sasuke supposedly lost all memory – well, it’s not how Naruto would ever touch Konohamaru, but then he and Kono have never been as close as Itachi and Sasuke. It’s a greedy kind of touch.

“He thinks,” Sasuke starts. “He’s wrong. Now that I’m not all tangled up in it, I get him more.” He snorts. “He adores me, that’s his problem.”

In the scene of Sasuke’s slightly fuzzy memory, Sasuke’s on the floor, unable to move much. Itachi’s cradling him.

Itachi tells him, *You speak to me in my head. It used to only be Lucifael, then it was God. But now your voice is drowning them out… Are you a saint? A witch?*

*I’m a person!* Sasuke snaps. His mouth tastes burnt. *What you hear are your own delusions.*

Itachi again makes the sign of the cross on Sasuke’s face, first with his finger, then with his mouth. The burnt taste intensifies. *You speak to me. In my dreams, in my soul, you speak to me.*
If I ever tell you I forgive you, you can be sure it’s not me.

His head explodes: light, pain, emptiness.

“Loving someone,” Naruto says, with a terrible weight in his chest, “that’s not how. It’s not about hurting them.”

“Really? Because I remember you eating my heart out of my chest.”

Naruto sags, as if axed. The world is darkness and ashes. “When I – raped you.”

Sasuke frowns. “No? Did I tell you that?”

“It’s not like you had to.”

“Naruto, I was a willing participant. I’m the one who let Kyuubi out. I’m the one who didn’t immolate you.”

Naruto makes a wide, rage-wild gesture, before his hand falls, suddenly as though cut off. “You wanted it more than you wanted me dead, but that’s – that’s not enough, that’s wrong…”

“Get over yourself. It’s not that simple. When it’s human on human, maybe, but you’re not human. You’ll never be human.”

“Would you want me if I were?”

He’s collapsed onto his hands and knees, head hanging close to Sasuke’s chest.

Sasuke puts a thoughtful, proprietary finger on his cheek, pressing against the whisker scars. “You’d have to be more of a kept wife.”

Naruto laughs a terrible, hoarse laugh that scrapes him raw on the inside. “I don’t think I’d be very good at that.”

“Hn. Probably not.” His hand travels up Naruto’s face, tangling in Kyuubi’s ear.

Naruto presses his face to the beat of Sasuke’s heart. “You remember me.”

“Some of you.”

Naruto nods, rubbing his face against Sasuke’s ribs. “I have to learn to exorcise again. This hard stand against the humans, we’ve got to be united. So I have to be able to exorcise, so we can leave all this stupid internal strife behind.”

“You’re unclean.”

“Nothing in this world can sully Uriel. Not even being channelled through me.” He curls even closer, slipping his arms around Sasuke’s middle. “You were making a sacred sword for me.”

“Really?”

“Mmh.”

“Hmm.”

“We’re gonna do this,” Naruto says. “Together. We can do better, and we will.”
Slouching into the kitchen, Kakashi finds Sasuke making tea. Naruto’s presumably still asleep, which suggests Sasuke maybe slept with him: given how claustrophobically Naruto’s clung to him, it’s hard to think he’d remain asleep if Sasuke hadn’t offered him some kind of reassurance.

It wouldn’t be the first time a good but ultimately insufficient exorcism got Sasuke in the mood.

“Yo,” Kakashi mumbles.

Sasuke nods at him, and oh. It’s over now, that brief dream of redemption. Sasuke’s face is young and beautiful, its expression sardonic, faintly bitter. What was it Orochimaru said? Zankouku na tenshi no you ni.

“You remember me,” Kakashi says.

“Some of you.” He shrugs. “Enough.”

“I see.” For what will probably be the last time ever, he pokes Sasuke’s forehead, a light touch that feels like it brands itself into his finger, lingering under his skin. He started doing it, once upon a time, not to tease Sasuke but to tease Itachi, who regarded it as his personal gesture. Catching on to Itachi’s annoyance, the envy that burnt under his skin, Sasuke had been mostly amused.

This morning he turns around a throws up into the sink. Kakashi blinks, feeling ashy, empty. He reflects that the bond must be more open, because this is so clearly Naruto’s panicked projectile vomiting.

Sasuke’s never thrown up easily. He ate some poisonous berries once, when he was little, and Itachi had to force several fingers deep, deep into his throat before he expelled them. Kakashi knows from personal experience that what little gag reflex he had has since been trained away.

Sasuke spits, rinses out his mouth and straightens.

“Did you remember something about Itachi?”

Sasuke wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. “You’re still friends with him, aren’t you?”

“I suppose so. In so far as one can be friends with him.”

Sasuke picks up a lemon presumably meant for the tea and bites into it before spitting again, cleaning out the taste of vomit. “Out of curiosity, is there anything he could do that would change that?”

“I don’t know. Moral convictions have never motivated me to break off a relationship. It’s when I start to look down on someone that it’s over.” He shrugs. “That’s always happened sooner or later. But the whys can be surprising.”

Sasuke smiles at him, the smile Naruto calls his shark smile. Kakashi hasn’t had it directed at him in a while now, had forgotten how edged it is, sharp enough to only hurt afterwards. Sasuke’s new, more innocent smile has torn at him in a very different way. But that Sasuke is lost to him now.

“It might interest you to know,” Sasuke tells him with no discernible emotion, “that the sick fuck hears me talking to him in his head.”

“I’d like to be on your side,” Kakashi says.
“Okay,” says Sasuke, because he has nothing else to say. Kakashi’s a manipulator but it’s become obvious that he never knew Sasuke as well as Sasuke liked to pretend to himself that he did.

He bites the lemon again, spits out the last lingering taste of vomit.

The window in front of him is made of reinforced Plexiglas, so thick it barely resembles glass. The outside world becomes like one of those Impressionistic paintings Kakashi likes.

Sasuke’s always preferred photographs. Something real.

He does like the much older paintings, the ones that are like photographs: a piece of the world saved from time.

_Not an art critic, perhaps_, Kakashi used to say, warm and teasing and presumably covering up the disappointment he must have experienced.

Sasuke, who has always written in little square letters and drawn the same way, meticulous and uninspired, supposes he could paint now, in the extravagant nonsense colours that are considered artsy, because Naruto can.

He turns his back on Kakashi.

Inside his head, Uriel’s raging against the seal, straining to erase the taint of Itachi’s touch, burn his soul clean of it.

xxxxx

Naruto dreams of the final horror, chains and loss and life ending.

A sensation of being lobotomised, the parts of his brain unable to connect to each other anymore. Like he’s been cut off from himself, had part of his mind amputated.

On that note he wakes, slips from the nightmare and into reality, which is the same as the nightmare, or almost the same.

Kyuubi’s too weak to even howl, shocked still and icy at the abrupt reliving of his crippling. When Sasuke disappeared from him, when the bond was shut down as simply and cleanly as cutting his throat.

The blessed chain is gone from around his neck, he can sit up in bed but everything in the world is wrong, half his head is missing. He’s on his feet somehow, staggering, but he doesn’t know where to go. That’s gone, that’s a part of him lost.

He’d thought – he’d thought he could be okay, last night. He keeps reminding himself: _I remember some of you._

Keeps reminding himself, telling himself over and over like a useless litany of prayer, that even without remembering him, Sasuke came to him. Wanted him.

But Sasuke isn’t _with_ him, the bond’s breaking apart and breaking Naruto along with it, and anyway Sasuke almost died, almost went fucking nova, he _wanted_ to go nova –

And the seal is strangling Kyuubi, is ripping Naruto’s mind apart, and –

He catches the scent, staggers back into the room, and –
At last he finds Sasuke with his eyes, sitting on the beside.

He looks perfectly normal. His skin is just skin now, ice grey but solid, with no energy bursting through it. He’s nowhere close to going nova.

So he’s there but he’s still missing: what Naruto’s been brutally robbed off, the piece of him lost.

The bond lies dying and dull inside his head. And he should be used to this, he’d accepted living like this until they could get it fixed, but it gets worse and worse, instead of resigned he’s becoming enraged. He thinks his soul is rotting, piece after piece of it shrivelling and dying.

He staggers drunkenly across the floor, crashes into Sasuke on the bed and has to drag himself up onto it.

xxxxx

“Sasuke,” Naruto says, in this shaking, breaking, fucking unignorable voice.

“Are you still on my side?” Sasuke demands.

Uriel’s war songs echo through his skull. He’s insulated, isolated: locked inside a fish bowl, so he can see the bond but he can’t touch it.

It’s a rather simpler seal than his previous one, and certainly its destructive potential is directed at Naruto, not at Sasuke himself. Still his whole body is numb with the impotent pulsing of the bond, heavy with sealed power that resonates through him, pounding, screeching –

Itachi’s handprints on his soul, sooty and smouldering across his thoughts, interfering with his magic, with what’s his –

Naruto blinks, almost uncomprehending. “Yes!”

Sasuke believes him, sort of.

But that last certainty, the certainty of Naruto, is gone now.

“Are you,” Naruto starts, “all right?”

“No.”

Naruto swallows, but doesn’t stop. “I meant.”

“I know what you meant.”

“So say it!”

“Why?”

“Because I need to hear it, God damn you!”

But there is no one left at all, Sasuke thinks. Not even Sasuke himself: not all of him.

This calls to mind the morning after Orochimaru had first taken possession of him, the dead feeling spreading inside him: the empty darkness and the rage and nothing very much else. Frost over all the new hollow places inside him, icing down the loss that would otherwise have torn him utterly apart.
The worst part wasn’t the intrusion, the red violence that broke the world. The worst part was afterward, the knowledge that something – his life, the person he’d thought he was – had been stolen from him and he would never be able to get it back, he wouldn’t even be able to recognise it anymore.

It’s time for that sleeping darkness to wake up, for the rage to burn away the ice that covers it.

He always knew one day he’d burn the world.

He realises he’s clawing at the mark, blood under his nails, when Naruto catches his hand.

Naruto says, with astonishing calmness, “You’re going to destroy him.”

Sasuke isn’t sure whom he means, but he reckons it’s true either way. One way or another, he’s going to destroy everyone who matters to him, and a lot of people who don’t.

“Yes,” Sasuke tells him. It comes to him that Naruto’s the only person he keeps telling, yes.

But he can’t be sure of Naruto anymore.

Naruto’s hand closes around his, bigger and hotter than a human hand could be.

Sasuke stills, perched on a knife’s edge and feeling the blade slowly slide through the soles of his feet. It’s not a bad feeling.

“I do know you,” Naruto says. “That part was always real. Bond or no bond.”

Sasuke swallows, for no good reason at all.

He’d thought, sometimes, that he wouldn’t want Naruto anymore, bereft of the bond. But still Naruto’s presence makes life realer, paints it in brighter colours.

He puts his hand on Naruto’s cheek, feels the ridges of the whisker scars against his palm and none of the magic behind them, smears Naruto’s skin with blood from where he clawed at the mark. “I’m not sorry you’re here.”

Naruto’s face twists, too many expressions to settle into just one. “Okay.”

Sasuke quirks his mouth into some approximation of a smile, here at the end. “You gave me magic.”

“No,” Naruto says, and Sasuke looks away because before Naruto would have known this was code. “It was always yours.”

Knowing it was code might not have changed his answer, and Sasuke’s fingers clench, must be hurting Naruto’s face now, and he thinks it would have been good if he’d been able to give Naruto something. Naruto’s taken a lot of things from him, but he’d have liked now to be able to give him something.

“Sasuke –”

“Shut up.”

“What are you doing?”

“I’m making a choice.”
It’s maybe a selfish choice, and definitely reckless, but Sasuke’s never pretended he’s anything but.

“I’m done. I’m not going to live like this anymore.”

xxxxx

Naruto has always believed in miracles, in a God helps he who helps himself sort of sense, but it’s astonishing to see one unfold.

*I’m making a choice,* he thinks dimly, dizzily.

Sasuke changes his world by speaking those words.

Climbing up onto the bond-bridge, he can see Sasuke in the distance, encased in something like a snow globe, translucent but with marks on it similar to the seal on Sasuke’s shoulder.

The globe encases Sasuke’s mind, cutting off the bond.

But the strands of it are interwoven with Sasuke’s magic, and Sasuke calls to it now, calls on Uriel with words fit to lay waste to worlds, cleanse them of mortal life.

Naruto walks across the sleeping energy of the bond like across water, feels it whisper, more awake, under his feet.

He puts his hands on the globe, and Sasuke does too, palms and fingers pressed together on either side of the barrier. It burns Naruto’s hands, but that doesn’t matter. He pushes with everything in him. Wants Sasuke back more than he’s ever wanted anything.

In the outside world Sasuke twists sideways, pulls at his neckline. Naruto lets Kyuubi take his body, and Kyuubi rips and bites, fangs breaking through the seal.

His mouth burns with Sasuke’s blood and Sasuke’s magic and the tang of the seal, and he keeps pressing against the barrier.

He thinks that really, all this time, nobody gave Sasuke any choice, but now finally, in the end, he made one all the same.

It happens suddenly.

Audible for a moment over Kyuubi’s panting, over the thrum of Uriel’s war songs, there’s a sound at the edge of human hearing, and the globe shatters, Itachi’s seal breaking.

Sasuke’s magic burns away the shards, burns away any traces of the taint.

Naruto’s back in his body and the burning, singing power of Uriel is back in him, and he barely notices because *Sasuke* is back.

He belatedly detaches his jaw, sits back.

Sasuke smiles at him, a grim, stinted, brilliant smile.

The bond slots into place inside his mind like – like they’ve been trying to pummel a square peg into a round hole all these weeks, and now suddenly they’ve got it right, everything matched up and fitting.

“You stopped fighting it.”
“I made a choice. I won’t be stolen from again.” There’s no need to elaborate: Sasuke’s magic is super nova bright, the whole room tinted white. He’s met Naruto’s eyes in that head-on collision way of his, but now he looks away, jaw stiffening pugnaciously. “Also I will never trust another human being again. I don’t have it in me. But I don’t need to take you on trust.”

“I trust you,” Naruto says.

Kyuubi rolls and tumbls like a demented dolphin under Sasuke’s skin, his tails emerging through the small of Naruto’s back but his mostly-just-energy teeth snapping along Sasuke’s arms and neck.

“More fool you,” Sasuke says, but softly, like he understands it’s code, though Naruto’s not sure precisely what for.

Naruto slips back across the bridge, which is solid now, bright under his feet. Inside Sasuke’s mind he grabs a disgruntled Kyuubi by the scruff of his neck and forces him back home, into the cage.

There’s only Sasuke and him then, and the black edge of desperation like despair is gone. Greyed down, at least, and Naruto is light and bright and overflowing.

He stands at the very edge of Sasuke’s mind, and the bondbridge sings under his feet as Sasuke twines his arms around him, tight as a hangman’s noose.

xxxxx

Naruto mouths lazily, contentedly at Sasuke’s neck. He’s done it now, the thing he’s dreamt of and yearned for so long: fucked Sasuke’s soul.

Sasuke turns in his arms, fingers pressing hard and possessive against Naruto’s back, sinking into his flesh to the first knuckle. Sasuke’s memory hasn’t settled entirely back into place, and he hasn’t got entirely used to Kyuubi’s strength again.

But he looks at Naruto with no hesitation and no regret, pulls Uriel’s power experimentally through Naruto’s flesh and is satisfied with the result.

So here they are, the impossible desire fulfilled, Naruto’s first and last wish granted: Sasuke chose him.

“You’re it,” Sasuke tells him. He’s reacquainting himself with Naruto’s face, unhurried and careless as if he’s always had a perfect right to touch it. Which, actually, he has. “If you’re gone, then that’s it. I’m done.”

“I’m never gonna be gone,” Naruto says. “Wherever we go, we go together.”

Sasuke twists, seems almost pained. Then he rolls Naruto over onto his back, lying on top of him. They kiss each other until Sasuke’s thin, chapped mouth is red and swollen, looking almost lipsticked.

“I love you,” Naruto says, in between kisses. “You have no idea how fucking much I love you.”

Sasuke’s fingers lift his chin, inexorable. “But I do.” It’s not quite a smile that he presses to Naruto’s lips, but it’s close. “That’s the point. I feel it.” His fist opens, spreading his hand over Naruto’s heart. “I know you.”

xxxxx
Minato knows the moment he sees them. The brief respite is over. Back is Sasuke’s disdain and open dislike.

But back, also, is Naruto’s impossible ability to exorcise. Minato finally sees it with his own two eyes, in the mundane surroundings of a training facility. Naruto’s been running laps, still sweaty and flushed, orange energy sparkling around him.

Sasuke’s not even here, and still Naruto can close his eyes and open them a different red than they’ve ever been before, crimson rather than vermilion. The orange energy fades, and in its place Naruto can summon the white on white light of heaven. He frowns, biting through his lip and sweating even worse, but a blade of angelfire arcs from his hand.

It fades shortly, and Naruto looks up at him in breathless triumph, with the biggest shit eating grin. “I can do this,” he says. “They’ll follow me. All of them. Even against the humans – which, don’t start, we’re not going to war with them. I’ll get them to come around.”

“They’re far more likely to ally with the exorcists against us.”

“Well, yeah, the exorcists will be experiencing a bit of a shift in leadership.”

Minato takes a deep breath. “Where exactly is Sasuke?”

“He had some stuff he had to do.”

“Naruto. I need you to talk to me. I have to make decisions, decisions that might end up being catastrophically wrong because you don’t tell me what’s going on.”

Naruto bites his lip again. “He’s at Orochimaru’s.”

“I see.”

“He’s probably going to be there a while. Orochimaru won’t be alive anymore when he leaves.”

“And the Council…?”

“It’s not like they can stop him. Hanabi and Itachi won’t step in, and the rest of them,” he shrugs, “they’re not strong enough.”

“Right. So – he’s taking over Oto after all?”

Naruto looks at him the way Minato’s spent so much time looking at Naruto: fondly, but as though he should know better. “He was never going to take over Oto.”

xxxxx

“I’m dealing with him,” Temari says. “No, I won’t. He’s not as crazy as you think. Yes, well, he’s my family. Look, I’m simply informing you of matters – this is not up for discussion.”

She can remember a time when she was happy to have Shikamaru call, when their bickering was foreplay and teasing. She can, in short, remember a time when she was in love with Shikamaru.

It faded quickly enough after their bonding.

She’s not a fool: he was never boyfriend material, he was a fun fling before she expected to bond with someone on her level, of her kind.
It didn’t turn out that way, and looking at Kankurou and his mad girl, at Naruto’s demented crusader, perhaps she shouldn’t feel cheated. People have built amicable relationships on much less than she has with Shikamaru. But life is about expectation management, and it’s harder to be satisfied when your expectations were expectations of a loved one.

It is not Shikamaru’s fault that he cannot contribute. It’s not his fault that he can’t understand. It’s not even necessarily his fault that he can’t accept these facts.

It not being his fault doesn’t matter as much as she’d hoped. It doesn’t change the fact that he’s what Sasuke Uchiha called a loadstone around her neck.

She doesn’t believe in shifter/human relationships for the same reason she doesn’t believe in massive age differences, or a boss or master getting involved with their employee or slave. There are power imbalances that are too large to overcome, that will poison any relationship, until it’s corrupted the people in it, turned one of them callous and abusive, neglectful at best, and the other into a victim, something suppressed and to be used.

She commanded armies while Shikamaru slept through AP classes.

She’s never resented Minato for the things Naruto does – not that it’s her place to resent him at all – but she always perceived something unhealthy in his attachment to Naruto’s mother. What’s wrong with him, that he wanted a human woman instead of an equal partner, someone who could truly know him and match him? Love after all isn’t enough, can’t bridge any distance. She’s heard Minato himself say it, though he was trying to explain to a very young Naruto that mating with exorcists was impossible: *a fish may love a bird, but where would they live?*

Naruto had frowned and protested, but it was Kakashi who said, *The question denotes a failure of imagination.*

*Yeah!* Naruto had agreed, pumping his fist in the air. *Also of devotion!*

He’d have loved a human Sasuke, she thinks. That relationship would have been twisted in a different way, resentment and humiliation interwoven with care and painful carefulness, as any power Sasuke had would be the power he had to affect Naruto, his only importance the colossal importance Naruto gave him.

She’s less certain Sasuke would’ve loved a human Naruto. Even if he did, he destroys anything he touches, and a human Naruto wouldn’t have had the resilience to survive Sasuke’s attention.

Speaking of destruction, it’s time to leave. Gaara’s cleansing Rain County, and there’s no controlling Gaara, only a hopeful, partial managing of Gaara, and so Temari has never protested his atrocities, but simply pointed him in the least undeserving direction. Today the humans are making a stand, rallying behind what they seem to perceive as a hero. Temari notices an unflattering haircut, green spandex, and pre-battle ranting to rival Naruto at his verbose worst.

It would be funny, if she wasn’t so eager to get home to a shower and a hot meal she’d find it funny, that he actually seems to believe he has a chance, as if bravery and determination were enough.

Gaara doesn’t even look at him, doesn’t slow down for an instant as he moves through him.

The hero is blood and broken bones, and nothing very much more.

The town he tried to defend has had half its population slaughtered and has bowed down in defeat within half an hour.
Temari wipes her hands clean on her jeans. Tsunade will take point on the surrender negotiations, so the shower beckons. There should still be some hot pockets left, too…

Later that evening, when she’s painting her nails and shouting down Shino Aburame and his gung-ho faction, Shikamaru calls again. She doesn’t kid herself that it’ll be a pleasant conversation – he’ll have found something to be passive aggressive and biting about, he always does.

A few hours later, when she’s finished up the day’s business and indulged in a heap of hot pockets, she calls him back. It turns out he’s upset about that local celebrity, the idiot hero.

She could almost laugh. Isn’t this rather the wartime equivalent of fighting about the milk?

But of course it’s often like this. All these trivial details seem so terribly important to him.

Shikamaru tells the world stories about not caring, maybe he even believes them, but it’s all a crumbling defence mechanism. The coward’s, the survivor’s, foolproof way: you can’t fail if you don’t try. Because at the end of the day, most people aren’t Naruto. If they attempt something impossible, they will fail, like Lee failed.

“‘You needn’t concern yourself that he’ll become a martyr,’” she says. “‘Because I wasn’t born yesterday. He’ll need a feeding tube down his throat the rest of his life, but I’m not stupid enough to let him die. His devotees are more than welcome to come see him. He’ll just be a crippled reminder of what happens when you disobey your betters. There’s nothing glorious about it. No, trust me, the heroic aura fades quite quickly when you’re wearing an adult diaper. Yes, right. No, I’m going to be kind, actually – as soon as the point’s been made, I’ll put him out of his misery.’”

Really Shikamaru’s less the person he tries to be – detached, too lazy to be more than mildly bothered by anything, finding the world nothing but troublesome – and more like that exorcist friend of his than he’ll ever admit. She thinks of Ino and thinks of naked, hopeless striving and that relentless cheerfulness to cover up the knowledge of inevitable, inherent failure. A different mask, but it covers the same face.

Shikamaru tries to be dismissive, to cover up his defensiveness: *Ino’s a good kid, she does good.*

Well of course she does. She does what is in her nature to do, saves humanity the way Gaara tears it apart: the way she’s been built to.

Sometimes Temari thinks Shikamaru might really not realise that she knows he’s slept with Ino. The fact that he hasn’t been frank about it, hasn’t let it be understood between them, suggests he believes she might be upset. That’s cute. But she doesn’t love him anymore, and so can’t fault him for straying to another girl who doesn’t love him, whose world he can never really touch either.

xxxxx

Orochimaru is laid out as though on his lit de parade. His face is cracked and blackened, but clearly recognisable – definitely to Sasuke, probably to other people as well. His right eye has melted a bit, but there’s still awareness in it. Samael flaps his wings like a baby bird, unable to stretch them out of Orochimaru’s living carcass.

The room is still luxurious, but like the rest of the house has clearly been raided. Though Orochimaru’s defences are strong, at least a few people have made it through. Sasuke killed some of them, coming here. Most bowed out of his way.

Orochimaru smiles at him. “My prodigal son returns.”
I've Got Nothing For You to Gain

There’s a poem Kimimaro used to like. Sasuke didn’t get it, when Kimimaro was alive, but perhaps he does now.

Black milk of morning we drink you at night

Someone’s kept Orochimaru clean, changed his bandages, but he’ll never leave this bed. Their bed, for a long time.

This is home, in a sense that the shifter strongholds will never be home.

But in the end, you can never go home again, not really. You outgrow your past, shed it like snakeskin until you’re rawer and smaller and fit to survive.

“Your old friend Tsunade did the blood work,” Sasuke says. He rests his hands on the wrought-iron bedframe, feels the metal tremble on the edge of immolation under his touch. It feels a little like a black hole opening in the room. “She claims Fugaku did sire two crusaders. I was never yours.”

There’s a man in this house who cultivates snakes and who writes

“Oh, Tsunade. Of course she’d tell you whatever she imagines would matter to you.” A papery cough. “You’ve never been one to just take someone’s word for anything.”

“She doesn’t know me very well,” Sasuke agrees.

Orochimaru makes another papery, slithering sound, not very different from his normal laugh. “You didn’t have to be mine, but your family made sure you were. You’ll always be mine.”

we drink you at dawntime and noontime we drink you at dusktime

we drink and drink

“Well,” Sasuke says, alighting on the bedside. He lays a hand softly on Orochimaru’s brow, feeling the skin split and disintegrate under his touch. Uriel’s present in his fingers, but stays under his skin: Orochimaru’s just too weak. Dying. “I’m here now.”

“So you are,” Orochimaru agrees.

Sasuke pulls his legs up underneath him. Someone opens the door behind him and he wipes them without thought.

“You never did share well,” Orochimaru says, with a sound that might have been a chuckle, if it hadn’t issued from this husk of a man: decaying flesh, held together by magic and obsession.

For a disembodied moment Sasuke thinks he’s going to vomit and what comes up will be black, will be rotted blood.

“Sou ne.”

Orochimaru reaches for him and Sasuke breaks his fingers.

He realises he’s going to have to be more careful than he’d like, going forward, because Orochimaru’s burnt bones snap like kindling.
Orochimaru hisses, but then offers him a gift like a poisoned apple. “Your mother came to see me.”

*He shouts stab deeper in earth you there and you others*

  *you sing and you play*

“I don’t care.”

Orochimaru directs a thoughtful look at him. “Perhaps you don’t.”

Sasuke leans forward, close over Orochimaru’s face, and pulls out Orochimaru’s remaining eye lashes.

Orochimaru smiles up at him, black teeth and no lips. Sasuke inches down, kisses him, hears Orochimaru hiss in pain at the pressure of Sasuke’s mouth against his naked cranium.

“Ah, Shinigami-chan. When I first saw Itachi, I knew I wanted him.” His mouth twists, echoing or being echoed by Sasuke’s. “The stupid boy doesn’t know, but Mikoto protected him. Silly, silly woman. You’re far more than Itachi could ever hope to be, but she sacrificed both herself and you to keep your dear dull brother pure.”

Sasuke smiles at him, feels the smile pull at his face, ache pleasantly through his jaw. “If you’d got Itachi, he’d have killed you within a year.”

Orochimaru visibly wants to deny it, but there’s no seal that could hold God’s best beloved.

He reaches up to trace ruined fingers over Sasuke’s face. Sasuke turns his head and bites him.

“And now, Shinigami-chan, you mean to kill me?”

*stab deeper your spades you there and you others play on*

  *for the dancing*

“It’s going to take a long time,” Sasuke says. He’d imagined this moment as meteor strike dramatic but there’s mostly a sense of homecoming, like reaching the place you were meant to go.

“I expected nothing else. Parting is such sweet sorrow, isn’t it? One doesn’t want it to be over too quickly.”

Sasuke stretches, makes himself comfortable. “Did you mean for me to kill you?”

“I meant to live forever.”

“How pedestrian.”

Orochimaru chuckles, blood beading on the edge of his mouth, where his lips used to be. “You wound me. Well. I suppose I never meant to be killed by anyone but you.”

Sasuke feels unexpectedly close to him, warmed almost. Something hot and curdled sits in his stomach, tasting satisfaction and wanting more, waiting to see if its fury can be sated. “Is that right.” He tangles their hands together, then twists until Orochimaru’s wrist snaps. “Well, here I am.” He slides a leg over Orochimaru, straddling him and putting his hands on Orochimaru’s chest, until Orochimaru’s heart beats against his palms.

*he shouts stroke darker the strings and as smoke you*
“For your inheritance.”

Sasuke tilts his head to meet Orochimaru’s partly melted eyes. “You can’t actually imagine I’ll take over Oto.”

“It’s meant for you. I crafted it for you, and I crafted you to –”

“You know me better than that,” Sasuke tells him. “You have to realise I’m going to raze it to the ground.”

“That’ll be the next world war.”

“That’s not really a problem for me.”

It really seems as though Orochimaru only now realises this, and chokes on the realisation.

Sasuke smirks faintly at him. “I’m built for destruction. You know that.”

He let his finger drill into Orochimaru’s left eye, spearing it. Samael pushes back, but that no longer matters. Sasuke’s just stronger.

he hunts us down with his dogs in the sky he gives us a

grave

Orochimaru makes his sounds of agony, which Sasuke hasn’t heard before but which are no different from any other man’s.

“You’ll burn the world,” he gasps, when he’s recovered himself. “Tashika ni shinigami da. Zankouku no tenshi, ne.”

“Sou deshou? Maa, I came to see you first.”

“I’m flattered.”

Sasuke quirks his mouth. “But hardly surprised.”

“Hardly ever that.” He shifts a little, his long hair now matted and brittle and rasping against the pillows. “This patricide, will you enjoy it?”

“Yes.” The word comes hot and fast as predator breath.

“Will it give you peace?”

“I’m not built for peace.”

“And yet you expect your low-rent prince charming to, shall we say, fix you and carry you off into the sunset?”

Sasuke leans forward a little, putting weight on his hands and feeling Orochimaru’s breath stutter. “I’m not looking to get fixed.”

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night

“Don’t lie to me,” Sasuke says. “You did what you wanted to, because you could.”

“No ne. Are you going to ask me why?”

“No.”

“No? Surely, Shi –”

Sasuke strokes softly across the eyelid covering Orochimaru’s remaining eye. “I’m going to be the only thing left in your world.”

*we drink you at nightfall and morning we drink you and drink you*

Almost everything else has already been eradicated, and anyway Sasuke’s always been the realest part of Orochimaru’s life.

“When you came here last,” Orochimaru says, with the misty, jealous pride of any parent.

“It was easy.”

“I thought it wouldn’t be.”

“You thought I’d know you?”

“Maa, I thought my seal work would be quicker, too.”

Orochimaru had touched his neck, and his fingers had been hot with desire and repressive magic.

It had been so obvious, so simple, the natural order of the world reasserting itself: the moment he touched Sasuke, Orochimaru had burnt.

They’d been in Orochimaru’s study, and Orochimaru had collapsed onto the carpet on which he first took possession of Sasuke.

Of course, Sasuke hadn’t remembered that at the time.

It wouldn’t have mattered, anyway. Irony fades in the face of death.

“Do you love me, Shinigami-chan? Let’s be honest, here at the end of all things.”

“It goes deeper than that.”

“Oh?”

Sasuke shrugs, the shrug his mother tried to train him out of and then Orochimaru tried to train him out of. “Whatever we have, it’s deeper than love.”

“Oh,” Orochimaru says again. “Do indulge me.”

Sasuke pinches him, feels his fingers sink through rot-soft skin, brush against the naked meat below. His nails scratch against Orochimaru’s ribs, until the pads of his fingers whisper across the beating muscle of Orochimaru’s heart. “Love fades. This doesn’t.”

“Ah, but I do love you. And you love me as well. Hush, now. Of course you do. It’s just that you hate me more.” He makes a strange face, as though searching for an expression his ruined face can’t
support. “I had to make you mine.”

he grabs at the iron in his belt and swings it

Sasuke sits back. Orochimaru’s hanging on by a thread: this is not, after all, going to take a long time. “Isn’t this what people are?” he says, pushing his hand further into Orochimaru’s body, rubbing against the bone of his rib cage. “Random acts of senseless violence.”

“Sou ka na.”

“Your pronunciation’s atrocious as usual,” Sasuke remarks. He’s so close to this hot edge, and yet so comfortably at home. He thinks he was born for this: to dominate and destroy. “I was going to have a demon eat your soul, but I decided I’ve got a use for you.”

“You intrigue me.”

Sasuke leans forward and whispers in his ear.

Orochimaru tries to go nova. Sasuke doesn’t let him.

They’re done talking now. He burns Orochimaru’s vocal chords, watches the smoke spill out of Orochimaru’s ruined mouth.

Then he does what has to be done. He unmakes Orochimaru: over the minutes and then the hours of pain and nothing else, he strips away Orochimaru’s individuality, his humanity, his personhood. Orochimaru believes this is something he taught Sasuke to do, but killer instinct can’t be learnt. Sasuke has always known how to destroy, how to make something smaller; how to take something weaker and break it apart in his hands, under his heel.

he plays with the serpents and dreams death comes as a master

In the end there’s nothing left and Sasuke starts, quite literally, burning Orochimaru’s soul. It’s a failsafe way to make a weaker exorcist go nova.

There are no demons here, so the immensity of power explodes into empty space.

Correction: into Sasuke’s waiting hands.

Some of it dissipates, but Sasuke collects much of it, twisting it into shape, into seals he carves into his arm.

Samael is close kin to Uriel, a far more compatible power than Gabriel or Raphael or Hanael.

It sinks into him, locked and buzzing in the seals burning along his arm. These aren’t the rounded, intricate designs Orochimaru favours, but the sharp-edged, slashed kanji of Sasuke’s earliest childhood. They’re his, like much of Samael’s power is now his.

He’s reached the heart of the labyrinth at last.

xxxxx

It’s surreal, more surreal than he’d anticipated, to be back in school.

He and Dad are sort of working at cross purposes at the moment, which means Naruto needs to find
Sakura so he can get access to Morino. And Sakura, on an early Wednesday afternoon, is of course in school.

Just a few months back, one the far side of a war, Naruto would’ve been too.

The corridors are familiar, the lockers and the school uniforms. What’s new is the students don’t seem to recognise him as one of their own. He was a prankster, one of the Ritalin kids, but he used to indisputably belong to this place.

He passes by his locker. The graffiti he painted on it has been removed, until there’s just the usual slurs, a cocksucker here, a die beast there.

Finally there’s Sakura emerging from a classroom, detaching from the crowd when Naruto waves at her.

She hugs him quickly, fingers lingering in his shirt as though wanting to check him for damage. “It’s so good to see you. It’s been far too long, are you all right?” She looks over his shoulder. “Is Sasuke here too? He said he’d lost his memory, but then I heard from Ino that he’d got it back…”

“Yeah, he’s good.”

“I kept asking to see him – you know that, I kept asking to see you too.”

“I know. I’m sorry, there’s been a lot going on, and just – yeah, sorry. But now’s not a good time for Sasuke.”

“Why not? If he remembers, and he’s all right, then…”

“Orochimaru just died.” Naruto realises this even as he says it, feeling this – fulfilment, this sense of something urgent now being finished.

“But that’s – I understand this is a horrible and selfish thing to say, but – but that’s good, right?”

Naruto hugs her again, just quickly, a brief press of childhood and loveliness against his chest. But, “Sakura, um, he died because Sasuke just finished torturing him to death.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. And I – I really have to go to him. But I want to see you. Soon. And, um. I kind of need to see Gramps too.”

Sakura’s face stills. “Why?”

“Because Dad’s not really handling this the right way, and I need to clear some stuff up with Morino.” Sakura licks her lips. She doesn’t like to go against adults, Naruto knows that, but, “Look. Sasuke’s doing a lot of things right now that has really big implications, and he can’t stand Dad so Dad’s out of the loop. I want Morino to know the real deal, so we can get a handle on this before it explodes.”

Sakura nods, uncertain still but then she’s always thoughtful, never quite sure of her decisions.

“Thanks, Sakura.” Naruto presser her hand, brief but ardent. “I really loved seeing you. I’ll get in touch, okay? Sasuke too, when he’s stable.”

xxxxx
In an odd way, he feels more at home in Orochimaru’s mansion than he did in the school he’s attended for the last three years: Sasuke thinks of this so clearly, so deeply as his home. In spite of what he’s been through, how he’s been treated, Sasuke’s always retained that basic feeling of entitlement that makes it easy to appropriate each new place as one’s home. Usually Naruto resents that kind of staggering exorcist arrogance, but he can’t deny it’s been a lifeline for Sasuke, that he has reason to be grateful for it.

It’s relatively easy to get in: the place has been broken into so many times, a lot of the defences are defunct, and anyway some of them register Naruto as an exorcist now, when he lets Uriel swim to the surface, glimmer just under his skin.

He finds Sasuke in an atrium that feels a little like an aquarium because the entire south wall is made of tinted glass, and the light filters in somehow wetly, tinted bluish.

Sasuke’s gaunt and pale – won’t have slept, won’t have eaten – but the impression from earlier holds true. There’s a measure of peace now, something like grace granted.

“Hey,” Naruto says, smiling helplessly.

Sasuke nods at him, not quite smiling back. Almost, though.

Naruto’s voice hardens with need, “I want to see him.”


“I could at least stomp on his ashes.”

“There’s no ashes. There’s not even atoms left.”

“He’s in his grave in the sky, then.”

“Where it’s roomy to lie,” Sasuke agrees dryly. “But no, not quite.” He pulls his sleeve up, exposing a long line of jagged, intricate cuts. “Come here.”

Sasuke’s already pulling up Naruto’s sleeve, but Naruto’s distracted, has to nudge his cheek against Sasuke, rub his face against Sasuke’s hair. The last few days is the longest he’s been away from Sasuke since the bond, bearable only because it had to be, because this was something Sasuke had to do on his own, and because the bond has never been as open as after they unsealed it.

Sasuke shoulders him off. “We can fuck when we get home. Give me your arm.”

“You’re so romantic,” Naruto tells him, holding out his arm next to Sasuke’s. Which, he discovers upon closer perusal, looks like a serial cutter’s. Every inch, from the edge of his palm and up to his armpit, is covered in cuts that glow white.

They sparkle under Naruto’s touch. “What’re these?”

“Samael.” Sasuke smirks at him, the expression sharp with triumph. Naruto feels like he could cut himself on the lines of Sasuke’s mouth. “Your archangel.”

“My archangel,” Naruto repeats. “Wait, I get Orochimaru’s hand me downs?”

Sasuke ignores this, gesturing towards his own arm. “I’ve locked his power into a sequence of seals. I’m going to transfer them to you gradually. Uriel knows not to burn you, and by going through me, Samael should be neutralised as well.”
“This is possible,” Naruto says. “Taking power from another exorcist? Upgrading? Why don’t you always –”

“Normally one goes nova because of demons. In that case the power’s need for the exorcism.” Sasuke starts drawing the first seal on Naruto’s wrist, fusing their arms together for a brief, burning movement. When Sasuke moves his away, the first of the seals is gone from him, smouldering instead under Naruto’s skin. It’s a subtly different power from Uriel’s, both less protective of Naruto and more open to him, because orphaned, no longer yearning to return to its rightful master. “Obviously it’s heresy.” He gives Naruto a considering look, half challenge, half concern. “How’s it feel?”

“I’m good. Gimme the next.”

Sasuke smirks back at him, etching another seal into him, and another.

They’re up to five when the opposite wall gives way, letting seven exorcists enter.

Naruto piggybacks Sasuke’s understanding that these are Orochimaru’s men, intending to erase the stain of his unworthy heir affiliating with shifters and committing heresy.

Naruto always figured you had to be kind of stupid to follow Orochimaru. This proves it.

Given the way they search for cover, they don’t even understand that this is a suicide mission.

They do seem to understand, however, that Sasuke’s out of their league: concentrating on Naruto, who’s enveloped in burning power meant to erase him from existence.

Sasuke wipes three of them instantly, incinerating a fourth.

Two of the others turn on Sasuke, the last one continuing the attack on Naruto.

“Wipe him!” Sasuke snaps.

Samael’s power, still more attuned to Sasuke than to Naruto and guided now by Uriel’s will, flows to the surface. Kyuubi seethes but curls obediently underneath the angelic energy, keeping Naruto whole and safe as Samael’s fire leaps from the seals on his arms, immolating his opponent.

There’s a moment of pushback, but whoever the stranger channels can’t stand against Samael.

The power burns blinding, until there’s absolutely nothing left of the attacker. His very soul has been incinerated.

Naruto turns towards Sasuke, who must have wiped one of his opponents and is now slowly burning the other.

Sasuke takes his wrist, stroking the seals until they sink deeper under Naruto’s skin, tangling irreversibly with Naruto’s native energy.

“I wiped a crusader,” Naruto says.

“So did I.”

“Duh, not like it’s your first.”

Sasuke shockingly snickers. “This is proof. You’re an exorcist.”
Then there are steps, heavy but human. Ibiki Morino enters the room flanked by Anko and surprisingly few guards. He nods curtly at them. “They were broadcasting from the moment they entered.”

Anko smirks, savage and volatile and so, so weary. “Welcome to World War IV.”

Shikamaru isn’t used to understanding things gradually. Realisations tend to hit him immediately, no space for thought between fact and conclusion. But it’s only slowly, in numb increments, that the commencement of WW4 dawns on him.

It begins when Naruto calls him, a rather short call, Naruto’s voice drawn and intense.

Shikamaru catches on to the hurry, takes the bag containing Sasuke’s latest experiments in constructing sacred swords for Naruto and gets Temari to drive him to the assigned location.

It’s a windy day, mostly sunny, thin clouds chased quickly back and forth across the sky.

Naruto and Sasuke, accompanied by Anko Mitarashi and a small entourage, are standing on top of a highrise. Naruto starts to fill him in on what’s happened – and Shikamaru scrambles for the media outlets, to see Naruto channelling the power of heaven, the magic exclusive to God’s chosen children. To see Sasuke turn on his own kind without hesitation, wiping several exorcists attacking Naruto – while Sasuke opens the bag and starts working on the swords.

“Orochimaru’s dead?” Temari confirms.

“Yes,” Naruto says. “And now – well, there’s no use holding back. We’re going all the way with this. Shikamaru, you got your equipment, right?”

Shikamaru starts to set it up without comment. He understands what’s going to happen, agrees that it’s the only logical course of action, and still his stomach twists, brain momentarily freezing at the utter horror, the world gone dizzingly wrong, when Sasuke reaches up. He moves his hand as if he’s wrenching at something, and Shikamaru supposes he is, because heaven opens.

Shikamaru can’t actually see demons, but he does see darkness, a horrifying and utterly unnatural darkness. Actual evil, which shouldn’t have a place in a civilised, scientific, secularised world, but which is invading it now anyway.

Naruto smiles.

He steps into the sky as if it’s always been his domain. There’s light around him, heavenly light, possibly wings.

Sasuke remains on the roof, to all appearances uninvolved in what’s happening, as Naruto exorcises.

He doesn’t seem to need incantations now, angel blades forming in his hands as if they were his birthright. After a while, Sasuke apparently finishes with one of the sacred swords and throws it up towards Naruto, who catches it, and glows even brighter.

Shikamaru streams it live. He feels disembodied, unreal.

That mad, impossible dream: to become a crusader, to wake up from the Calvinist nightmare of predestination and helplessness.
If Naruto said, *Take up your cross and follow me*, Shikamaru would seriously consider it.

Shikamaru supposes he shouldn’t be surprised that they’re having what amounts to a war council spread out on the carpet and sofa in one of the rec rooms. The adults are elsewhere, which is too bad for the adults. Naruto and Sasuke started this war, and Shikamaru’s increasingly certain that Naruto and Sasuke will finish it.

After Naruto’s exorcism, when Naruto was busy having a screaming match with Minato, Sasuke shrugged everyone off and went to bed. Apparently torturing Orochimaru to death was tiring work.

To be fair, Ino showed him some of the pictures taken after Sasuke burnt Orochimaru, and Shikamaru’s prepared to acknowledge that it must’ve taken skill and patience to torture a man so badly hurt while avoiding the killing blow. He imagines Sasuke drilling through his teeth, precision burning nonessential body parts.

He notices Sasuke’s return by noticing how Naruto abruptly relaxes. And it’s – remarkable. Sasuke climbs over the back of the couch, settling against Naruto’s side. He’s still pale with sleep, maybe he had a nightmare, and he moulds himself to Naruto like the most natural thing in the world. Naruto slips an arm around his shoulders and tilts his half-finished dinner plate towards him, and Sasuke starts eating the greens.

For the first time since the bond business began – no, since the first time Shikamaru met Naruto, way back in boarding school, Naruto doesn’t seem starved. It’s so clear now, that Sasuke’s available to him: Sasuke’s magic, Sasuke’s body, Sasuke’s mind. It’s evident from every line of their bodies that Sasuke too has decided that they belong to each other.

Which is cute, if you’re into that kind of stuff, but Shikamaru’s rather more concerned with the news playing on the widescreen.

All over the world, shifter are rising up. Naruto responds to the footage with less wonder than Shikamaru had assumed: it comes to him that Naruto has always known this would happen, in the same bone-deep way he’s known Sasuke will be his – in that way of his of knowing things will happen that everyone else knows are impossible. Sasuke remains unimpressed, spearing a piece of broccoli and making Naruto shift his arm so he can lean on him more comfortably.

“What?” he grunts when Naruto turns to him after all with a rather stunned grin.

Naruto makes an extravagant and incomprehensible gesture. “This is the revolution!”

“I can see that,” Sasuke say. “Sit still.”

Naruto snorts but obediently stills. He wouldn’t want Sasuke to move away. He finger wrestles with Sasuke, eventually emerging victorious and seizing the last pepper, chewing open-mouthed in triumph. Sasuke frowns at him but remains curled into his side, resting his head on Naruto’s shoulder and rubbing at something – a mark? – that glows on Naruto’s wrist.

Shikamaru had never imagined he could look so domestic, as if he’s a human child after all, a person who gets tired and likes to be comforted: someone fundamentally approachable and understandable.

He thinks then of Sakura, of all people, saying *a lynx trying terribly hard to pass itself off as a house cat*. Of Mist Town, and Kabuto, and New Suna. Remembers the level of violence between Sasuke and Naruto, the ease with which Sasuke hurts Naruto and accepts being hurt by him.
But Shikamaru needs to get over these reservations, get over himself. If you can’t play advisor to the sort of leader you’d prefer…well, take what you can get, and all that. Minato won’t listen to him, and in any case Minato is no longer in charge.

This becomes clear to Minato himself only a few hours later, when he returns from wherever he was – some meeting with Ibiki, Shikamaru surmises, or perhaps with the exorcists or the media, or even the more radical shifters – and corners Naruto at first opportunity.

With palpable reluctance, Naruto disentangles from Sasuke, who must be in a strange mood, because he leans up to catch Naruto’s neck, pulling him down and looking at him like there’s nobody else in the room. Like there’s nobody else in the world.

Shikamaru’s always known they sleep together, of course. He’s just not always been sure Sasuke’s particularly into it.

This time, he looks like he’s in love, and really, looks like is all Shikamaru needs.

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