Of Harrowed Hearts

By Sable_Scribe

Summary

Sometimes the hardest battle isn’t enough to change a heart, sometimes all the war and blood in the world isn’t enough to shift a single destiny.

Sometimes a simple touch is enough to break down the strongest of barriers, sometimes a single word is enough to make the world quake.
Sometimes the most reaching of changes comes in the form of a little boy sad enough, strong enough, and kind enough to make friends with a monster. Sometimes one change makes waves.

Naruto has been hearing the rumbling growl in the back of his head for as long as he can remember. He’s seven when he tries to talk to it for the first time. He’s the dead last, the failure at everything, so he doesn’t actually expect to succeed. And when he’s suddenly standing, knee deep in murky water and face to face with a demon, he has no idea what to expect. As it turns out, the world could use something unexpected.

In which Naruto discovers the real meaning of the word monster, Sasuke discovers power and strength and learns the difference between them, and Sakura discovers that being herself is not as selfish as she thought. Where Kakashi learns to fight again for what he loves, and Obito never stopped.

Notes

Oh the Opportunities in plot holes.
I regret nothing
Naruto has been hearing it for as long as he can remember.

It’s not a voice or anything, just a growling rumble that fluxes in pitch and intensity, a dark, hateful sound that brings to mind bared fangs and the color of blood. He’s curious, despite being mildly terrified, about where it comes from.

It doesn’t go away.

Naruto knows better than to talk about it. No need to be a bigger pariah than he already is. It’s the worst at night, when the deep roar raises like a howl, full of fury and pain and something Naruto knows very well. Something like loneliness.

He doesn’t sleep much on those nights. He doesn’t sleep much at all anymore.

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He’s seven when he tries to talk to it for the first time. He’s the dead last, the failure at everything, so he doesn’t actually expect to succeed.

Let alone get it on the first try.

It’s one of those dark, lonely nights again. He’d failed a taijutsu history test today. The words had made his head hurt and his body jittery again as he read them, and he’d ended up drawing stick figures in the margins on the last page and turning the test in mostly blank. Iruka’s look of disappointment had hurt. He’s usually good at taijutsu.

He’s lying on his bed, running his eyes along the cracks in his ceiling, when he thinks- what the hell.

Naruto closes his eyes, reaches back into his own head, and thinks; “Hello?”

There’s no response, but the growling stops, slows to something like a rumble. After minutes pass with no other response, Naruto opens his eyes, sighing.

But he’s not looking at his bedroom ceiling.

He’s not in his bedroom at all. He’s suddenly standing, knee deep in filthy water in a cavern so huge he can’t see the ceiling through the murk. An enormous metal gate, thick ornate black bars stuck with a paper seal, seals off an entire section of the place.

“Hello?” Naruto repeats.

Something dark and enormous shifts within the cage, uncurling from the dark, but still moving in the shadows.

“Hey, I can see you, ya know. I know you’re there.”

The massive shape stills, growling softly. Something swishes, several somethings, sweeping through the air and sending ripples across the dark water. The shape moves forward into the sparse light of this place, and Naruto gets his first glance at his internal tennant.
The creature is massive, all sharp teeth and cruel eyes, tails flicking back and forth restlessly in the dark. He’s the color of bright blood, though faded and dingy, giving the rough bristled fur an orangish tint. It looms over him, sharp, black wraithed red eyes regarding him with disdain and annoyance.

Yeah, Naruto’s seen that look before, giant monster thing or no.

“So you’re the voice in my head?” Naruto asks. Some part of him acknowledges that he should probably be terrified, but for some reason he knows the enormous creature can’t hurt him.

The big fox– because it clearly is a fox, Naruto may be an idiot but he at least knows that much, multiple tails or no– tilts its massive head slightly.

For a second Naruto wonders whether or not the thing can actually understand him, but then it speaks.

Its voice is so low and deadly it’s like a seismic wave against Naruto’s eardrums, dark and powerful and heavy.

~You can hear me already, little meat sack?~ The fox grumbles, it’s voice tumbling rough and abrasive to fill the space with its vibration. Naruto fights the urge to rub at his ears.

“Yeah, I can hear you. What are you? What are you doing down here?”

The fox growls ferally, like Naruto’s pinched an unseen nerve.

~Go back to your world, petty human. I have no patience for your kind. Get out.~

A push of dark and powerful energy, and Naruto finds himself flung back into his body, back into the dark emptiness of his apartment. For a moment Naruto entertains the idea of it all being a dream, but he can still feel the dark power pulsing restlessly beneath his ribs and decides that no, he hadn’t just imagined it.

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The next day is just as bad as the last, but this is nothing new to Naruto. The hateful looks, the distrust, the disgust in some cases, he’s used to it now. Things like Sasuke beating him in a spar and then not acknowledging him for the rest of the day, Sakura and Ino looking annoyed with every word out of his mouth– they’re all things Naruto has dealt with before and will again. It doesn’t matter. He still loves this village, loves these people despite their hate. They’re good underneath it, and he has Iruka and Jiji. His life could be far worse.

That night, as he looks into the cool darkness of the night sky through the window, he does it again.

Closes his eyes and dives backwards.

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Every night after that, he lets himself fall back into his head, finds himself in the filthy, dark cavern of the Fox’s prison. For the first week or so, the fox sends him right back out the second his
metaphorical feet hit the ground, but Naruto is nothing if not impossibly stubborn, and so he just keeps showing up.

Eventually, the Fox stops kicking him out of his own head and starts to study him; like he’s a particularly oddly behaving insect. Naruto finds that the louder he is, the more likely the Fox is to eject him, so he does a lot of looking around and asks benign questions instead of the ones that have been nagging at him.

The relationship that results is… strange to say the least, and not really what Naruto had been expecting. The Fox mostly ignores him, curling into the corners of his prison either to nap or do whatever it is that giant fox creatures do instead of sleep. Naruto talks, mostly to himself, about his day or whatever comes to mind, and so long as he doesn’t raise his voice too much or ask any probing questions, the creature lets him stay. Naruto isn’t sure exactly what the fox gets out of it, but Naruto gets a place to go when he can’t sleep, and even though the fox never listens when he speaks, it helps sometimes to talk to him instead of to himself.

Naruto might be imagining things, but he thinks the Fox has stopped howling so much at night.

It goes on like this for a long time, and for the most part it stays the same, except for that sometimes instead of sleeping through his presence, the Fox will watch him with intense eyes, blood red irises searching for something Naruto’s not sure he has. It doesn’t happen often, but when it does Naruto just keeps talking like nothing has changed, except he actually talks directly at the Fox instead of at the walls.

After the first few exchanges of harsh, snarled words, the Fox doesn’t speak for six months.

Naruto goes about his normal life. Iruka-sensei is awesome and takes Naruto out for ramen all the time now, and Teuchi and Ayame are always nice to him, so it’s not so bad compared to what it could be. He talks to the Fox about them a lot, but he leaves out being kicked out of the Korean barbeque place and the takoyaki stand. It doesn’t matter so much anyways. Not anymore. Naruto still doesn’t sleep much, but it’s for a different reason now, something less exhausting.

And somewhere along the line, the Fox ends up staring at him more often than he sleeps. The angry howls are gone entirely.

More months pass by like this, a standstill brought about by the combination of Naruto’s stubbornness and the creature’s refusal to acknowledge him. That’s okay though, Naruto is used to being ignored, and he knows how to make sure he’s noticed.

Then, suddenly and without warning, that changes.

Naruto knows something’s up the second he settles back in his head for the night. Normally the Fox is tucked into the corner someplace, steadfastly pretending that Naruto doesn’t exist, but not this time.

This time the creature is waiting for him, closer to the bars of his prison than he’s ever deigned to be before, bright red eyes glowing with intent sharp enough to cut steel.

Naruto is all of seven and a half and very stubborn about it, so he glares right back, refusing to be cowed by the giant creature behind bars.

~Why?~ The Fox demands immediately, the first word it’s spoken in more than half a year. It’s voice is the same as Naruto remembers, low and rough, but unless Naruto is hearing things there’s a second tone underneath the aggravation that hadn’t been there before.
Something like confusion.

And it shows a little on his face too–his ears are tucked a little more, his eyes aren’t quite so narrow, his fur is bristled along his snout.

Naruto blinks dumbly, taken aback. “Why what?”

~Why do you do this? Insist on returning here night after night. You will gain nothing from it. There is nothing for you here.~

The creature hasn’t raised his voice though– it’s still low and strangely thin despite its harshness.

Naruto makes a face. “Who says I have to get anything out of it?”

~You mean to say that you would converse with a monster on a whim?~

The last word is growled and spat like a curse, and oh yeah, Naruto knows that emotion like he knows his own heartbeat, no matter how hard the giant fox creature tries to hide it.

Hurt.

And that’s it suddenly. It makes sense in Naruto’s messed up head now. Because if there’s one thing that Naruto knows, it’s pain, the inside kind, the kind that comes from loneliness and loss and fear and anger. And it’s so easy to see how all that hurt can produce all that hate.

“You’re not a monster.” He says, with all the confidence and stubbornness in his little body.

Because monsters are made, not born, and people are afraid of what they don’t understand. Naruto isn’t, but according to most of the village, he isn’t a person anyway.

The creature snorts, tails lashing behind him.

~And how would you know that?~

It says harshly, but the confusion is still there, underneath the rage and hate and hurt. But Naruto knows that fury and loathing and disdain are only really bodyguards for the deepest and ugliest of wounds.

“I just do!” Is what he says though, because Naruto has never been good with words.

~You don’t know anything.~ The creature insists, but the conviction in its words just isn’t there anymore.

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~What do you think you’ll get out of this?~

The fox asks again a long time later. Naruto is sitting, legs crossed, in the six or so inches of water that floods the fox’s prison. The water is linked to Naruto somehow– he isn’t sure why, but the worse his day is, the thicker and more sludge like the water becomes. Today had been awesome though– Iruka-sensei had let him get an extra portion of ramen at Ichiraku, because he’d actually had to make Sasuke work for his win in sparring today. The water is cool and clear as a result, and despite the Fox’s usually sour mood, he seems to be enjoying a reprieve from the muck.

“Why do I have to get something out of it?” He repeats, leaning back on his arms to stare at the fathomless ceiling above him. “It’s so quiet here, how do you stand it?”
~I find myself missing it more and more.~

The creature growls.

Naruto ticks his head to the side and kicks his feet a little. “But don’t you get lonely?”

The question seems to take the enormous being off guard.

~What would you know of loneliness?~

It snarls, but Naruto doesn’t rise to the bait, even though a year ago he might have wanted to.

Instead he looks up, smiles, and lies right through his teeth.

“Not much.” he says easily.

The fox’s ears twitch and his eyes narrow.

~What is your name, little human?~

Naruto smiles with less teeth. “Naruto, Naruto Uzumaki!”

The fox’s ears go all the way up at that, his crimson eyes widening fractionally.

~Uzumaki, you say?~

The fox mumbles, almost to himself.

Naruto nods and rocks forwards to put his hands on his knees. Something changes in the air, enough of the tension leaves the atmosphere that Naruto feels brave enough to ask his own question.

“So, what’s yours?”

The fox pulls its head back from the bars abruptly.

~What is my what, exactly?~

“Well you have a name, don’t you?”

The fox freezes instantly. The tails still mid swish and the little world around them suddenly goes very very quiet.

Just when Naruto begins to think that he probably said something wrong the stillness breaks- the fox's tails start up their soft swish again, and the fox speaks. Low and clear.

~My name… is Kurama.~

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“So what even are you?” Naruto asks one day, when Kurama seems in a good enough mood to answer questions. He’s lounging easily, tails swaying idly back and forth, colossal head resting lazily on crossed forepaws. The fox lifts his ears a little.

~You mean you don’t know, fishcake?~

Naruto shakes his head, brows furrowing at the odd nickname. “Nope. Nobody talks about it.”

Kurama doesn’t answer immediately, instead he regards Naruto for a long moment with keen crimson eyes.
"I am the bijuu of Nine Tails."

He says eventually.

That means nothing to Naruto, and he says as much.

“What the heck is a bijuu?” Because he’s noticed the nine tails thing already, and figures Kurama will elaborate anyways.

~Humans call us Tailed Beasts. We are beings of living chakra, and have existed far longer than your little shinobi villages.~

“Living chakra? Whoa… does that mean you’re like, really really strong then? Iruka-sensei says chakra is why Chunin and Jounin ninja are so strong.” Naruto babbles.

Kurama just snorts through his nose harshly.

~Like ants before dragons. I am the most powerful being you are ever likely to meet.~

“Out of all of you?” Naruto asks, horribly curious. “You did say us, right? How many bijuu are there?”

~…We are nine.~ The Kyuubi says with some reluctance. ~I am the eldest.~

“Are the others foxes too? Like you?”

Kurama shakes his head.

~We are all different. Gyuuki, for example, is an Ushioni. A bull demon.~

“How many tails does he have? What does he look like?”

Kurama blinks, clearly not expecting his enthusiasm, so Naruto tries to tone it down a little, sits on his hands and makes an effort to be still. It’s hard.

~He’s the bijuu of Eight Tails.~ Kurama allows. ~And I suppose if I had to describe him to a human, he appears as a mix between a bull and an octopus…~

Kurama tells Naruto about his siblings in only cursory detail, and Naruto has never had a brother or sister before, but Kurama makes it sound like it’s simultaneously the best and worst thing in the world. He seems sad when he talks about them, but Naruto doesn’t ask.

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Shortly after that comes one of the worst days of his life.

He’s not exactly sure how it happens, it’s all a freaking blur, but there’s screaming and anger and fury and even more hate than Naruto is used to, a man with a wide red face practically spitting at him, Ayame yelling somewhere in the background.

He doesn’t even really remember what the man had said, but he remembers it hitting all the parts inside him that already hurt. He was running before he even managed to start breathing again, doesn’t hear Ayame’s furious outrage, and doesn’t notice the powerful stranger that materializes around the corner—he just bolts. He doesn’t look where he’s going, doesn’t care, because the man’s
words are still rattling around in his head, the equivalent of all the cold hateful stares he’d ever been given voiced aloud.

*Monster. Demon. Worthless. Should never have been born.*

And he knows he should be used to it by now, but it *hurts* like nothing he’s ever felt, to be so easily disregarded, so easily told that his existence means *nothing. Nothing at all.*

And so he runs until he can’t run anymore. And by the time he realizes where he’s going, it’s too late.

Naruto has heard of the Forest of Death before, on the tongues of Jounin and Chunin alike, but he’s never seen it, never thought that it might look like enormous dense trees and a canopy so thick it turns day to night. Never thought to heed the warning calls of ravens overhead or the hissing sound of swampy ground between the gargantuan roots. By the time he realizes he’s made a mistake he has no idea where he is, no clue how to get out of this dark place.

He’s lost.
Promise of Heart

Chapter Notes

I think I accidentally made this fic deep.
Oops.
I figured that starting the first chapter with a cliffhanger was maybe a little cruel, so here you go.
Also, KAKASHI.
Moving on.
I regret nothing.

Kurama has been alive for a very long time. He’s lived so much, and at the same time so little. He’s watched villages fall and battles rage, land torn asunder by old primal chakra and stitched back together the same way. He’s watched human lives go by from behind sealed bars for centuries now, watched his freedom bleed away to nothing and hated for it.

He’d hated his jailors most of all.

He still remembers Mito with blinding clarity, in perfect memory. She was strong and stern, loved deeply and exclusively, was a beacon of strength and hope for the humans that had locked him away.

And he remembers the way she would look down her nose at him through the bars of his cage, the empty toneless cell he had been forced into, like she would live in spite of him, like he was some colossal burden she had been left to bear, like a warden.

He remembers Kushina better though, and hated her less, but even she still thought of him as a burden, thought herself a warden, saw him as a weapon.

But this shit? This is something else entirely. And Kurama has no fucking clue what.

Never, from the moment of his creation to that very second in time, never in his incredibly long and powerful life, has someone ever asked him his name.

This kid, this child, in one question, has shown Kurama more consideration and respect than any being since the Sage himself.

Everything Kurama knows about humans, about jinchuuriki, is based on a solid faith in their petty, hateful ways. And this little brat has the gall to shake that faith to core with one fucking question.

This kid’s stubborn and continued presence in the seal space had been one thing– easy enough to write off as idle curiosity except for the fact that– despite Kurama’s obvious distaste at his presence and the fact that there is nothing down there of interest whatsoever– the kid kept coming back every night.

But this? This? What the hell is Kurama supposed to do with this?
There’s something strange and warm forming in him, small but determined and entirely foreign. It grows, little by little, night after night, each time the little golden haired brat sits in the dark dank cold of his prison and never looks as miserable as Kurama expects him to become. Each time the kid recounts his day, speaks with such fondness about senseis and ramen vendors and Kurama knows that it’s because they are the only people in the entire village that have shown him any kindness, even if the kid never says so. When Kurama had snarled about loneliness, the potency of the lie in the response he’d been given had sent Kurama reeling.

He’d told the brat about his parents, told him how he’d killed them in cold blood when they’d tried to reseal him, tried to elicit some kind of familiar fear or hatred. But it had only made him sad, aggrieved, nothing like Kurama had intended, and for a fraction of a second, Kurama had hated himself for doing it and he had no idea why. So he’d told the brat about his parents when he’d asked, in some kind of recompense, and grudgingly admitted that he remembered little of his siege against Konoha but for the strange and lingering impression of blood on his tails and broken Uchiha eyes.

And the forgiveness had been instant. Foolish. Unconditional and without thought. Idiotic. Or maybe wise beyond years. Kurama truly cannot tell.

In the midst of this inner turmoil, in this chaos of unfamiliar feeling that Kurama is still trying to snuff, something happens.

A rending surge of hurt and sorrow sweeps deep through the seal space, calling Kurama’s attention up instantly.

Impossible.

Kurama cannot feel his Jinchuuriki’s emotions unless he makes a conscious effort to sense them, but this is powerful and clear, uncontrolled, and so very clearly the brat’s. Even at her most distraught Kushina’s emotions never reached down to touch him like this, and never with such force.

Something begins to mix with the pain and sadness. The acrid tang to the air speaks of fear.

Kurama reaches through what he can of the seal, syncs his vision with that of the brat’s.

Fire country tigers come into view, prowling in a pack of three. He senses pain of the physical kind now, deep gashes along the kid’s arm from shoulder to elbow. Kurama’s chakra is doing it’s job, bloody steam already curling from the wound, but the kid isn’t fighting back, he just keeps backing up, terror rising high as the animals stalk closer.

What the hell kid? They’re just cats, fight back. He thinks, as Naruto continues to retreat, terrified.

And then it hits him.

He has no idea how to mould chakra, even if he can draw on my reserves, he has no clue how to use it.

And what the fuck are they teaching him at that stupid academy if not how to use fucking chakra? Arts and crafts?

One of the tigers attacks again, tearing through the fabric of Naruto’s jumpsuit and sending fresh waves of agony across his chest. Kurama can heal it, of course, but now his Jinchuuriki is backed
up against a tree’s wide trunk, nowhere to go, as cornered as a rat.

And that little something deep in Kurama’s chest, that spark he had been trying so hard to smother, suddenly flares to life all at once. Powerful and electric, it surges forward, and Kurama acts. Instant and foolish, unconditionally and without thought.

For the first time, it is Kurama who reaches.

He sends his chakra flooding through the seal, pushes as much of himself as he can with it. But there is no instinct to escape, to corrupt, to control.

Only to Protect.

Because something deep inside him knows that whatever this kid is, human or not, Uzumaki or not, he’s different, and Kurama will not let that slip away before he knows what it could be. Not without a fight.

The Shade rushes through the brat’s chakra and coalesces, an aura of purest wrath shielding him like a cloak, and Kurama roars.

The shockwave is so powerful it sends the tigers skidding backwards. Kurama’s aura does the rest, and the overgrown cats scatter to the wind in fear.

Naruto staggers, his back hits the tree trunk and he slides to ground, the tears still streaming hard down his small face. Kurama curls his chakric form around him in some instinct he’s never felt and doesn’t understand. Naruto’s clawed hands scrub at his eyes, now as bloody a red as his own, and it confirms something he’s long suspected.

In altering the seal used to imprison Kurama into his son, Minato Namikaze inadvertently removed the chakric safeguards that had been present on every seal before it. As a result, there is no barrier between Naruto’s chakra systems and Kuramas, no buffer— the chakra enters the boy’s pathways in it’s raw form. The healing properties of his chakra are more potent as a result, can cause physical transformation, but he knows for a fact that his raw chakra burns harsher than any acid.

Kurama stays anyway, wrapped around him even though this form is not a physical one, until the brat’s sobs die down.

He steadfastly ignores the feeling in his gut that tells him something has just changed for good.

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Kurama leads Naruto out of the Forest of Death. It’s nothing so obvious as giving him directions or anything like that… just a sensation he gets in his chest that urges him to go a certain way. The fox feels… different within him, like something’s shifted. Two steps back from what it was before. Or maybe forward. He can still feel the hate curling in the beast’s chakra, but no longer is any of it directed towards him. It’s an odd feeling. Alien. But he doesn’t mind. Quite the opposite— the strange feeling of acceptance calms his nerves and torn heart in ways he’s incredibly grateful for.

He ends up heading in the general direction of Shikamaru’s clan forest, though he’s never been there this way before. Naruto likes Shikamaru. He talks to Naruto just the same as he would anybody else, and he always looks at the people who treat Naruto badly like they have some sort of mental disease and he's debating whether he should try and fix it or push it as far away from himself as he can as to not get infected. His parents apparently hadn’t put the same stigma on playing with Naruto that most had.
He likes Kiba for the same reason, though Naruto knows the dog-ninja only first started playing with him to make his mom mad.

The woods outside training ground forty four are still thick and sharp and matted together, so the first chance he gets he hops down onto a swiftly flowing river peppered with flat rocks. The forest is just as thick on the other side, so he moves up river instead of risking his already torn up jumpsuit on more briars.

The river is more like a creek—wide and shallow and only a few feet down at it’s deepest. It winds very little, rolling over the steps of soft rapids as it curves gently southeast. After ten minutes or so of following it the banks open up into a clearing; a circular stretch of thick grass and low ferns penned in by towering redwoods. The little river cuts crosswise through the glade, curling into the basin of a cascade at its far end. Water runs in clear ribbons over a steep and rocky cliff face, framed on one side by the biggest willow tree Naruto has ever seen, so big that it’s branches dip to cover the whole basin in tendrils of green. He gravitates towards it without really thinking, tired and aching, and he immediately feels safer behind the arbor curtain, like a soft shield against the outside world. He thumps down to sit between it’s roots, scrubbing hard at his eyes again with the back of his sleeve.

It makes his eyes sting more, not less, and when he actually gives the sleeve a good look he finds it covered in blood and grime, the orange fabric torn to nothing but thin strips in places. He grits his teeth and pulls the jumpsuit angrily from his person, ripping at the zipper and yanking the thick orange turtleneck off his shoulders. He leaves it half off, pooled around his waist, and drops his head into his arms, crossed over his knees.

He just can’t stop crying, and it’s stupid and weak but the more frustrated he gets at himself the more he cries and he just can’t make it stop.

When the hiccups slow down and Naruto finally manages to halt the waterworks, he feels the burning rush of chakra again. He knows now that it’s Kurama, stirring up from his seal. The hurt in the burn is familiar, like how muscles feel when worked into failure, like nerves feel when rubbed raw.

Kurama had...protected him. Naruto is used to the dark power and wrath that radiates from Kurama’s chakra. He isn’t used to having it rise in his defense.

He feels the same surge he’d felt then but softer, slower, as Kurama’s chakra moves through him. It starts as vaguely reddish haze that rises off Naruto’s skin in waves. Then in condenses, becomes more solid as more chakra floods the shape, and then materializes into the form of the Kyuubi. Compared to Kurama’s true size it’s tiny—little bigger than a horse.

“I thought you couldn’t leave your seal.” Naruto says, his voice barely above a raspy whisper.

The fox curls his body around him, tails flicking back around for Kurama to rest his paws on. He’s sort of see through in the middle but more solid around the edges, like a drawing that hasn’t been shaded right.

~I cannot. This is just a shade, brat. Only chakra.~

The fox says, just as quietly.

Naruto’s eyes start to well up again. “I’m sorry.” He says miserably, babbling, burying his face
back in his elbows. “I should have been watching where I was going, I should have noticed when I
crossed the fence—”

~Easy.~ Kurama cuts him off smoothly, almost gently, and isn’t that a kick in the teeth— Kurama of
all people comforting him. A single chakric claw tucks under his chin—not entirely solid, but not
entirely ethereal either— and tips his head up.

~Did you know that man, kid?~ Kurama asks.

Naruto shakes his head.

~Was he important to you? Like your Teuchi, or your Ayame, or your Iruka-sensei?~

Naruto shakes his head again.

~Then why does what he says matter to you?~

Naruto blinks, not understanding.

~Does your Iruka-sensei think you’re a monster?~

Another head shake.

~Then who are you going to believe?~

The tears stop, his eyes go wide as he looks as Kurama. The fox looks tired and sad, so different
from what Naruto has become accustomed too that the shift alone makes Naruto readjust his view.
Why had it mattered? The man hadn’t been Jiji, or his sensei, or anyone precious, just a man
whose face he can’t even remember.

And it… works. If he thinks of it like that, he can shove it back and away, make it matter less up
against the warm existences of those precious to him.

“You’re pretty smart, Kurama.” He says, wiping the last of the tears from his eyes. His head hurts
and his nose is still runny, but he doesn’t feel quite so much like he’s drowning. “I bet you’re not
scared of anything.”

Kurama looks at him for a long moment.

~...Untrue.~

Naruto tips his head to the side. “What could scare a bijuu?” he asks, half curiosity half concern.

Kurama cocks his head, almost in mimicry, crimson eyes pinching in what might be disbelief,
might be confusion, might be pain.

~Do you remember when I told you of my siblings?~

Naruto nods. “Mhm. Matatabi and Saiken and Kouko and all of them?” Kurama dips his vulpine
head in affirmation. “What about them?”

~It would seem I am losing them.~

Naruto’s eyes widen to saucers. “What do you mean? What happened? What do you mean ‘losing
them’?”
As the eldest of the bijuu, I possess the ability to sense my Kin. Their locations. Their states of being. Over the last few years, one by one, they have been vanishing from my senses entirely.

“But… but isn’t that impossible? You can’t be killed, right? And aren’t you even stronger than Kages like Jiji?”

Kurama shakes his head, and Naruto’s stomach drops into his sandals.

“Our existences depend on those of our Jinchuuriki. If they were somehow killed, our life would be snuffed out with theirs. Likewise, removing a bijuu from their Jinchuuriki pulls the soul of said Jinchuuriki from its mortal shell along with it. And if enough power is brought to bear, it is possible to subdue even us. It is how we ended up imprisoned in human beings in the first place.

“Are they dead?”

Kurama’s ears flatten.

“I’m not sure.” He admits. “I can still sense their chakra, but it’s weak. Constricted somehow. I cannot tell if they are merely imprisoned, or if chakra is the only thing left of them.”

Suddenly all of Naruto’s problems seem very, very small. He’s never had a family, but he tries to imagine what it would feel like to lose Iruka-sensei and not be able to do a thing about it.

He finds the mere thought makes him sick with grief.

“Who…” Naruto starts, but can’t bring himself to finish the thought.

“Who did I lose?” Kurama asks, because he’s smart like that.

Naruto nods.

“Son Goku, Isobu, and Matatabi.”

So the monkey, the turtle, and the cat, if Naruto remembers right. He settles his cheek against his elbow. “Tell me about them?”

Kurama’s eyes go wide for a moment, but then they soften in resignation.

And he does.

Later Naruto learns that the civilian man was a drunk, had accosted Naruto for some imagined slight against his person as he walked along the street towards Ichiraku. Ayame had heard the shouting and come to his defense, small and slight and impossibly ferocious, shouting the man down right back.

What he never learns, is that before the man can even turn his hate on Ayame for defending a monster, a tall ninja with bone white hair and a crooked hitai-ate —so obviously a Jounin he practically wears the rank like a cloak— wraps a single hand painfully tight around the man’s shoulder, powerful fingers digging into muscle and nerve with pinpoint precision.

The man drops to his knees with a cry, curling inward like a dying insect against the pain, but the pressure remains perfectly steady, unrelenting and unremorseful. He crouches down next to the man, the move deceptively easy, enough so that passerby could easily misread it as someone comforting a nauseous stranger. But up close the tension in the the man’s body is painfully clear,
and he uses the motion as cover to dig down to the bone. He leans close, his voice low and nonchalant except for the deadly undercurrent of dark fury that sobers the man so quickly he sees stars.

“That was poorly done of you.” He breathes, his tone smooth and toxic. “Consider this your first, and final, warning. If you ever so much as come near that kid again...well.” The man’s single steel-sharp eye curves in false amusement. “I’m sure you can use your imagination.”

~<>~

Later that night, Kurama’s brat sits, legs crossed before his prison bars. He’s thinking so hard Kurama could swear there’s steam coming out of his ears. It would be funny, if Kurama’s mood weren’t already so sour.

“Who would be able to do it though? Hunt bijuu?” They’re still on this topic hours after they should have been off it, and it’s starting to grate on the Kyuubi’s nerves. If there’s nothing he can do, it’s the last thing in the universe he wants to talk about.

~Shinobi, I would imagine.~ He growls shortly, but Naruto doesn’t seem to notice his temper. Not surprising, since it’s usually far worse.

The brat is uncharacteristically quiet after that. Kurama might be relieved, except that he can sense that something’s up. He sits, wrists on his calves, staring into empty space. Deeper in thought than any eight-year-old has a right to be. He’s so tiny, so fragile, but suddenly he looks up at Kurama and his eyes are iron.

He tells Kurama, on no uncertain terms; “I don’t care who they are. I’m going to stop them.”

Kurama barks out a harsh and humourless laugh. But despite the close proximity Naruto doesn’t start, doesn’t relax the steel in his small face.

~And what could you do, little brat? The shinobi hunting my kind would be like gods to you.~

‘I’ll get stronger then.’ The kid says the words calmly, like he’s stating a fact; like the sky is blue or the grass is green or blood is red. “I’ll get stronger than everyone.”

Kurama stops laughing.

He presses his nose against the bars of the gate, washed gold in the new light flooding through the chamber. The kid doesn’t flinch, doesn’t move away, even when Kurama’s enormous snout moves between the columns to rest practically in the kid’s lap. He meets Kurama’s eyes unwaveringly, will adamant. Something dangerously close to confidence flickers in those cerulean eyes.

He means it.

~You would make that kind of promise, kid?~ Kurama rumbles softly.

Naruto shrugs like the question is obvious. “I need to get strong enough to be a Kage anyway, in order to protect the people I love.” He grins. “I just need to be strong enough for this too.”

He means every damn word out of his mouth, with every bright corner of his being. Kurama can practically see it gleaming in his eyes.
Kurama asks, already knowing the answer; ~Whatever that takes?~

Naruto just smiles wider and, to the great fox’s complete disbelief, places a hand on the fur of his snout, small fingers curling in the short strands. “Believe it.”

Kurama does.

The bijuu huffs a soft breath, enough to ruffle golden hair. ~Then I might be able to help with that.~ He says, because this little boy may be weak, may be naive; but with his bright soul, unwavering will, and powerful spirit, that is something Kurama can easily fix.
Okay, I am posting this two days early for two reasons. Firstly, I sense a shitty week coming and think it best I cover all my bases before said shit hits fan. Second, I have a question for all readers. Itachi/Shisui. If I could pull it off. And that's a big IF without touching down on some seriously cliche and trope-infested ground. Thoughts? Either way, I regret nothing.

Naruto wakes up with fire in his chest and voltage crackling in his blood from toes to fingertips. Because Kurama had promised to train him. Like a real ninja.

He looks down at his hands, breathless smile on his face, and closes his fingers into fists. Kurama had warned him that it wouldn’t be easy, that it would take time and dedication and it would exhaust parts of him he didn’t know existed. But that, if anything, makes him thrill more, not less.

His dream is suddenly that much closer to not being a dream at all, and donating his blood sweat and tears to training seems like a small price to pay.

“Can we start now?” he asks, because he’s so far from sleep it’s not even funny.

~Now? It’s not even three in the morning.~ Kurama responds grumpily. Naruto gets the impression of him cracking open one crimson eye.

~Please?~

Kurama harrumphs, a terribly put upon noise that Naruto doesn’t buy for a second.

~I suppose we can start with the boring stuff.~ he agrees.

~Can training even be boring?~

~It depends on the type, believe me.~ He warns. ~Exercises in patience, for example.~

“Hey!” Naruto grumps back, because he’s fairly sure he was just insulted, or at least his attention span was. Kurama ignores his outburst.

~Do you remember when I told you we were starting from the foundations?~ he asks instead.

“Yeah.” he answers, a little confused. He’d just figured he meant the basics.

~The true basics of building strength and ability have nothing to do with jutsu, and everything to do with simple skills and knowledge. Basic life lessons.~
“Life lessons?”

There’s a long, hesitant pause.

~Like things your parents should have taught you.~

There’s a subtle apology in those words, and Kurama never apologizes, not for anything. Naruto figures calling him out on it would be unappreciated, but it makes something warm and achy eat at his chest regardless.

“What, you mean like cooking and cleaning and things? What does that stuff have to do with being a ninja?”

~Don’t dismiss something just because it seems menial. The same skills required to cook are useful when mixing poisons like the paralytics Jounin use on senbon. A clean and organized system makes it easier to get to things you need faster, be it medicine or books stored in a cabinet or weapons stashed around an apartment.~

Naruto blinks, takes a moment to consider this new idea.

“I never thought about it like that.”

~Ninja are able to turn any type of skill to their advantage. Usually the only difference between a menial skill and a deadly one is how you use it.~

Naruto nods, hops up from his bed and looks around.

“What do I do first then?”

~Clothes, first and foremost.~

“What’s wrong with my clothes?”

~You don’t want me to answer that.~

Naruto huffs indignantly, but moves over to his closet anyway. What greets him is the sorry sight of his jumpsuit, muddy, bloody, and mangled like a war veteran. Or like it was sent through a blender. One of the two.

“Dammit…” He says aloud, because how the hell is he supposed to fix that?

~Lost cause, I’m afraid.~ Kurama says without provocation. ~Do you own anything that isn’t the color of a citrus fruit?~

“What’s wrong with orange?”

~Nothing, in moderation. But it’s very… conspicuous.~

“Con- what now?”

~Noticeable.~

“Oh. Yeah, I know.”

~It’s all got to go.~
“What?! Why?”

Kurama sighs heavily through their connection. ~You’re trying to be a ninja, right? Ninja clothes have to blend in and be practical. Almost all of the stuff you have here would get in the way of both stealth and motion.~

Naruto holds up his jumpsuit, his favorite article of clothing, and grimaces forlornly at the red spiral on the back. “Aw man.”

He feels Kurama’s attention sharpen suddenly and gets a weird image of the big fox’s ears coming up.

~Hey, brat. Do you know what that symbol means?~

Naruto shakes his head, even though it means very little to Kurama.

“Nope. I just liked it, and it was on all the Jounin vests. Why?”

~It’s Uzushio’s village symbol.~

“Uzushio?”

~Hidden Whirlpool. It’s where your clan originated. Where your mother was born.~

“My mom was… wait, my CLAN? I have a clan!?”

The emotion Naruto gets through the connection is practically sheepish. ~Not exactly.~

Naruto can sense a long story coming, so he crosses his legs and sits down on the floor.

“Okay, go.”

Kurama deliberates for a bit before he seems to settle on a place to start.

~Uzushio was a sort of… sister village to Konoha, from what I understand. I remember that Mito married that sappy weirdo that was your first Hokage. Hashirama?~

“The one on the monument with the long hair and the dopy downturned eyes?”

~That’s the one.~

“I painted fat spirals on his face.”

Kurama dissolves into yipping laughter. ~Ha! I knew there was a reason I liked you, kid.~

Naruto is glad someone finds it funny. It makes getting yelled at by Iruka-sensei for two hours straight totally worth it.

“Who’s Mito?” he asks.

Kurama wipes an imaginary tear from his left eye. ~She was my first Jinchuuriki. She was an Uzumaki too. Like you, and like Kushina before you. She was the matriarch of the Uzumaki clan, when it existed.~

“What happened to it?”

~Uzushio itself was wiped out during the one of the Shinobi World Wars. The third, I think. I
remember because it happened right after Kushina left the village. She was so upset she made herself nauseous.

"Why did she leave Uzushio then?"

~She became a Jinchuuriki. Hated or no, Jinjuriki are considered powerful weapons. In order to maintain the balance of power in the elemental countries, each major village is supposed to have at least one. Suna and Konoha only have one, because of all the bijuu Shukaku and I are the strongest, but the rest of the villages have two.~

Something doesn’t seem right about that, so Naruto does the math in his head. One for here and Suna, two for Kiri, Kumo, and Iwa… “Hang on, that’s only eight bijuu.”

Kurama snorts.

~Well technically, some backwoods village in Waterfall Country has Chomei, but don’t ask me how the hell that happened.~

Naruto giggles a little at that out loud. The shadows in his room are thick and soft, catching the sound as it echoes against the walls. The dark isn’t the obstacle to his eyes it once was—ever since Kurama had pushed his chakra through Naruto’s system, his night vision has been incredible. That’s not the only thing either— for the first few second afterwards he’d been hyper aware of everything, colours, sounds, the tree against his back and the damp, scent charged air in his lungs. He could feel the grit of the bark clear through his sandals, could see motes of dust and spores as they wafted through the moist air, could smell the leaf matter and clay churning in the mud pits dozens of feet below. He could hear heartbeats like they were drums and could tell which was the tiger’s and which was his own. And, for a fraction of a second, he had felt Kurama within him, felt not just the great beast’s power, but everything else too— bone and skin and muscle, and a beating heart not unlike his own.

The sensation had dimmed, but never entirely faded. His senses are sharper as a result, altered permanently somehow. He can see through most shadows now like they aren’t there. He can smell the fire elms outside his apartment like the leaves are changing under his nose, even though the window is hardly open a crack. He can hear wolves howling just outside the village, cries that remind him a little of how Kurama used to sound at night. He can sense heavy clouds coming in by how the breeze feels against his skin through the cracked sill, can tell there’ll be a storm tomorrow.

He wonders if better senses will help him be a better ninja. He hopes so.

“If Uzushio was wiped out so easy, I guess that means they were pretty weak, huh?”

He asks, a little disappointed. It would have been amazing if he came from a strong clan too, but a village that got wiped out in one battle can’t be very strong, and that just adds to the evidence that he really is a loser.

Kurama guffaws, like the answer is obvious. ~Are you joking?~

Naruto flinches at the inflection, at that little bit of hope dashed, but Kurama isn’t finished yet.

~Uzushio was a tiny village in a tiny country, barely big enough to occupy the island it was founded on...~

And… ouch. That kind of hurts even more than Naruto thought it might—

~... And it was still strong enough to go toe to toe with any elemental country, and then come
around again for round two.

Naruto’s head snaps up from where it had been sagging. He can feel Kurama grinning, but it’s not mocking, it’s excited.

“What?”

~Don’t get me wrong kid, I hated Uzushio’s guts probably more than anyone else's, but just because I didn’t like them doesn’t mean I don’t appreciate sheer tenacity in human form. It’s why I can stand you.~

“They were strong, then?”

“You kidding me, kit? In the wars prior to it’s downfall, seeing an Uzushio-nin on the battlefield meant run for cover. One Uzushio team running in sync was worth more than entire squadrons of average ninja. The Ido-Senshi could decapitate a man without even touching them, a single Chunin level Kurogane clansmen could send out chakra scythes that left enemy ranks in tatters, the Kikan could lay down barriers that stopped any A-Rank jutsu in it’s tracks.~

Kurama’s grin is so manic that Naruto can’t help but mimic it. He rocks forward, hanging on every word.

~And the Uzumaki.~

Naruto’s eyes go wide, because Kurama says it like it’s the cherry on top, like it’s the point, like all the amazing things he’s been talking about up till now were only leading up to this.

~Kushina had chakric chains that she could manifest at will, unbreakable, and capable of being sword and shield at once. Fresh off a fight with Minato? Fueled by my chakra? She could turn a warzone into a graveyard faster that you can say Red Hot Habanero.~

“WHAAAAAT?” Naruto practically shrieks, but the fox only laughs. “My mom was a BADASS!”

~The definition of.~ Kurama cackles,

“Did my dad have a clan too?” And he has to know, because there’s no way his old man can be near as cool now that he knows how freaking awesome his mom was.

Kurama shakes his head. ~Naw kit. Your pops was a genesis. I remember that much.~

“A what now?”

~A ninja born of non-shinobi ancestry.~ Kurama answers easily, and Naruto loves that about Kurama. He always explains everything in a way that makes sense to Naruto’s hyper brain, and he never makes Naruto feel stupid for asking.

~It’s pretty rare, but sometimes chakric abilities just… pop up out of nowhere.~ He continues. ~Most clans start out that way– with a single powerful genesis that simply passes down a specific chakra trait through generations.~

“So like Hinata and Sasuke’s clans?”

~That’s a little complicated. More like your Shikamaru's clan and your Inuzuka. What’s his name? Kira?~
“Kiba.”

~Sure.~

“What about the Uzumaki? Were they geni-whatever or were they ‘complicated’?”

Kurama comes up short at that and scowls.

~Ugh, kinda? The Uzumaki themselves were originally a genesis clan, but somewhere along the line they ended up merged with the remains of the Senju clan. So… both? Both.~

“Was my dad cool too though? Do you know?”

Kurama thinks on that for a long moment before he answers, resting a vulpine cheek in a clawed paw.

~I mostly just remember that he was kind of an idiot. He worshiped the ground Kushina walked on, which mostly pissed her off, so I remember that the clearest. He was popular in a way Kushina wasn’t though. They called him a ‘prodigy’ and a ‘prophetic child’ and other such nonsense. He could use seals almost as well as Kushina could, and he could teleport I think, but I remember another ninja that could do that before him, so that’s not so impressive.~

“Mom wasn’t popular?”

Kurama shakes his head. ~She was bullied, kit. Especially when she first came to the village.~

Naruto blinks and scrunches his nose, because he can’t quite reconcile the picture of this amazing Kunoichi with a fearsome temper and fiercer heart with some kid getting kicked around or ignored on the playground the way he was.

“But... why?”

Kurama snorts. Bitter.

~For the stupidest reason you can imagine. Kushina was picked on for the colour of her hair.~

“The colour of her hair?” Naruto repeats, because he still can’t imagine it.

~Kushina’s mane was redder than a fire country sunset.~ Kurama explains. ~Beautiful, but it was an Uzumaki thing, a clan trait. And no one outside of Uzushio or Kumo had hair quite that red. So y. Kids bullied her. Just because she was different.~

Kurama growls and spits the last word like it’s a curse. And Naruto isn’t imagining it—Kurama is speaking in his mother’s defense.

“Did you... like my mom, Kurama?”

~No.~ The fox answers truthfully. ~But of all the humans I’ve ever known, I think I hated her the least.~

And that’s probably the highest praise Kurama is capable of giving. Naruto’s mom wasn’t just badass, she was amazing too.

“I wish I could have met her.” Naruto says, without meaning to.

The fox is quiet for a while, but Naruto wasn’t expecting an answer anyway. After a few more
minutes of sitting in the dark though, Kurama speaks again.

~You’re a lot like her, you know.~ He says quietly.

“Huh?” Naruto asks, surprised, because the way Kurama talks about his mother, that’s blatant praise, and well… Naruto just isn’t used to that. In any form, let alone from a grumpy hateful bag of fur and chakra.

~I mean, you have Namikaze’s colouring, but the fire? The temper? The willpower? The stubbornness? That’s all Kushina.~

Naruto’s face gets hot under the esteem and something warm and giddy wells up in his chest that makes him feel so light he might float off the ground. “Really?”

~Really. Only one big difference.~

“What’s that?”

Kurama doesn’t answer immediately, and there’s abrupt and inexplicable tension in the air now. Whatever it is it’s hard for Kurama to say—Naruto can practically hear him grinding his fangs around it. So Naruto waits in rapt attention, uncharacteristically patient.

~One big difference.~ The fox repeats, but this time the words are heavy with gravity, mean something greater than the air on which they’re spoken.

~You kit, I actually like.~

<>

“Why didn’t we protect them?” Naruto asks some time later, after the atmosphere has cleared a little and both he and Kurama have regained some of their emotional footing.

Naruto had been floored, to put it mildly. Kurama didn’t even like his mother, he’d said as much very clearly, and his mom had been awesome, which he’d also said very clearly. So why would Kurama like him? Naruto is still a nobody right now, and while he’s going to see to it that changes, he has no idea how he earned that regard.

But Kurama hadn’t explained, and Naruto hadn’t asked.

~Hm?~ is Kurama’s response.

Naruto has spent the last hour or so sorting through his stuff, putting it in piles to either throw away or find a better place for. His jumpsuit, unfortunately, is in the former pile. It hadn’t required a lot of intervention on Kurama’s part. If Naruto wasn’t sure what pile to put something in, he just sent a sort of vague askance in his direction, and the fox responded with either a warmer feeling positive or a cooler feeling negative, to keep or toss respectively. The toss pile is getting distressingly large, but Naruto trusts Kurama’s judgment, even if it’s sometimes grudgingly.

“If Konoha and Uzushio were so close, why didn’t we protect them?” Naruto clarifies.

~I don’t know.~

“We should have.” he says adamantly. “If I were Hokage, I would have made sure we did.”

~I believe you, kit. But the past can’t be changed. Only learned from.~
Naruto takes a moment to think about that, putting a particularly gnarly looking pair of socks in the Toss pile and his picture of himself and Jiji at the summer festival in Keep. Something strange occurs to him.

“We never talked about Uzushio during our history lessons. I would have remembered.”

Kurama seems to know what he’s asking even before Naruto tries to explain.

~Humans don’t like being reminded of their failures. Iwagakure and Kirigakure teamed up at the beginning of the war, just as it was breaking out. Uzushio was the real threat if all out war developed, because while Konoha had the numbers, Uzushio had the skill, and they were the reason Konoha had won every war before that. So they surprise attacked them with enough shinobi to overwhelm them, and Konoha failed to come to their aid in time. By the time Konoha got there to chase Iwa and Kiri out, it was too late.~ Then he adds, almost an afterthought; ~Kushina was inconsolable for weeks.~

“They attacked them because they were afraid of them?” Because that’s what Naruto is getting out of this, and he’s starting to see a pattern he doesn’t like.

~That about sums it up, yeah.~

“Kind of like people are afraid of you?”

Kurama pauses, obviously surprised, because Naruto is angry in a way he hasn’t been in a long time and Kurama can clearly feel it.


“Why would people destroy something just because it’s strong?”

~Fear.~ Kurama responds immediately, because he would know. ~People always fear what they don’t understand.~

Naruto doesn’t, but if that makes him not a person, if that makes him a monster, then he’s fine with that. He’s fine with being a demon if the alternative is being afraid.

“You know what Kurama?”

~Hm?~

“I hate that.”

~You know what, fishcake?~

“Yeah?”

~I think we have that in common.~

<> When Naruto finishes with the main room and has everything from his Toss pile packed up in trash bags, Kurama directs him towards the kitchen. Naruto goes, opening the refrigerator first. He immediately wrinkles his nose.

The milk has gone sour again, yet another thing he’d forgotten about. He doesn’t even need to open the lid to check.
Kurama makes a disgusted growl at the state of the shelves.

~How the hell you feed yourself, brat? It’s practically empty. And from what I’m getting through your olfactorys, what is there spoiled over a week ago.~

“Hey, that’s not my fault. I usually just eat with Iruka-sensei anyways.”

~Is ramen the only thing you ingest?~ Kurama asks, horrified.

Naruto has to think on that for a second.

“*Iruka-sensei makes me curry sometimes?*”

~Toss it.~ The fox barks.

“But~”

~All of it.~

Naruto huffs indignantly, but grabs another trash bag and starts to clear everything into it.

“Why are we doing this again? It’s not that big a deal what I eat, is it?”

~Wrong, fishcake. There is nothing more important to training than being healthy.~

“I’m perfectly healthy!” Naruto squawks.

~Oh I am starting to seriously doubt that. First big lesson, brat. Pay attention.~

Naruto snorts, but stays quiet.

~The body runs off food like a fire runs off fuel. The body needs all different kinds to function properly, especially when it’s under stress when training. Eating the same kind of food all the time will make you tired a hell of a lot faster than eating something balanced will.~

“Whaaaaaat?” Naruto whines. “Nobody told me that!”

~Human’s sometimes say the same thing using the words; ‘It’s good for you.’

“Ugggghh.” Naruto says aloud. “I owe Iruka-sensei an apology. Or seven. I just ate what I wanted when I was hungry. I didn’t think something that tasted so good would be bad for you.”

~And why ramen?~

Naruto pauses with his hand over the trash bag, Ichiraku take-out cup pressed against his palm. The question is odd, if only because it feels like Kurama is fishing for a specific answer. Naruto’s not sure how to respond, so he figures he might as well be honest.

“Teuchi and Ayame were the first store owners not to kick me out.” He admits. When Kurama doesn’t respond, Naruto adds, “Besides, ramen is amazing.”

Kurama blows air harshly through his nose.

~Must be hereditary.~

Naruto finishes with the fridge and moves on to the pantry. “Does this mean I have to learn to
cook?” He wonders.

~Afraid so.~ He replies, and it’s not even sarcastic.

Naruto groans obnoxiously. “I don’t suppose you know anything about that?” he asks, tentatively hopeful.

~I’m made of chakra, brat. I don’t need to eat.~ he pauses then, thoughtful. ~Kushina was a good cook though, I might remember some things.~

Naruto sighs with relief. “Okay, good. Because the last time I tried to cook anything I set off the smoke alarm four times and the sprinklers twice.”

Kurama snorts again the way he so often does, but it’s his amused snort. ~You don’t give up easy, do you?~

“No way. Believe it.”

~I do, kit.~

And it’s weird, having someone that does. Someone that has faith in him, even when he doesn’t have it in himself. It’s different than having Jiji and Iruka-sensei. Iruka-sensei believes in him in a way that’s half true kindness and half duty, and Jiji likes him, sure, but he doesn’t believe in him the way he pretends he does, and sometimes the old Kage looks at him and his eyes go straight through, like Naruto isn’t even there.

He knows now that it’s because Naruto makes him see ghosts.

But Kurama believes in Naruto, not as some extension of Kushina or Minato, but as himself, and that faith in him gives Naruto faith in himself. And faith in himself is all that really matters, right? It just matters that he gets stronger, not that the village sees him do it.

Kurama seems to sense his thoughts, his change of heart, because he speaks, out of nowhere.

~Village idiot my everliving ass.~

Naruto isn’t sure how to respond to that, so he doesn’t. Kurama had said it like he was talking to himself anyways.

<>

It’s something like six thirty in the morning when he finishes cleaning out his apartment. Kurama had been nonverbal for the most part, only really piping up to complain about the grime on his countertops or make disgusted noises whenever he pulled something out from under his bed that used to be edible. When he’s finished, having wiped down every conceivable surface and sacrificed several washcloths to do so, ninety percent of his apartment is wrapped up in plastic bags and the other ten percent is vaguely shiney.

He stares forlornly at the closest garbage heap, where his ruined jumpsuit is visible through the cloudy plastic.

~Did you make that, Fishcake?~ Kurama asks, curious.

“Yeah.” He responds miserably.

~You can sew then?~
“I had to fix my stuff a lot.” he confirms. “It’s one of the few things I can do okay.”

~The Eye Bleed Orange Ensemble was a bit much, but the Uzushio symbol? You could stitch that on practically anything.~

That… makes him feel a lot better actually. And he can put it on more than his clothes if he thinks about it, like his scrolls and his packs. It’s his clan symbol anyways, he might as well act like it.

He’s hauling his first heap of junk out the door when Kurama interrupts his thoughts again.

~How do you get money, kit?~ he asks, like the thought just occurred to him. ~You’re not a Genin yet, so you don’t get paid.~

“Well no, but Jiji pays for my apartment, and orphans get a weekly stipend.”

~How much?~

“2,000 ryo.”

~...That’s not much is it?~

“It’s enough. And it can go a long way if I stretch it.”

Kurama’s ears go up and his eyes narrow suspiciously. ~You know how to manage money?~

Naruto blinks, not sure what he did to deserve the scrutiny. “Uh, yeah. I have to do it all the time.”

~You’re barely eight.~ Kurama says accusingly.

“...So?”

The bijuu grumbles something that sounds suspiciously like stupid petty humans, but Naruto ignores him since he’s fairly sure it’s not directed at him.

“Why?” He prompts instead, as he heaves the last of the trash bags into the dumpster next to his complex.

~You need supplies for training.~ Kurama responds automatically. ~Actual food, too. How much do you have right now?~

Naruto isn’t actually sure about that. “Hang on, lemme check.”

He ducks back inside and heads for his bed, feeling underneath his mattress for Gama-chan. The fat frog purse is reassuringly heavy when he manages to yank it from it’s hiding place and flip through the bills and coins inside.

“12,800 ryo.” Naruto tells Kurama proudly.

~You saved all that from a 2,000 ryo stipend?~ Kurama seems… bewildered? Naruto isn’t sure what’s so surprising about it. He’d had more before he’d blown some on new sandals and dango last week.

“I like saving.” He defends. “Besides, I had to go hungry for a couple days after I bought all my academy supplies, which sucked, so I’m never doing that again.”

Kurama makes an angry noise at that.
“So, groceries and training supplies? Do I need anything else?” Naruto asks in an attempt to distract Kurama from his hateful brooding the way Kurama had distracted him from his darker thoughts earlier. He’s pleased to find it works.

~New clothes and paper barrier seals.~

Naruto grabs an ink pen from his bedside table and scribbles it down on his arm so that he doesn’t forget. He’s dreading it already, but maybe if he has it all written down he can get it over with faster.

“I hate shopping.” he growls.

~I can imagine why.~ Kurama trails off with a hum, thinking. ~Can you use transformation jutsu?~

Naruto grimaces as he caps his pen. “Not well.”

~Then take a seat, brat, and get down here. We’ll see if I can’t drill something useful into that stubborn skull.~

“Grumpy old fox…” Naruto mumbles, but does as he’s told.

<>

“Well that was the weirdest crap I’ve ever done, hands down. And it was easy! Iruka-sensei always made it sound so complicated.”

~You learn different. Kushina was the same way– she got in arguments with her instructors all the time.~

Naruto grunts, kicking open his front door and readjusting his bags around his arms to free his hands. He forms a quick sign to release the transformation–he’d imitated Sasuke, just for kicks, and boy had that been a trip, no wonder the asshole thinks everyone’s a simpering idiot– and dumps his current load of stuff on the countertop to join the rest. There’s a lot.

Thirteen bags in total– four of groceries, two of clothes, four of ninja supplies and three more of non-ninja supplies.

Naruto isn’t exactly broke, but it had been close. The ordeal has left Gama-chan distressingly skinny.

He puts the ninja stuff and clothes on his bed and starts going through the other bags, yanking out all the kitchen supplies he never thought he would need–a knife block, soup pot, rice cooker, cooking chopsticks– and sets them aside to deal with later. He unloads the groceries next. Kurama had insisted on getting a little bit of everything, and Naruto had listened because he has no idea what he might like outside of ramen, curry, and dango. Kurama had been particularly enthusiastic about the meat choices for some reason, so Naruto had gotten several kinds; tuna, salmon, beef, chicken, and some pork belly. He turns a package of Tofu in his hands.

“Is this supposed to be a meat or a vegetable?” He asks absently.

Kurama does a mental shrug. ~No idea.~

Naruto puts it with the rest of the meats anyway, because he’s found it refrigerated so it should probably stay that way. He sorts through the fruits and actual vegetables next, stashing away cucumber and eggplant and daikon along with apples and oranges and dragon fruit. He comes
across a small bag of red, berry-like vegetables and rolls one around on his palm.

“*These are the asshole’s favorite food, I think.*”

~Tomatoes?~

“*Yeah, I remember Sakura talking about it.*”

~By ‘asshole’ you do mean the arrogant Uchiha, yes?~

“*Yup.*”

~And Sakura is the pink one?~

Naruto snickers. “*Soooo pink.*”

~Do you like her, fishcake? Outside the pretending?~

Naruto pauses for a minute before he resumes loading the refrigerator. He considers pretending like he doesn’t know what Kurama is talking about, but the fox always knows when he’s lying, so he doesn’t bother.

“I do like her.” Naruto defends, because he does, especially when she’s not fawning over Sasuke, or when she drops her perfect sweetheart Kunoichi facade to yell at him for being a moron. It’s rare to see, but there’s a strong personality underneath all the fluff and sparkle. But the urge to be more than friends just isn’t there like it should be.

Kurama raises a skeptical eyebrow.

“I do.” He repeats. “*Just… not the way I think I’m supposed to? I don’t know. That doesn’t make any sense does it?*”

~It makes more sense than you might think. And don’t worry about what other people think you should do. They can’t know you the way you know yourself.~

Naruto nods to himself and finishes putting the noodles and rice away in his little pantry. When he’s finished, he gives his arm a cautionary sniff.

“I need a shower. I think I still smell like sour milk.”

~I’d be surprised if that’s all you smelled like.~

“Jerk.”

~Fishcake.~

<> By the time he gets out of the shower it’s almost eight. Only an hour before classes. He’s sitting on his bed in a new pair of black boxers, looking over the long sleeve black top he’s gotten from the ninja supply store around the corner.

“So this is standard shinobi stuff?”

~Yes.~
“You sure about the size? It’s at least one too big for me.”

~With the rate you’re growing, Kit? I’d be surprised if it lasts you a year.~

He pulls on the long sleve and the loose black sweats. The pants hang a little low and the shirt is a little baggy around his elbows, but other than that they fit fairly well, despite being a little long on all fronts.

~You have the wraps, Fishcake?~

“Mhm.” Naruto picks up the black roll of soft, gauzy cloth. “Where do I put it?”

~Arms, wrists... anywhere there’s too much fabric.~

Naruto nods and gets to work on the problems spots, mostly above his knees and elbows, but also a few loops to tie back the too-long sleeves and hems.

“Breakfast?”

~I think we start simple. Rice omelet?~

“Can you even taste things?”

~I can see through your eyes and smell what you smell. What makes you think I can’t taste what you taste?~

Naruto stretches to test the movement of his new clothes and finds them comfortable enough. He places the two sets of spares in his now mostly empty closet and puts his hands in his new pockets before wandering back into his kitchen.

He yanks a cookbook of simple recipes from one of his shopping bags and starts to gather what it says he needs.

~Kushina always said that cooking was a lot like sealing.~

“Sealing?”

~Fuinjutsu was the specialty of Uzushio, why they were so strong. They used seals like shinobi here use clones or substitution.~

“Like the seals on scrolls and exploding tags?”

~A poor imitation, but yes. Seals are difficult to master, but Uzushio had them down to such an art form it was practically in their blood. They could use them for anything from transportation to combat.~

“How is cooking like sealing then?”

~She said it was because both are composed of many pieces that, when pressed or mixed or moulded together, creates something greater than the sum of it’s parts.~

“Is it weird that that makes a lot more sense than I thought it would?”

~It means you learn like an Uzumaki.~

<>
With Kurama’s help and new hope that he may not actually be a total idiot, Naruto makes a whole rice omelet while only ruining two eggs and setting off the smoke alarm once.

Turns out Naruto does like rice omelets.

“So what’s next?” He asks as he clears away his dishes. “Please say some actual training.”

“Patience, brat. First things first, I’m teaching you about chakra. As a being made of it, your education on that front is severely lacking. But after class. Right now you need to get going before you get late.~

“Aw craaap.”
Naruto isn’t late to class for once in his life.

Sasuke would find it strange, if he cared about that sort of thing.

He doesn’t notice something is truly different until first break, when after several unusually quiet lessons, Kiba leaps over the benches to sit on the desk in front of Naruto.

“Hey dude, what the heck happened to your jumpsuit?” Kiba asks.

Sasuke does turn around at that, subtly as not to be noticed. It actually takes him a second to find Naruto, because without the bright flash of color that he wears like a banner, he looks very different. Instead of that horrendous orange thing he usually wears around, Naruto’s in a set of standard issue shinobi wear, black sweats and a matching high necked long sleeve shirt. The getup is about two sizes too big on him, but before Sasuke can conjure up something to say about that, he notices that the excess fabric had been tied back with black wrapping above his elbows and at his wrists.

...Surprising practical.

Naruto makes a face at the Dog-nin that’s halfway between upset and aggrieved. “It got gross and too torn up to fix, so I had to throw it out.”

Kiba pulls a sympathetic expression. “That sucks, I’ve never seen you without the thing. Had to have been your favorite to keep it around as long as you did. I’m not surprised it crapped out on you though.”

Naruto grins up at him, a little bit wry, pulling a hand through his blond hair. It looks brighter against the black than it should be. “Yeah, no kidding. I held onto it because Iruka-sensei helped me make it. Losing it kinda blows.”

“That stuff’s got to be easier to move in, though.” Shikamaru drawls from behind him, head pillowed boredly on his arm. Sasuke would have assumed he was asleep if his eyes weren’t open.

“Much.” Is the Dead-Last’s reply, shifting his arm as if to demonstrate. “Just wish I didn’t have to get new stuff, ya know?”
Shikamaru nods, barely perceivable with most of his face hidden in the crook of his elbow. “I feel you man. I hate shopping. What a pain.”

Made it with Iruka-sensei? That’s why he wore that stupid thing around all the time? Sasuke wonders.

But Sasuke jerks his attention back to the front of the room when Sakura or Ino or someone calls his name, and goes back to pretending like Naruto doesn’t exist.

It doesn’t work like it normally does though, and even though he keeps his eyes on Iruka-sensei for the remainder of class, he feels some sort of strange gravity churning at his back.

Curiosity and… something else.

The strange sensation that something has shifted, and he can’t tell what.

><><>

Naruto is so excited about training after he gets out of class, that he nearly forgets about something almost as important.

Food.

~Lunch, brat. You need to eat before we start this.~

Naruto stops with a hand already halfway to his bags of supplies by the kitchen table and groans.

“I totally spaced.”

~I noticed.~ Kurama drawls sarcastically. ~I’m teaching you about chakra, so you’re going to need your strength. We can go over your supplies while we eat.~

Naruto burns his rice on the first attempt and accidentally makes pudding with it on the second, but the third try is palatable and he does okay with the miso soup and salmon, which is only a little charred. He sets everything down on the table and pulls his equipment out of his bags with one hand while he eats rice with the other.

A brand new set of twelve Jounin-grade Kunai, three packs of assorted shuriken, two bundles of senbon, a fuma shuriken, a steel tanto, twelve regular seal-grade scrolls, two large storage scrolls, fifty paper tags; fifteen exploding, ten flash-bang, ten smoke bomb, and twenty-five blank; and twenty paper seals, half blank and half barrier.

“What am I gonna need anyway?”

~Just the barrier seals for now. And chew your food kit, you’re going to choke.~

Naruto has to make a concentrated effort to eat slower– he feels a little like he swallowed a lightning bolt. He taps the barrier seals with one finger as he swallows a bite of salmon.

“So these are what seals look like?”
“Extraordinarily basic ones, yes.”

“How do they work?”

~Patience brat. You can’t do anything with those until you learn to mould chakra properly.~

Naruto tries not to pout.

“Oh fine.”

~A lesson for another time. We’ll get to it.~

“Soon?”

~Soon.~

Naruto finishes his food and tucks the seals into the wrappings on his thigh.

“Where are we going?”

He gets an impression instead of an answer, a set of images and sensations and sounds. The sun filtering through willow branches, the sound of water crashing against rocks, a memory of solace in pain.

“Gotcha.”

He clears his dishes and heads east from his apartment, aiming for the outskirts of the village proper. He crosses a river on the outer edge of training ground nine, following it as it curves further from the village until the sound of rushing water gets louder. Here the trees get close and the branches weave together, making the path more and more difficult for him to find his way around. He remembers having ran this way at full tilt, remembers how the branches had caught at his clothes and hair and skin as he bolted through them. This time’s he’s careful to avoid them as he comes close to the rapids.

He abandons the forest for the sharp juts of rock protruding from the river. It’s slow going, since he has to be careful about not losing his grip and falling in. After a bit the area opens up and Naruto can spot the waterfall on the other end of the clearing.

The glade looks different in the afternoon than it had at dusk– the willow is more green now than gold, and the water in the basin shines like a mirror under the sunlight.

~Alright, fishcake. Stick the barrier seals around the perimeter. As evenly spaced as you can.~

Naruto hums his ascent and goes about his task. It takes a couple tries, but Kurama is patient, and by the fourth attempt he’s satisfied that the seals are in good places.

“There.”

~Good. They’re not true shielding seals, but they should keep anyone from noticing any chakra you end up throwing around. Have a seat.~

Naruto plops down among the roots of the willow, jittery and excited. He’s never been so hyper to learn something in his whole life.

He feels Kurama’s chakra, old and feral and familiar, scorch up through his system. A shade materializes in the air, the same size as the first one. It seems to be about all the chakra Kurama
can currently squeeze through the seal. The fox settles so he’s eye level, vulpine paws crossed, his tails swishing lazily back and forth.

“Can you teach me how to use chakra now?” Naruto whines. “Please?”

~That was the plan, kit.~ Kurama reminds him patiently. ~So, what do you know about chakra already?~

Naruto racks his brain. He doesn’t come up completely empty, when he thinks about it. “There are five types? And what kind of affinity you are determines what kind you can use best.”

Kurama huffs and shakes his head. ~This is worse than I thought. Wrong. No offense to your Iruka-sensei, he’s close, but most humans have the wrong idea.~

“About the chakra types?”

~About ‘affinities’.~

“You mean people don’t have affinities?”

~I mean that just because someone has a place they are more comfortable drawing their chakra from, does not mean that they possess only one kind of chakra.~

Naruto shakes his head, forehead scrunching. “I don’t get it.”

~Let me start from the beginning then.~

The fox reaches up, gently pinching off the end of a willow branch.

~Chakra, in it’s most basic form, is the energy generated by existence. It’s in everything—grass, stones, the air you breathe and the water you drink. Most things do not produce enough chakra to even sense, but powerful living beings, like shinobi or sage animals, are capable of creating it in an amount great enough to mould.~

A soft pulse of energy and the branch dissolves into white light. Kurama flicks it into the air, and it settles obediently between them.

~For the most part there are seven types of chakra. Nature is balanced by the first five forms; Earth, Water, Fire, Wind, and Lightning.~ As he speaks, Kurama drags from the chakra flare five different spheres of energy as big as fists. The first is greenish grey like old stone, the second cobalt and clear as crystal, the third is bright with flickering shades of red, the fourth is twisted and fast moving but otherwise colourless, and the last is a crackling ball of onyx and silver flashes. They orbit the space left by the central flare in a lazy spiral. ~Each of these forms can be drawn from the parts of the body in which they rest.~

“Rest?”

Kurama nods. ~Each of the elements that balance nature also balance living beings. They saturate and hold dominion over certain systems. The chakra in these systems remains dormant, for the most part, until someone attempts to draw on chakra for the first time.~

“Okay, hold up.” Naruto holds up his hands for a time out. Kurama pauses, obviously amused. “So you’re telling me that everybody has all five of these kinds of chakra, in the same amount, but people only use one kind? Why?”
Most human shinobi are born with one of these pathways already open, or find one kind of pathway easier to open up than all the others. This is where I can only assume the idea of affinities originally came from. In truth, using only one kind of chakra throughout your life can cause the other pathways to atrophy.

"Atrophy?"

Disintegrate, become useless. The same thing can happen to unused muscles. They just... stop working.

"That sounds really bad."

Kurama nods gravely. That’s why I’m going to teach you how to open all five pathways before we even start you on moulding chakra. Keep in mind. Kurama holds up a claw to snag Naruto’s attention. Training all five of these chakra sources means that it will take five times longer for you to learn, not to mention all the other training I’m putting you through. Are you okay with that?

“Will it make me stronger?” Naruto questions, because that’s really the important part.

It will exhaust you. You’ll be tired and run down six days out of seven, and you’ll constantly feel like there aren’t enough hours in those days. For a while, training will be your whole life.

Kurama pauses. Naruto remains silent, waits him out, because he can feel the ‘but’ coming.

The bijuu grins, all fangs. But it will make you stronger in ways you’ve never dreamed of. You prepared for that, Fishcake?

Naruto sends a toothy grin of his own right back. “Believe it.”

Kurama chuckles. That’s what I thought. he sticks the first orb on his index claw, the one that looks like a mossy mountain rock.

Now, you know that technique you use to talk to me through the seal?

Naruto nods.

Do that now, but instead of reaching into the seal, reach into yourself instead. I’m going to give you a taste of the kind of chakra you’re looking for and where it comes from, and you need to find it in yourself and try to draw it forward, wake it up. Think you can do that?

That sounds complicated, but Naruto is nothing if not persistent. “I can try.”

Let me know when you’re ready.

He shifts his shoulders to ease out the tenseness, slows his breathing and closes his eyes. When he can hear his heartbeat clear in his ears, he nods.

There’s a sound like rolling gravel as he senses something move to hover over his chest. The energy pulses just shy of his skin, and he can feel the not-quite solid touch of Kurama’s claw against his sternum. Kurama’s voice echoes strangely.

Earth chakra is the seat of strength, and is defined by its endurance and stability. the ball of chakra tingles as it's pushed into his chest. It rests in the bones.

The power suffuses through him, just a touch of foreign energy that rolls slowly out across his ribs.
The energy is heavy and dense, rolls through him at its own slow pace. Naruto tries to memorize it as best he can, and then does as Kurama says and tries to find the same energy in his bones.

There’s nothing at first, just emptiness, and he’s about to complain to his bijuu that it’s not working like it’s supposed to, that he doesn’t feel anything—let alone something that resembles the heavy sensation of earth chakra—when he notices…something. It’s not chakra, at least not that Naruto can feel, it’s more like…the potential of it, something sleeping in the spaces between his ribs.

He reaches for it, tries to draw it from its hiding place, but it remains burrowed, stubborn, entrenched thoroughly in his skeleton. Instead of trying to force it like he would normally, Naruto stops to think. Patience kit. He can imagine Kurama saying. Look at it differently, you might see something new.

Chakra is alive, in it’s own way. Kurama had said as much. So it wants something, wants him to do this a certain way. If he wants to draw on it, he has to work with it, not against it.

Strength Kurama had said. The seat of strength.

So how would he draw strength? He tries to remember sparing with Sasuke, to remember how it felt when he pulled up energy he didn’t possess, made muscles move that shouldn’t have just because he couldn’t lose, not again. And he recalls the sensation, how it clawed up from inside him, how he’d had to dig deep.

So Naruto dives, comes at it from underneath, and pulls on it with all his might the way he would if he had nothing left but needed more anyway.

And like crunching rock or breaking bone, something cracks open. Something wakes up. With a rumble that echoes in his ears like the rushing of blood, vibrations roll through him that shake him down to his marrow like an earthquake. It pushes outwards, rushing to his fingertips and through his senses. He smells fresh turned earth and tastes stone dust on the back of his tongue, feels like his bones have turned to mountain granite and that all the force in the world couldn’t move him.

~First try. That was pretty impressive, Fishcake.~

Naruto opens his eyes slowly and stares at nothing for a few seconds, bewildered. “What was that?” he asks, flexing his fingers and neck experimentally. Even as the strange power recedes, he still feels…steady in a way he never has. It’s like he’s found footing that won’t shift underneath him, strength he can be sure of.

~You, without any prior chakra training, have just woken your earth chakra system.~

Naruto blinks up at him, both in confusion and an attempt to clear his suddenly shaky vision, because if Naruto didn’t know him better, Kurama almost sounds proud.

“That was weird.” he says, because he feels the need to voice that sentiment aloud. “Not hard…but weird.”

…And Kurama starts laughing at him.

A sharp short dissolves into yipping coyote-like chuckles that Kurama’s obviously trying to hide behind a paw but is failing miserably.

“What? What did I say?” he demands. Kurama makes an effort to control himself but doesn’t quite manage it the first time, another slew of snickers escaping through his claws.
You do realize that it can take fully mature shinobi years to activate chakra pathways they weren’t born with? You did it in fourteen minutes.

And it probably takes another fourteen minutes for that to actually sink in, because he’s never been good at anything, not really good, but Kurama makes him sound like some sort of…

Prodigy.~ Kurama says, grinning so wide all his fangs are showing. ~I believe that’s the word you’re looking for.~

That makes Naruto entirely breathless in a way that has nothing to do with earth chakra.

“What’s next?” Naruto blurts. “Water chakra right?” Once can be a fluke— but if he does it twice, three times? He might actually believe it.

Kurama huffs affectionately, heavy enough to ruffle his hair. ~You and all the energy.~ he says, but takes hold of the second sphere anyway, the one that looks like melting crystal. ~But alright.~

Naruto drops back into light meditation and waits.

Water chakra is the seat of understanding, and is defined by its adaptability and flow.~ Kurama presses the second sphere to the left of the first, into the space over his heart. ~It rests in the blood.~

This power is heavy too, but it’s quicker, fluid, harder to grasp. He gets his sense for it, his taste, and focuses his attention on his blood. First he tries to focus on his heart beating, but he gets a different flavor of power from it, tangled and dense, one that doesn’t match what he’s looking for. So instead he tries to sense the energy in the rush of blood further from it, lower in his chest and higher in his throat. He does find a match there, hiding in the space between beats, but it slips through his metaphorical fingers when he tries to grasp it, avoids him the same way earth did when he sought it out.

Understanding.

But what kind of understanding? Of water? Of chakra?

Of himself?

That question resonates somewhere in his vessels, like a hint.

Close.

What does he understand best? He understands fighting, even if he’s not good at it. He understands Kurama, because Kurama is like him in a lot of ways. But he never tried to understand those things… he just did.

But maybe that’s it though. Maybe to understand something, you have to let it come to you?

It’s worth a shot, so instead of seeking out the power at all, he waits, leaves himself open, and lets the energy come to him when it wants.

It starts as a trickle, the first sign that something’s changing, and then it’s like the energy can no longer stand the confinement and bursts forward all at once. It crashes through him like a flash flood, pressing against his veins until the pressure grows so high it’s nearly painful. It tastes like sea air must, salty and crisp, smells like the petrichor that comes off the sidewalk at the start of a storm. He tingles all over like a rushing river as the chakra washes through his insides.
He feels a little like his apartment had looked that morning, clean and cleared out, like he’s been stripped of all those things he didn’t want or need but didn’t quite know how to throw away.

The sensation, combined with the steadiness still lingering in his bones… it’s a strange and heady feeling, and now he gets the sense he’s missing pieces of an even greater sensation.

Kurama whistles low. ~The rate at which you’re getting the hang of that is mildly disconcerting.~

“Hey, Kurama…” Naruto asks, blinking his eyes open to look at the fox, who seems inordinately pleased with himself. “Are we doing them in this order for a reason?”

Kurama’s eyes widen a bit, but then he just grins again, chuckling some more. ~Clever clever fishcake. Yes. There is a method to the madness. Each of the natural elements of chakra have what you could call… an order of stability. Earth Chakra is something of the foundation, which was why I had you wake it first.~

“Like the foundation of a building, right?” Because he’s starting to get it, really get it. He’s not only understanding what Kurama is saying, he’s starting to discover what it means for himself. “It’s the most stable, so it’s the best to build on top of so that everything else doesn’t crash down around it, right?”

Kurama starts snickering again. ~Alright smart guy. If earth is the foundation, then what is water? ~

Naruto thinks about that for a moment, scratching absently at his chin. “It’s the stabilizer?” He says, because that word fits best. “Or the buffer? It keeps balance, anyways, makes sure one element doesn’t override the others.”

~How do you figure?~

“Because water can stop fire or lightning or wind in its tracks the way earth can’t, and can keep them from interacting badly with each other? It can’t stop earth that way, but it doesn’t need to, so that’s why we did earth first, so water can rest on top of it without being confined and stuff?”

Kurama laughs again, a warm sound, and plops a chakric paw down on Naruto’s head to ruffle his hair. Kurama is solid enough that it makes blond go everywhere and stick out like dandelion fluff. Warmth swells so hard in Naruto’s chest he almost chokes on it.

~Why all the question marks, Kit? A+.~

Naruto has to take a couple of slightly shaky breaths before he feels comfortable talking without actually bursting into tears. He scrubs his eyes to double check that salt water didn’t well up when he wasn’t paying attention.

“I got it right?” he says, and even though the words don’t shake, his voice is far from steady.

~Sure did.~ Kurama confirms, pinching his nose between his claws to mess with him. Naruto huffs and flails indignantly, and Kurama just laughs some more. Naruto likes it when Kurama laughs like that. ~Water chakra is known as the arbiter, the same way earth chakra is the foundation. It protects the more volatile elements from each other and ensures that all five work in harmony in the system. Of all the elements, water is the only one that is in constant touch with the other four, the same way that blood touches every system in the body.~

“What about the other three?”
Kurama pokes him gently in the forehead with one claw, a soft admonishment.

~Find out for yourself. You're on a roll so far, think you can keep it up?~

Naruto nods, because he really has no words for that, and wonders if this is what it feels like to have an older brother.

“Next is fire?” He asks, and he’s proud that his voice doesn’t waver this time.

Kurama dips his head in a nod, scooping up the flickering crimson orb in one claw. Naruto takes the cue and drops back into himself again.

He can feel the warmth of the sphere saturate the material of his shirt, lower than the first two–over his navel this time.

~Fire chakra is the seat of will, and is defined by its passion and intensity. It rests in the gut and throat.~

This energy is strange– it’s warm, but weirdly empty, and without Kurama to sustain it, it vanishes faster through his system than the others did. He gets enough of a feel for it to know that that it’s missing something. He looks for the warmth he felt, but doesn’t find it. Instead he finds a cold shadow, something dark and dormant.

Willpower huh?

Kurama had called it intense, but he finds none of that here, just empty chill. But fire needs fuel right? A spark to start it up.

So what feeds will?

And suddenly it’s easy. It desires desire, so what does he want more than anything else?

He wants friends, sure, wants family, but what he wants far more than that is the ability to protect them, power enough so that once he has that family, no force in the world could take it from him.

So he takes that desire, and yanks it together into one place, and feeds the fire.

The energy sparks in his stomach, flares fast to life, and roars up to sear his throat until he feels like he could cough up fireballs. It expands like a supernova, pushing heat into every cell. He tastes gunpowder on his tongue and every inhale brings the scent of a forest fire with it.

It makes him feel like he could run for miles, like he should, like any obstacle he could face would be worth it. Combined with the clarity in his blood and the solidity in his bones, he feels like he could take on the world.

He huffs, laughs, shakes his head like a dog shedding water as he comes out of it.

“Whoa, it’s like a generator! Or a motivator? Whatever, it gives stuff energy, right?”

Kurama snickers. ~Very good, fishcake. Fire chakra is the amplifier. It’s responsible for pushing chakra outwards and increasing the energy that lies dormant in most chakra.~

“Is that why it’s in the middle?”

~Yes it is.~
“Cool.” Naruto almost wants to train now, to skip the rest and jump right into getting stronger, but he has two more pieces missing, and the idea of missing out on more because he’s too impatient to finish this part drowns out the idea. “Wind now?”

~You know the drill.~ Naruto pulls into meditation again and waits for Kurama to give him the fourth sphere. ~Wind chakra is the seat of change, and is defined by its swiftness and unpredictability.~ He presses this orb to the opposite side of his sternum from his heart, at the same elevation. ~It rests in the lungs.~

This power comes to him easy, far easier than the others, twirling in familiar spirals through his system. He hardly needs to go looking, hardly needs to think about it and the answer comes to him. Change is movement, the unexpected, and Naruto likes the unexpected, likes surprises, likes not quite knowing what comes next but rolling with the punches instead. It’s how he’s gotten through life this far.

It answers the second he calls it up, with the urge to jump when others might stay put, to fall into the abyss just to see what might happen.

It bursts through him like a hurricane, pulling everything around up to dance with it. It sweeps in curling zephyrs of chakra that leave the taste of summer wind on his tongue and air rich with the scent of a coming storm in his lungs.

Combined with the sureness, clarity, and incentive of the previous three elements, he feels like he could stand at the edge of any precipice and fly where others might fall.

Kurama huffs, bringing Naruto out of his head.

~Well that figures.~

Naruto stretches his arms above his head and breathes out a heavy breath. He feels like there’s too much air in his lungs. “That one pushes on stuff, makes it move, right?”

Kurama nods again. Naruto really is getting the hang of this.

~Correct. Wind chakra is the dynamo. It shifts everything into motion around it, helps chakra flow the way it’s supposed to.~

“Why was it so much easier than the other three?”

~Because it was your ‘affinity’ so to speak, which doesn’t surprise me. Both your parents were that way as well, but just because it’s easier doesn’t mean you can slack with the other four.~

“Yes Kurama.” Naruto drawls, half sarcasm half promise, because he knows. “Lightning now, and then I can learn how to mould it, right?”

Kurama shakes his head. ~Hold a second kid. This one isn’t like the others.~

Naruto blinks and looks up at the flickering sphere of black and white where it orbits in circles like an angry moon. “Huh? Why not?”

Kurama brings the orb down so it hovers only a foot or so away from Naruto’s nose. It’s like looking into a storm, only without the obscuring black of the clouds around it. It seems angry and lost, directionless, thrashing madly to get free of what confines it.

~Lightning chakra is the pinnacle chakra. It is the hardest chakra to master because it possesses
the most dangerous properties of all four other chakra types, as well as a nasty property of its own. Most people who claim to have mastered this type of chakra only really know how to mould it and let it loose. Rare is the individual capable of channeling it properly. It is as unpredictable as wind, as damaging as fire, as adaptable as water, and as unmovable as earth. On top of these things, it is capable of stopping life it’s tracks with a touch, capable of stopping a heart, and in the right hands, restarting it.

Naruto stares at the angry energy, arcing against the borders of the sphere like flashes of a blade, there and gone in an instant. “So it’s the strongest then?”

Kurama nods. “And the most unwieldy. That’s why I’m giving you a leg up. Before, I let you determine the nature of the elements yourself in order to better understand them, but this one will not give you two chances. If this gate is forced open, your own body’s electrical current could be knocked out of alignment. The rhythm of your cells relies on electricity. One stray discharge could stop your heart.

Naruto swallows hard. “Yikes.”

Kurama’s nose ducks in to poke once at his stomach, right over his seal. “Don’t worry kit. I can stop it if that happens, but to do so I would have to shut down your lightning chakra pathways, which would damage them, and I’d rather not have to do that, and I’m sure you’d rather not have that happen.”

Naruto nods. If it’s the most powerful kind of chakra, he’s going to need to know how to use it. And four out of five would leave a bad taste in his mouth. “So what is it? Where does it come from?”

~Lightning chakra is the seat of power, and is defined by chaos, and by serenity.~

Naruto scratches his jaw. “But wait, aren’t they opposites? How can something be both at the same time?”

~That is the question, isn’t it? That’s what makes it so tricky– the duality. Most understand one part or the other, but not both. But without peace the chakra cannot be controlled, and without wrath there is no force behind it. The point of greatest power lies between them, without both, true power cannot be obtained. Do you understand?~

Naruto looks down at his hands. He curls one into a fist, angry and tight and ready to strike, but leaves the other open skyward, relaxed against his knee. Anger is easy, he’s known rage for as long as he can remember– rage at the village, at his place in the world, at himself. He’s known peace too, wrestling with Kiba or talking with Shikamaru or sitting next to Iruka-sensei at Ichiraku. So he pulls up the fury and tries to mix it with what he felt when he was at peace. For a while he gets nothing, just conflicting sensation, but then something pangs against a familiar ache and a memory from not so long ago comes to mind.

The memory of when he’d run here, tired and afraid and angry and so very very lost. He remembers what he felt when Kurama had asked him why a stranger’s hateful words had mattered, remembers how something had shifted inside him, focused down to a few seconds of perfect clarity.

He had still been angry, but he’d been something else too.

“I think I get it.” He says, and Kurama doesn’t ask him if he’s sure. He just floats the sphere of chakra towards him across the short space as Naruto closes his eyes.

~This chakra is known as the catalyst.~ Kurama murmurs, as the sphere sinks into the skin at the
base of Naruto’s throat. ~It rests in the spine.~

This power flickers, dances in a flash barely long enough for Naruto to get a reading before it’s gone. It’s strong, a little goes a long way, and what he manages to grab hold of gives him more than enough of a sense for it. He focuses on the energy lying dormant beneath his vertebra. He gets the feeling somehow that this chakra’s allegiance is not easily given, but he has the key already, and like the others, he knows what it wants.

This time, when the chakra bursts forward, it doesn’t flow through him, it rages, with him and against him all at once. It crackles and surges, spinning static in fractal patterns along his nerves, leaving them raw and overwrought. He feels the wrath in it, but tempered with the calm it becomes honed like a blade—deadly and sharp. It rips through him with so much force it’s painful, tears a gasp from his lungs, but when it’s through he feels like a waiting thundercloud, dark and dense and charged with power. He opens his eyes to Kurama nosing around him like he’s attempting to stiff out injury.

~You okay kit?~ He asks, halfway to a demand.

Naruto nods quickly, because he is, but…

“Does that Chakra always respond so well to pain?”

Kurama sighs, pulling away, but doesn’t go far. ~Unfortunately, the things that bring us pain, also tend to bring us strength.~

“Yes that why you’re so strong?”

The fox’s eyes widen, but then soften again to something sad.

~It’s why you are.~

It’s an evasion, one that doesn’t make any sense. “But I’m not strong. Not yet.”

~That’s not the kind of strength I’m talking about.~

But before Naruto can ask him what the hell he means by that, Kurama sways to his feet and tucks around him, nudging his half-solid snout into his back. ~Enough of that kit, I thought you wanted to train. Up up up.~

“Hold on a sec!” Naruto squawks, tripping to his feet and turning on his bijuu. “I thought you said there were seven types of chakra? Remember? What are the other two? Hey!”

Kurama huffs, curling back around to face him. ~And here I was sure that had slipped right by you.~

Naruto crosses his arms. “Spill.”

Kurama chuckles. ~Don’t worry, brat. It’s easy. Remember how I said nature was balanced by the elemental chakras?~

“Ya.” his tone tacks a duh onto the end of the statement. Kurama flicks him in the forehead for his attitude.

~Well, smart-ass, living beings are balanced by another two. Yin and Yang chakra are active in your body whether you like it or not, so no need to go looking for them. They flow throughout your
“But what do they do? What are they like?” Naruto demands, hopping from foot to foot as he follows Kurama’s lazy stride towards the more open part of the clearing.

~Fundamentally, even though they use the same chakra system, the two are very different. Yin chakra is the seat of the spirit, and is defined by emotion. Yang chakra is the seat of the body, and is defined by reality. They’re the basis for the use of genjutsu and taijutsu respectively, the same way elemental chakra is used for ninjutsu.~

Naruto nods. “I think I get it. Yang chakra works with the body, so fighting and stuff, and Yin works with mind and emotion, and messing with those things, so genjutsu.”

~You understood more about that than I’d hoped.~

Naruto makes a face. “I’m really bad at genjutsu.”

~We’ll work on it.~ Kurama murmurs, nudging Naruto forwards again.

“Wait! One more question.”

Kurama sighs again. ~Make it quick, while we still have daylight.~

“What chakra rests in the heart?”

Kurama freezes, bewildered. ~Why would you ask that?~

Naruto rubs the back of his head in nervous habit. “Well, I kinda noticed it first when I was going through the water chakra pathways, and then again with lightning. It kinda feels different, but I sensed chakra there too, just not any there that matched any elemental chakra.”

~Fishcake, are you telling me that you accidentally sensed your heart’s chakra pathways?~


Kurama taps a knuckle against his chest. ~The heart’s chakra system doesn’t match any type you know because it doesn’t just have one type.~

“Huh?”

~The heart, when it pertains to chakra, has another name. The Nexus. It is the one place in the body through which all chakra passes. The pathways seemed strange to you because instead of one system of chakra vessels, the heart has half a dozen. These pathways are smaller and thinner, but have thousands more branches that overlap and weave together.~

“That makes sense. So it doesn’t have it’s own resting chakra, because the chakra in it is always moving?”

~Mhm. There’s something else about the chakra pathways in the heart you’ll find interesting. Unlike your normal pathways, which are set in stone, the chakra pathways in your heart are capable of growth.~

“Like how tree roots grow? To let more chakra through?”

Kurama fixes him with a halfhearted glare.
You are entirely too good at this. I was going to save this lesson for another day, but I may as well
tell you now. Might put things in perspective anyways. He draws a circle with his claw over
Naruto’s heart. The more you manage to open into your chakra systems, the more power you’ll be
able to draw from those systems. The more power you draw, the more strain you put on the vessels
in your heart. This prompts those vessels to grow to accommodate the strain. With me so far?

Naruto nods. Strain makes muscles stronger too– that’s how training works, so it makes sense.

If you grow each of these systems enough– earth, water, fire, wind, lightning, and central– it
allows for you to push two types of chakra through at once.

“Wait wait wait.” Naruto crosses his arms in a dramatic X. “You telling me it’s possible to use a
bunch of elements in one jutsu?”

Well it’s a hell of a lot more complicated than that, there are elements that aren’t compatible with
one another and other things you’d have to learn, but yes. Essentially.

“Can we train now?”

Oh, now you want to train. Kurama drawls sarcastically, but nudges Naruto towards the open
space by the water anyway.

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Kurama is a good teacher. He’s patient and he listens and he doesn’t mind explaining things in different ways when Naruto doesn’t quite understand. He praises him when he deserves it and berates him when he lets it go to his head even for a second, but he’s a good teacher.

In training? He’s a goddamn tyrant.

~Remember about resonance, brat. We talked about this.~

Naruto wobbles precariously on the water, the surface flexing and rolling underneath him like a funhouse mirror. This was so much easier in the trees; at least up there nothing was moving.

Kurama says that his chakra stamina is fantastic but his control is shit, so he’s spent the last half hour learning to walk on trees and rocks with chakra. There are craters all over as a result of his screw ups. The sun is starting to set, and he’s already exhausted from training his balance and strength and endurance and all sorts of things he didn’t know he should train. But he’d gotten the tree climbing mostly down, so next had been water.

“I know already you grumpy old fox, but the water’s rhythm keeps changing.” he grouches, glaring daggers at the bijuu’s shade, which is sitting calmly on the surface of the water like it’s the easiest thing in the world, which for him I might as well be.

~Then change the frequency to match.~

Naruto tries to do as he’s told, but his water chakra is still unwieldy and tends shift either too far or not far enough, which so far has left him very frustrated and very wet. “What do you think I’ve been doing~” but he doesn’t finish the sentence because his energy sways one way and the water sways abruptly in the other and all the windmilling of his arms in the universe doesn’t keep him from going down.

He plunges into cold water—again—sinking though blue in a cloud of bubbles. But before he can even register the fact or get his bearings, fangs nip into the back of his shirt and Kurama pulls him from the water like disgruntled puppy by its scruff.

He deposits Naruto back down on the water’s surface, and he automatically reaches for yang chakra instead of water when he lands— which is easy by the way. Yang chakra makes him feel like he’s standing on a pane of thick glass instead of shifting gelatin, and the water flows around his feet instead of underneath them, taking the path of least resistance.

“Why do I have to learn it this way again?”
~Because moving with the natural resonance around you will attune you to the flow in things. Mastering it will allow you to slide with or push against the water in a way you wouldn’t be able to do normally. The strongest Kiri-nin can ride tsunamis using this method. Now again, and this time monitor both rhythms, not just your own.~

And that’s the thing about training with Kurama. The fox demon knows what he’s doing wrong before he does, knows when he’s actually tired and when he’s faking it to get a few more breaths of rest. But he can also sense when Naruto is wavering, sense when he’s about to go through the water or faceplant off the rock he’s been using for balance training. When he does, he’s always there to yank him out of the cold water of the basin, or nudge him back in the right direction before he tips over. Even though he pushes relentlessly, his corrections are gentle, not reprimanding, and whatever frustration Naruto feels doesn’t last long before he gets back up and tries again.

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Naruto stumbles back into his apartment physically exhausted, mentally exhausted, and all kinds of chakra exhausted. Earth chakra makes his bones hurt, water chakra makes his muscles hurt, fire chakra makes his throat hurt, wind chakra makes his chest hurt, and lightning chakra makes his hurt hurt.

He’s also soaked, and filthy, and cold.

_Freaking slave driver fox._

~I heard that.~

“Good!”

But even if his limbs are sort of tingly numb and he can’t really see straight, he’s secretly glad of every torturous minute. Not that he’ll tell that to Kurama.

The sun is dipping low and red over the fire country forests, dusting the streets in orange and yellow. He casts a look at the bloody sun, remembering what Kurama said about his mother, about her hair being as red as a Konoha sunset, and wonders if he can make her proud if he never knew her. He shakes the thought from his head and shoulders through his door.

_Long way to go._

He heads straight for the shower, first thing, casting a stray glance at the clock on his microwave as he breezes past it.

_Five hours._

He’s never spent that long on any one thing before in his life. Granted, it hadn’t felt like just _one_ thing. There had been at least six different kinds of _everything,_ and Naruto hadn’t known there were so many ways he could be stronger.

He yanks his sopping uniform off and turns the shower on full blast, which to be honest, is still pretty shitty. But it’s hot, and that’s really all Naruto cares about right now. He spends only enough time under the spray to warm his bones and strip the dirt and leaf matter from his hair, because he starts dozing standing up and he really should be horizontal before he actually passes out.

He steps out and towels off, scrubbing his face hard with the rough cotton to try and force energy into his limbs he doesn’t have, just enough to move him out of the bathroom and into sleeping clothes. He manages sweats and sleeveless top, but that’s apparently as far as his dying brain is
willing to go before he collapses face first on top of his covers and is snoring in under a minute. It’s the best sleep he’s had in months.

He wakes up at some ungodly hour of the morning. The sun isn’t even a thought in the sky yet, just a feathered grey idea beyond the edge of the eastern horizon, and oh god he’s starving.

He rolls off his quilt with about as much grace as a cat in a tube sock, because his muscles aren’t all that sure what moving is anymore, and they clearly need to relearn how to hold his weight from scratch. He sways to his feet, which is a challenge all itself, because he feels like his legs consist of red bean mochi instead of the stuff they’re usually made of.

But his stomach is cramping like it’s been tied in triple knots so he makes his jelly-legs move and stumbles into the kitchen. Healthy food be damned, he goes right for the electric kettle and instant ramen. Kurama can yell at him later– he’ll make some real food when he can think around the pit in his gut. Four minutes later he’s through not just one but three instant ramen meals, empty styrofoam cups and his burnt tongue the only evidence they were there at all.

~Well good morning sleeping beauty.~ Kurama jeers with a yawn as Naruto heads for the fridge to dig up something more to scarf down.

“Ugh, what time is it?”

~A few hours before dawn.~

Which means he only slept about six hours. Crap.

But now he has food in his stomach and sleep is a far away concept, so he whispers “Screw it.” to himself and starts making breakfast. He ends up making three omelets and a massive pot of miso, because he knows he’s going to be hungry later, dammit, so he’s planning ahead. He really needs to figure out how to make curry soon, so he can just make a giant thing of it and not have to cook six times a day. Ramen was so much easier.

He’s most of his way through the first omelets and a mango, because he’d felt like something sweet, when Kurama snags his attention.

~Is there some place you can get jutsu scrolls from?~ He asks, tapping his claws against his maw pensively.

Naruto swallows his tongue against his immediate response of not really, because that’s not quite true. He knows where he can find a ton of scrolls on jutsu, he’s just not exactly supposed to know that.

“There’s a jutsu library at the back of the academy, on the other side of the Hokage’s office. But no one under Chunin is allowed in.”

He’d spied it on accident when he was visiting Jiji, and he’d been staking it out before the whole training thing with Kurama. He hadn’t actually been planning to break in, he’d just wanted to understand what it was and if it was important to being a ninja. But now…

~You know how to get in.~

It’s not even accented like a question, because Kurama knows him well enough by now. Naruto runs through what he knows about the archives in his head.
“Hardly anybody uses it, and the only people I ever see go in there are Jiji and the teachers, maybe a Jounin or two. There’s a Chunin librarian, but just one, and he locks up and goes home around midnight, and gets in about an hour before classes with the rest of the teachers. There might be chakra alarms though, I think some of the stuff back there is classified.”

~I can sense the traps. Will they notice if things go missing?~

Naruto grimaces around a mouthful of egg. “I think so. The librarian does an inventory every morning and night. I can’t take anything without him figuring it out within twelve hours.”

Kurama growls something unpleasant. ~I can’t teach you shinobi jutsu, I just don’t know any. Bijuu don’t need things like hand signs to focus chakra. I can only teach you if we both have something to go off of.~

A light goes off somewhere in Naruto’s head and he swallows the last of his omelet in one go before shoving back from his little table and rolling to his feet. He digs through his bags of shinobi supplies, still sitting by his closet where he left them. It’s not an ideal solution exactly, but…

~Kit?~

Naruto pulls out the triangle shaped package from the bottom of the second bag. Six blank scrolls, strapped together by a band of waxed paper. He dips back into the sack and comes up with a small set of calligraphy pens and ink.

~You sure that’ll work? Don’t they have safeguards against that kind of thing?~

Naruto looks at the clock. Less than three hours before the teachers get in. If he wants to go, he has to go now. “Only if I use chakra to try and copy the stuff down, I’m pretty sure.” he sighs. “It means I have to take everything down by hand though.”

~That’ll take a while.~ Kurama grumbles. ~But better than nothing. Best move your ass then.~

Naruto is already pressing the stuff into his pack as he says it though, because he needs those scrolls to get stronger, and if he’s going to do this he needs to do it before his nerves get the better of him.

He’s almost out his front door when Kurama stops him.

~Windows.~

Naruto stops, does a 180, because if he takes the streets someone will see him, duh, and he won’t be able to avoid the nighttime patrols if he doesn’t know where they are. He has plenty of practice with that at least– most of his pranks involved slipping around the night watch. So he leaves his door locked and goes out his bedroom window instead.

The whole running on vertical surfaces is still hard, especially when he’s trying to be quiet and not accidentally channel too much chakra into his feet and leave craters in the plaster. But he’s been running on rooftops since before he had any idea how to do it with chakra, so, piece of cake really, in comparison to most of the crap he’s done today. Or yesterday. Whatever.

He slips through the window into Jiji’s office, because he knows the old man always leaves it open in case of Jounin sized emergencies. Thankfully even the Hokage isn’t enough of a workaholic to be in his office this late (or early, whatever) and the chakra traps on the walls recognize Naruto, so they don’t go off. He slips to the door, pulling on Kurama’s burning power to sharpen his senses.
There’s no one in the hallway, but there are two people in one of the rooms off of it. It’s in the opposite direction of where Naruto needs to go though, and one of the ninja is snoring anyways. He ducks into the correct corridor and comes to a stop at the inconspicuous double doors. There are a couple of potted plants hanging from the ceiling, and Naruto carefully climbs the wall to get at the one on the left. He finds the spare key at the base of it, covered in soil and moss. The Chunin who is the librarian isn’t supposed to have it, he knows. The spare keys for all the rooms that connect to the Hokage’s office are supposed to be locked in a case in one of Jiji’s desk drawers.

He hops down, using chakra to make the landing silent. He dampens the click the lock makes as he turns the key with the same method–it was one of the first things Kurama taught him. He slips inside and locks the door behind him, just in case.

The archive is one big, low ceilinged room with long shelves that run the entire length of it. The librarian’s desk is tucked into one corner, but the rest of the space is all shelf, barely far enough apart for two people to walk side by side between them. He scans the kanji labels on the short ends–he hadn’t bothered turning on the lights, too risky– but the moonlight coming through the windows combined with his night vision is more than enough to read by.

The sections go by level, and then by type, so he heads for the cases labeled D-Rank. There’s only one full shelf, divided into nin-, gen-, and taijutsu, with the ninjutsu section is further divided by element. He starts there, since he clearly doesn’t have enough scroll space for everything, and he only has so much time to copy.

He spends the early hours of his morning like that, several small scrolls unrolled in front of him, one of his own larger ones draped across his lap like a snake skin as he pens in jutsu after jutsu. It’s **boring**, but the info in the scrolls actually sticks– the more he writes the more he gets the phases involved, and the more he understands the complex hand signs and what they’re really used for. He notices patterns he otherwise would never have cared to see; almost all Katon jutsus have a rat sign in them somewhere, the Fuuton use a lot of bird and ram signs, and the dragon sign is almost exclusively used in Raiton, at least in the low level jutsu.

He gets so into looking for patterns in hand signs that Kurama has to snap at him to get moving when the sun starts to creep up on the horizon, and he barely makes it out before the building starts to come to life with sluggish morning activities.

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He has a test later that day on chakric properties. He fails it spectacularly.

The weird thing is he actually knows about the properties now, more or less, but the questions are worded funny and he second guesses himself, and it doesn’t help that he’s so exhausted by the end of the test he’s not even sure if he finished it or not. Kurama sleeps through more of class than Naruto does.

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Iruka has never been the most patient of people. He knows this, his colleagues know this, and his students definitely know this. What most people don’t know is that Iruka’s true patience, which knows few limits, is reserved almost exclusively for those he holds dear. So when he’s bolting down for the night, getting ready to lock up his classroom and head home to grade papers only to turn to find all three stacks of them missing from his desk– well. He stares at the corner of his workspace next to his empty coffee mug, where the smart stacks of tests had been resting seconds ago, and only sighs. He goes back to collecting his things and dropping them into his bag, pulling it closed and throwing it over his shoulder.
He strides easily towards the door, stopping once to tap a sandal back into place and rub tiredly at the back of his neck with one hand. When he pushes through into the hallway, he levels a ready glare on the Jounin waiting outside, leaning carelessly against the wall with Iruka’s tests folded carefully under one arm. He doesn’t make a move to take them back—not that he could, dammit. He knows from experience that Kakashi Hatake won’t do anything to make him mad directly, and only stole his papers as a convoluted way to get his attention, but he also knows Kakashi won’t relinquish them until he’s gotten what he wants.

Iruka ignores him for a moment as he turns his back to lock his classroom door, and wonders absently how often such a moment has meant someone’s death. Few dare turn their backs on someone like The Hound.

But Iruka has no fear of such things, not even in what could be considered healthy amounts.

When he turns back again Kakashi has moved, is leaning against the wall next to him instead of across from him, and is holding out a pen that had nearly fallen from his bag. He doesn’t speak, but Iruka isn’t really expecting him to. He just takes the pen without a word, slips it more securely into his pack, and starts his meander down the hallway like it’s any other night. Kakashi follows him, a few steps behind him to his right, an unconscious move that allows him to view all the exits even with his visual handicap.

He’d never say so, but Kakashi is one of the main reasons Iruka chose not to pursue a Jounin rank. He prefers being able to walk down a street in his own village without a biological imperative to map out a tactical vantage point every third step, thank you very much.

Once they’re out of the building and Iruka is fairly sure no one is looking their way, much less listening, he sighs. “I heard about the little ‘incident’ in the marketplace. That was you, wasn’t it?”

Kakashi doesn’t answer right away—for whatever reason his usual devil may care attitude seems difficult to pull to the surface. Even when he does manage, it’s weak at best.

“Maa, Iruka-sensei, I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about.” His voice is low and entirely too steady for the strange veil of unease the Jounin is projecting, and Iruka stops suddenly in the middle of the street, turning to look Kakashi in the eye. The silver haired ninja stops as well, meeting Iruka’s gaze levelly, but the uncomfortable air around him doesn’t shift. If anything the atmosphere thickens.

“You’re going to catch hell from the Hokage, you realize.” he says bluntly, because Kakashi hadn’t expected him to buy the hedging words in the first place, and the strange aura around the Jounin is starting to make him uncomfortable.

Kakashi doesn’t answer, because he knows, but he’d done it anyway. Iruka looks at his single silver eye and sighs again, giving in. He keeps walking, Kakashi keeps following, and when Iruka passes through his apartment door, he leaves it ajar behind him.

He puts his bag down as he hears the door close, waits until the sound of the test papers hitting his coffee table reaches his ears, and then turns. He hooks an arm around Kakashi’s neck, the closest thing the Jounin will allow to a hug, and pulls the idiot towards him, pressing Kakashi’s masked face into his shoulder.

“Thank you.”

Kakashi doesn’t return the embrace, Iruka doesn’t expect him to, but he feels the brush of Kakashi’s eyelashes against his neck as they close, and knows he needed this, needed to know that
what he’d done had not been wrong in any way.

“I almost killed him…” Kakashi confesses, so softly Iruka can barely hear him. And Iruka knows, has felt the same impulse enough times he’s familiar with the dark urge, and can’t imagine what it must have been like for Kakashi, who isn’t used to needing to suppress those instincts.

Because for all that Iruka loves Naruto like a brother, it is Kakashi who knew the boy’s parents so dearly; it is Kakashi who is not allowed near the only thing that remains of the last people on earth he ever loved.

Iruka hadn’t known Kakashi, not before, has never seen the kind of man he used to be. But Iruka alone knows even the faintest part of Kakashi’s heart, knows how much of it is dead already. He alone knows the full extent of Kakashi’s fury when something he holds even remotely dear is threatened. And he doesn’t even know Naruto, the Hokage had made sure of that, made it an order, because Hiruzen, perhaps justly, believes that Kakashi and the others who knew Minato and Kushina would not be able to keep the secrets they need to around the boy if given any leeway at all.

Iruka has no idea how bad a reaction might be if something truly dear to Kakashi was ever put to harm.

They’d bonded over it, this urge to hurt those who hurt what was close to them, and now Kakashi comes here when there is nowhere for that impulse to go, when he needs some place to let down the mask and breathe.

Naomi-san down the street thinks they’re lovers. Iruka sometimes wishes the truth were so simple.

He’s not sure exactly what their relationship is. They’re not friends, that’s not intimate enough a word, but lovers implies something is happening that isn’t, and that there are emotions here that Kakashi is no longer capable of. Iruka has never been capable of them, not in that context anyway, but it’s easier to let people believe what they want than it is to try to explain what’s actually going on.

What’s actually going on is far too simple and far too complicated to explain in any words.

Kakashi breathes.

He leans into Iruka and takes one breath after another, a hand gripped around his upper arm, not to restrain, just to anchor. Iruka doesn’t speak, just breathes as well, a steady base tempo for Kakashi to pace his own breathing against, one inhale for Iruka’s every two.

Because Iruka has something Kakashi can’t touch through barriers of duty and loyalty and rules rules rules, and it’s killing him inside in all the ways he’s not already dead. To watch the people of this village mistreat the gift Kakashi’s mentor and surrogate mother died for.

“You need to see Genma.” Iruka tells him maybe an hour later, when Kakashi can breathe like a human being and not the animal he suddenly wants to be. Kakashi nods against his shoulder. Genma knows about Kakashi’s animosity in a way that Iruka doesn’t, the same way Iruka knows about his humanity in a way Genma does not. The human part of Kakashi needs calm, but the animal part has always needed blood, and Genma knows how to deal with those monsters better than most, in ways Iruka is incapable of.

Anbu squads tend to be well acquainted with their collective demons, and know how to draw strength from them in a way no stable ninja could understand.
No matter how hard Iruka tries to convince him to do otherwise, Kakashi sleeps on the floor. On
nights like this he seems incapable of allowing himself comfort in any form, and so he lies on the
tatami past the foot of Iruka’s futon, facing the window, and doesn’t move for the rest of the night.

In the morning he’s long gone, off bowing before a carved stone and praying to phantoms. Iruka
wonders, of all the ghosts he speaks to, which specter is the one that took Kakashi’s soul with it.

He shakes his head, clears it of questions he’ll never know the answer to, and gets up to grade the
tests he’d abandoned on the coffee table. As he flicks through the papers with a red pen and the
ease of long practice, he comes across Naruto’s name in the stack. With a soft cringe he starts
marking, wincing with every X he has to cross. When he gets to the end, something catches him
off guard.

The last three questions on Naruto’s test… are correct. Normally this wouldn’t surprise him,
Naruto isn’t a complete F student, and he knows that, but these questions… They were trick
questions he’d drawn from advanced material and put on the test in an effort to trip up his more
know-it-all students, kids like Shikamaru and Shino and Sakura. He’d planned to make them extra
credit when he calculated the grades. So far none of the tests he’d graded have had any correct
answers, (he always sets Shikamaru’s tests aside so they don’t screw with his grading curve) so
he’d been prepared to cross them out when he came to them.

But… they’re right. The questions on chakra resonance and antiresonance that he’d stolen from a
sensory jutsu journal, the one on the physical manifestations of Yang chakra in taijutsu vs. Yin in
genjutsu… all correct. The responses aren’t thought out– some of the words are spelled wrong and
most of the sentences are stream of consciousness, but they’re the right answers.
A Change In Faith

Chapter Notes

Angst incoming– FIRE IN THE HOLE
And most of it isn't even Sasuke
Shit just got intense tho
I Regret Nothing.

It’s two months into his training when Naruto notices it first. It takes another four before he figures it might mean something’s wrong.

It’s one of his rest days, when it first happens. Kurama insists on having them once a week to let Naruto recuperate from the hell he’s put through regularly, but that doesn’t mean they’re not training. Kurama had seen one of the Tokubetsu Jounin on training ground nineteen spitting senbon with the speed and force of gunshots at terrified Chunin, and he’d asked if Naruto wanted to start his inner strength and breath training early during rest days.

And Kurama, the sneaky demon, had known he’d say hell yes after watching what it could do in action.

So he’s sitting on a rock by the waterfall in his impromptu training ground, and… breathing, essentially. But Naruto is starting to get where the strength part is coming from, steady inner power, and is exploring how it seems to work when he sort of loses track of time.

It’s dark when he opens his eyes, which is weird, he hadn’t thought he’d been at it for that long, and Kurama hadn’t warned him when it was getting late like he usually did.

He sends a soft askance through the seal, a hint of a question. He gets no response.

Sighing, he drops back into his head, landing with practiced ease in the clean blue water of the seal space. It’s so different from how it had been nearly three years ago, dark and oppressive and so much like the inside of a sewer. There’s actual light now, though Naruto couldn’t say where exactly it comes from. The pale gold glimmers in sideways like the rays of a sunset after a storm, refracting off the obsidian cage bars in spider webs of fractured light. It gives the air a dream-like quality, the sensation of dozing lightly in a warm room on a lazy autumn evening. The water, crystal clear and mountain spring cool, reflects the golden sunrays in waves across the smoky opaqueness of the walls, stripes of shining dust motes that wink softly as they float about.

The shafts illuminate the sleeping beast within, gilding Kurama’s coat at the ends and making it look more like fire lilies and less like blood.

“Kurama?”

The word echoes softly like a call in a canyon, but the bijuu doesn’t move.

The fox is lying close enough to the bars for Naruto to touch him, so he reaches up to run his hand softly over the fur of Kurama’s snout just above his canine nose– a familiar gesture nowadays.

Kurama’s crimson eyes blink open, dazed and unfocused, far from their usual keen stare.
~Kit?~ He murmurs. ~What time is it?~

An odd question, since Kurama usually knows the time better than Naruto does. “Nine-ish, I think. You fell asleep.”

Kurama scrunches his nose a little, like he finds it hard to imagine how that happened. ~So it seems.~ He mumbles, shaking his head once like a dog as if to jostle away the fatigue. ~Did you finish your exercises?~

Naruto makes a face, but it’s more put out than actually offended. “I promised I would, didn’t I? I keep my promises. Even if the whole ‘just breathing’ thing was dumb at first.”

~I know you do, fishcake.~ He says sleepily, already starting to doze again. Naruto doesn’t try to keep him awake; instead he just strokes Kurama’s fur some more until the beast’s breathing evens out again.

It’s a little weird, sure– Kurama needs considerably less sleep than he does usually, but if Kurama needs rest Naruto’s not going to bother him. He stays in the seal space a little while longer, suddenly overwhelmingly grateful to this creature of blood and chakra that has become his family, has become yet another precious person. He hasn’t told Kurama that little tidbit, isn’t sure the great fox would appreciate it, but he holds the knowledge close and tucks it deep inside him. Another place to draw strength from.

He’s got a long way to go.

But he keeps his promises.

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Kurama sleeps all the way through the night into the next day. Naruto doesn’t blame him, he does the same thing– only when he does it he gets an earful from Iruka-sensei, again, and Kurama gets to snore through the lecture.

But this time Iruka-sensei corners him after class too, and asks him with far more serious concern if he’s getting enough sleep. Naruto grins sheepishly and apologizes again for dozing off, sincere and everything. It’s worth the way Iruka-sensei smiles, exasperated and fond, and reaches down to ruffle his hair.

“Ramen, kiddo?” he asks, and Naruto grins bright.

“Is that even a question?” he declares, and it makes Iruka laugh.

He lets Naruto get shio ramen with extra pork belly on top, which is awesome, and asks Naruto how he’s been doing like he does every week. Naruto tells him he’s been training, which is true, he just neglects to mention how.

Kurama wakes up when Naruto’s halfway through his food. ~Really brat? More ramen?~

“Oh go back to sleep you grumpy old demon.” He shoots back, but it reminds him of something.

“Hey, Iruka-sensei?”

His teacher swallows a bite of his shoyu and egg ramen, glancing over. “Yes Naruto?”

“Will you teach me how to make curry?”
Iruka blinks at him, surprised. “Of course.” He says easily, and then grins. “I’m glad to see you taking an interest in something other than ramen for once.”

Teuchi smacks a ladle down suddenly on the counter, making Iruka start. Naruto just snatches up his bowl and holds it close to save it from the wrath of the ramen vendor. Iruka’s isn’t so fortunate, and broth sloshes over the side at the impact and splatters all over the counter. “You trying to chase away my best customer, Umino?” he says accusingly.

Iruka holds up his chopsticks in surrender. “No, of course not! I wouldn’t dream if it, Teuchi-san.”

Naruto giggles, setting his own ramen safely down. “Couldn’t chase me away if you tried!” he insists, and Teuchi favors him with a grin.

“You better not. My sales would drop threefold.”

Iruka winces. “My poor salary.”

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Kurama doesn’t have another narcoleptic episode for two weeks. By the time it happens again, Naruto is so focused learning and memorizing new sequences for the C-ranks he’s been okayed to start on that he doesn’t tie the two events together at all. It’s only when it starts happening once a week that Naruto really starts to notice— and worry. Though nothing seems terribly wrong except for the intense lethargy that overcomes the bijuu without rhyme or reason. Kurama insists it’s nothing to lose his fishcake brain over, but Naruto suspects that Kurama is not only wrong, but he’s lying too.

Naruto is given irrefutable proof early one morning, two days before the end of the school year and two weeks shy of his birthday. He’d just fallen asleep, having gone over his ‘acquired’ scrolls about an hour prior. Deep in the recesses of his dreams, he hears a rumble like the starting of a flash flood, and then the precision-like crash of something shattering. A few moments later he’s jerked from sleep, hard, goes from dozing to completely aware in less than a second.

Something is burning across his abdomen, sending scorching pain from below his navel clear up into his ribs, and when he tears his blankets off to grip his stomach, he’s surprised that he’s not actually on fire.

The skin over his seal is a hot and angry red like it’s fighting an infection, only the infection is eating through his shirt: a soft hissing sound accompanies the volatile energy as it chews through the fabric of his sleeveless top over where it was pressed against his seal. He rips it off fast, hurling it to the other side of the room for good measure.

Despite the obvious danger of doing so, Naruto presses a hand to his seal, visible in dark black against the tan skin of his torso. The chakra is Kurama’s, but… wrong, vicious and lost and in pain, and fighting, though with what he can’t tell. He tries to dive down into the space but is instantly rebuffed— Kurama’s chakra flavors half with fear and half with protective instinct and snaps him right back out.

Kurama hasn’t done that for almost three years.

Naruto goes from worried straight into Oh Shit DEFCON 1.

He tries again, forces his way through the raging energy Kurama is throwing off in waves, and drops down into a place very different from the pocket of ease and peace that Naruto has grown used to. The water at his feet isn’t water anymore— it’s scalding hot and viscous and the color of a
bruise—bubbling like a cauldron and spewing dark choking miasma into the air of the seal space. In the center is Kurama, thrashing and tearing around, tails slicing through air thick with fumes.

“KURAMA!” He shouts, trying to make himself heard over the din of hissing smoke and roiling tar and retching painful coughs, throwing up an arm in an attempt to shield his eyes from the stinging fog.

The bijuu looks up. Noxious sludge is dripping in nasty gobs from his open maw, coating his normally pearlescent fangs in slime reminiscent of congealed blood. Kurama blinks, dazed, and is suddenly overtaken by another series of racking coughs. He shakes all over like he’s trying to throw off an attacker, and then he turns abruptly to vomit more muck the color of busted blood vessels.

Naruto tries to force his way through the bars, tries to get to him, but the unseen forces that govern the seal space won’t let him through, and Kurama isn’t close enough for him to reach out.

But Kurama looks like he’s dying, and Naruto can’t just stand here, can’t just do nothing—

Before he can so much as call Kurama’s name again, the Kyuubi looks right at him, reaches out, and swipes a clawed hand through the air. The chakra that pushes him from the seal this time is more familiar, more like Kurama’s, less like the rotten sensation he’d felt at first.

He finds himself suddenly back in his body, and Kurama must have slammed shut some kind of door behind him, because now Naruto can’t find his way back in.

So ya. Sue him. He panics.

He spends probably a whole ten minutes just freaking out. Because what the hell? Kurama is a bijuu, the Kyuubi no Kitsune, and everything Naruto knows about what that means tells him that Kurama can’t get sick, can’t die, can’t even really be truly damaged.

Then what the hell is going on?

The more he thinks about the more he realizes that it has to be chakra—everything Kurama is begins and ends with chakra. The stuff Naruto can feel roiling inside him feels rotten, spoiled.

Rancid chakra?

Naruto has no idea what that means, and has even less of a clue about how to deal with it, but he has no time to think. Class starts in twelve minutes and even if Naruto tries to ditch, Iruka-sensei will notice and come track him down afterwards, both to make sure he’s alright and to give him a good lungful of lecture. Naruto knows this from experience, so he makes himself breathe through the fear.

Think idiot, think.

He can’t go to class with sick bijuu chakra eating through his clothes. The acidity factor of the chakra seems to be calming down somewhat, but it’s still enough to make his hand hot and itchy if he holds it over the space for too long. It also isn’t moving much outside the seal, merely saturating the air directly above it.

He pulls his med kit out of his closet, ransacking through for the adhesive bandages until he finds one large enough to cover his stomach. He slaps it over his seal and wraps it with as many layers of gauze as he can conceal safely under his shirt, which he leaves untucked as he pulls the spare over his head.
He has no clue if it will be enough, but he doesn’t have time for anything else.

It’ll have to be.

Sasuke has begun to note the days when class is quiet.

It’s an irritating thing for his brain to latch onto, but he finds himself incapable of truly ignoring the abnormal hush that settles over the classroom whenever Iruka pauses for breath. It’s instinct now that his senses stretch, that he listens for changes in the air that might indicate the doldrums will pass, but more often than not, on days like this, they don’t.

Naruto is quiet.

He’s not sleeping either, though Sasuke refuses to look behind him to check. Naruto has slept through class for the last three weeks solid, and that’s an entirely different kind of quiet—soft and easy and normal in a way this deafening silence is not.

The first time it happened was the day after the one he came in sans obnoxious jumpsuit—he’d been so quiet that the black shinobi clothes had seemed like mourning attire instead of a uniform. This quiet is different though, he feels that something isn’t right, and the tension in the air is too tight for that feeling to be a coincidence.

The second he gets a chance, as soon as Iruka leaves them for lunch break, Sasuke—as covertly as he can—casts a glance at the dead last.

What he sees startles him.

There are bags under Naruto’s eyes that speak of exhaustion—the kind that sleep can’t fix—potent and arduous and born of tortured sleepless nights. His eyes are downcast, weary, even his hair is far tamer than it usually is—which is standing in all directions after no doubt only just rolling out of bed. Instead he looks like he hasn’t slept at all, like he’s spent the night battling demons only to find them still there as the sun rose.

Sasuke’s seen that look before.

After long nights of terror and nightmares of bonds and brothers and blood, he’s seen it in the mirror.

Sasuke’s not the only one that’s noticed.

“Do you think he’s okay?”

He whips his head around, momentarily mortified at being caught staring at an idiot that shouldn’t hold his attention at all, only to find Sakura there, sitting next to him.

What the same.

He scoffs and turns his head away. “What do I care?” he snaps.

Sakura blinks, a pathetic look of hurt flashing across her face. But then the hand she’s holding clasped over her chest tightens, and something else flashes through her eyes, so fast Sasuke nearly misses it.
Something ferrous.

She turns from him, which alone is startling, and walks up the steps to the rows above them. For one terrifying moment Sasuke fears she’s going to talk to Naruto, and something in him panics just a little, because no, stop, it’s not the kind of pain you can console, it’s the kind of pain that when confronted turns angry and defensive, and Sakura won’t like what she sees if she tries.

He’s not sure why he’s worried about Sakura. He’s even less sure how he knows the way it would end.

But thankfully Sakura doesn’t turn to Naruto– she bypasses the row he’s sitting in, both seats beside him empty, and instead goes one row up to sit on the side of Shikamaru that isn’t occupied by Choji. Sasuke can’t fathom what she wants from the dozing shadow-nin.

She looks to Choji first, oddly, a question in her eyes, and Choji nods, his hand buried in a bag of fried pork skins.

Like she’s been given permission, Sakura jostles Shikamaru’s arm gently. The Nara blinks awake, turning his eyes to Sakura with alarmingly razor focus for half a second, before his gaze relaxes back into it’s normal lazy stare.

Sasuke eavesdrops shamelessly.

“Ya?” Shikamaru yawns, not bothering with a more complex sentence.

Sakura points at the back of Naruto’s head. “What happened? Do you know?” She murmurs softly.

That hits Sasuke kind of sideways. What would Shikamaru know about Naruto?

Shikamaru favors Sakura with one long blink, eyes sliding between Naruto and Sakura as if debating which one was more trouble.

Sakura levels him with a glare Sasuke didn’t know she was capable of. “And don’t tell me you don’t know, Nara. I may be no genius but I’m not stupid.” She growls, though she keeps her tone soft and low as not to attract the attention of the blond below them. Sasuke figures she needn’t bother– Naruto’s eyes are clouded like he’s looking in instead of out. The view is inordinately disturbing.

Shikamaru sighs heavily, disproportionately harassed for what’s been asked of him. He looks down at Naruto again, his eyes lingering, assessing, on blonde hair. Sasuke isn’t expecting the pinch of worry around Shikamaru’s eyes, or his own response to it.

Irritation.

Frustration that Shikamaru knows something about Naruto that he does not.

Sasuke moves to shut the emotion down, as violently as he can, but his anger only rises when he finds the sensation can’t be quelled.

“He’s sick, I think.” Shikamaru responds.

Sick?

That brings him up short again. Naruto doesn’t look sick, he looks in pain. The signs on his face speak of stress, not ailment.
Sakura seems to come to the same conclusion, because her forehead scrunches and she frowns. “That doesn’t make any sense. He’s never been sick.”

She’s… right, now that Sasuke thinks of it. In all the years at the academy that he remembers, Naruto’s never presented with so much as a sniffle.

“That’s not the kind of sick I’m talking about.” Shikamaru corrects, and the concern in his lazy eyes becomes more apparent. He tears the corner off his notebook– a prop, since he has an eidetic memory– balls it up and flicks it at Kiba.

It hits the dog-nin in the back of the head, and he cuts off his conversation with Hinata to glare at the culprit. He’s clearly surprised when his eyes land on Shikamaru. “Shika?” He asks. “Somethin’ the matter?”

“You remember that...thing you heard happened outside Ichiraku a while ago?”

Kiba’s eyes dart immediately to Naruto, a terrible tell that whatever Shikamaru is talking about obviously involved him, and then flick back to Shikamaru. “I remember.”

‘A while ago’ could mean anything, but Sasuke gets the sinking feeling that it has something to do with the day Naruto came to class without his jumpsuit.

“Has anything like that happened since?” Shikamaru asks vaguely.

Kiba shakes his head. “No idea. I only found out about the first time on accident because my sister has a big mouth.” His eyes flicker to Naruto again and back. “Did you hear something?”

Shikamaru shakes his head, even as Hinata leans forward.

“What are you talking about? Is something wrong?” She asks.

Kiba smiles back at her, reassuring and false. “Nothing, don’t worry about it. So your idiot brother did what now?”

Hinata flushes angrily and becomes so busy defending Neji that she fails to notice the strain that crops up on Kiba’s face.

*What the hell is going on here?*

“Shikamaru?” Sakura asks, her expression uncertain.

The shadow-nin waves his hand as if to disperse her wariness. “Just… leave him be. I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

Sakura doesn’t look convinced though, and neither does Shikamaru.

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The problem is that Sasuke can’t stop thinking about it.

Not the fact that something’s wrong with Naruto or the fact that he was acting strangely today, but the fact that something in him *needs* to know why. Naruto’s an idiot, a failure. He shouldn’t so
much as catch Sasuke’s attention, let alone hold it in a vice the way he does, and without even trying.

Sasuke’s instincts are running wild, and trying to sort out the barrage of impulses and intuition is like trying to categorize a hurricane—like trying to differentiate wind from rain and rain from flailing debris. It’s not just one thing; it’s too many little things.

Naruto sleeps through almost all of class now in a way he hadn’t before, but clearly his grades haven’t dropped enough to warrant being kicked out. So where is he getting the information? He can’t be absorbing it the way Shikamaru seems to be able to, or else he wouldn’t be the Dead Last, yet he somehow passes every test by the skin of his teeth.

What’s worse is that he comes to class obviously exhausted, but when it’s time for spars and they’re pitted against one another Naruto doesn’t fight any worse than he used to— in fact he fights better. And sometimes, when Naruto’s far too weary to really even be considering spars, or Sasuke is inches away from victory in them, something changes. Sometimes, deep in Naruto’s eyes, something switches on like an instinct or a reflex, and suddenly Sasuke is forced back by strength the idiot shouldn’t have, and all the ground he’d gained is lost in moments. He still wins, but it makes the victories seem hollow, makes that strange sensation throb in his chest— the one that tells him he’s missing something.

The more he interacts with the idiot, the more a very specific instinct in his hurricane gains credence. Because even before these strange things started happening, Sasuke has always had the feeling that somewhere in the core of both of them, somewhere buried deep, is the same kind of pain.

And that makes him hopeful and furious all at once, because Sasuke, ever since that night, has defined himself by his misery. The idea that Naruto might feel the same pain and can still find joy and meaning in the smallest of things— it makes him furious. Once upon a time Sasuke might have said that his indifference made him the stronger one, that Sasuke’s ability to disregard everything between him and his revenge gave him power.

But the painful thing is that he’s not sure. And because he’s not sure, there is a fraction of a chance that Naruto is the stronger of them both.

That night he thinks himself sick about it; lies cold in his too large bed in his too large house in a complex filled with ghosts and tries to use their torments to school his thoughts into order. Vengeance for those who died here, for his mother and his father and dammit for the memory of his brother, the one he used to know. That ghost is by far the loudest; the wraith of who his brother used to be screaming across the house in echoes of why why how could you why?

But the idea of his strength against Naruto’s sinks its claws into him until he can practically feel blood welling up in his throat.

He hates nights like this.

But more painful are the nights when he’s flooded with ideas of how things could have been, when he dreams of having a family again only to have it ripped from him again and again until he’s left in nothing but pools of Uchiha blood that only grow and grow and grow.

So he lies awake and tries to hate for it.
He succeeds less and less these days.
Naruto finally gets back to his apartment, after what feels like thousands of reassurances to Iruka-sensei that yes, he’s fine, he just needs some sleep. He feels bad for lying, mostly because he has no intention of sleeping tonight at all.

Right now, he’s merely infinitely grateful that prolonged use and familiarity with Kurama’s chakra has acclimated him to constant chronic pain. The burn radiating from his seal is worse than what he’s used to, but he is used to it, and if he were any less used to it, sitting still through class would have been impossible.

He hadn’t heard a word of Iruka-sensei’s lecture though, even if he had been awake for it this time. He’d been far too busy trying to figure out what the hell he was going to do.

And he had.

It’s a long shot, but in the closed off section of the archives, the room meant only for the eyes of Jounin or the Hokage, are copies for every medical ninjutsu the village knows— it had been in the librarian’s logs. Even if they don’t have something that can fix Kurama’s ailment, they might have something that could tell Naruto what the hell is wrong. Either way, it’s his only choice.

Figuring out that part of the plan had been easy, it was the rest of it that had required more thought, because knowing where the scrolls are and getting to them are two entirely different things. Naruto already has the hardest part handled purely by chance— the door to the inner part of the archives requires two chakra-laced keys. The first key, which is carried by any active jounin, opens the door itself. The second, carried only by the Hokage, goes to a hidden lock that deactivates the chakra alarms— that way even if someone managed to steal a Jounin key to open the door, the alarm would still go off and alert every Anbu within a five mile radius.

But Naruto doesn’t even need a Jounin key, because Jiji, on top of having the key to the alarm, also has a key to the box in his desk that carries the spare Jounin keys, Naruto just has to get them both off Jiji.

Which would be a problem for everyone but Naruto. Not only is Naruto keyed into the chakra alarms on Jiji’s office, but he also knows that Jiji keeps all his important stuff in a compartment on the underside of his shodo easel.

The biggest hitch is that he needs more time with whatever scrolls he can find, so he can’t go in the small hours of the morning like he usually does— and worse, he’ll have to slip by the Chunin librarian while he’s still on duty.

There’s one saving grace, however. Naruto is one hundred percent positive that the inside of the library has no bathroom whatsoever. The Chunin in question also has a fondness for sweet black
tea, given the bottles of the stuff Naruto keeps finding both left on his desk and cluttering the waste bin behind it.

Naruto had done him the favor of leaving a case full on his porch as soon as he’d gotten free of Iruka-sensei’s concern. Now he just has to wait until Jiji leaves his office.

He sits outside the window in the branches of one of the big oaks, close enough that he can see the old man, but far enough away not to get in the way of the patrols going past. He uses the time to practice the one skill he’s going to need if he’s going to pull this off.

Chakra resonance.

He remembers Kurama’s lessons on it clearly, and he remembers how it pertains to stealth.

*Most high-level ninja rely more on their chakra sense than their eyes when it comes to detecting threats.* Kurama had told him. *Match your internal resonance with the ambient chakra around you, and even the most skilled shinobi will walk right past you.*

He practices matching his resonance to that of the tree around him, and when he thinks he’s got it handled, he tests it by sitting out on one of the branches close to the patrol and waiting for it to pass. The Jounin on duty don’t even slow down.

He’d be more proud of himself, only the pain in his abdomen threatens his focus every time he loses sight of what he’s trying to do, and every burning aching throb reminds him of the dire straights Kurama is in right now.

Kurama is precious to him. For almost a year now Kurama has raised him, and he will not let Kurama suffer if he has anything to say about it. So he draws from that strength, that will of fire, and razors his focus.

Ten minutes later Jiji stands up from his deck, rubs his back like the old man he pretends he’s not. He knocks twice against his desk, a signal for his Anbu escort, and immediately the two guards that had been standing outside his door appear beside him– Rabbit and Falcon judging from the masks, which is normal. He waits a good fifteen minutes after they’ve left, until the patrol passes him a third time and the candle Jiji had snuffed at the edge of his desk is no longer trickling smoke. Then he slips through the window, moving silently to the shodo easel. He feels along the underside of the wooden frame until his fingernails catch against abnormal grooves, and then pushes against it.

A soft click as the panel gives a little, and when Naruto releases it a drawer pops forward at the easel’s base, shallow, but as long and deep as Naruto’s forearm. He pulls it open, eyes scanning the compartment for the key he needs, when his gaze catches on something else.

It’s a set of picture frames. The first is old and oak and rough around the edges. Featured is a young picture of Jiji, his hair brown instead of grey, no age spots in sight. He’s flashing a cocky grin Naruto has never seen on the reserved Hokage, standing behind three kids Naruto doesn’t recognize. They’re all older than him, but not by much; the boy to the furthest left of the picture has jagged white hair and is wearing a grin of his own that almost matches the once gracing Jiji’s face. The boy in the middle has smooth black hair, pale skin, and strange slited eyes in toxic green-gold. The girl, the one on the right, has long blonde hair four shades lighter than Naruto’s own, smooth and tied back on a smart pony tail, and her eyes are the color of warm and creamy coffee.

It looks like a picture of a Genin team, but Jiji has never mentioned having Genin, and Naruto would remember if he’d seen these faces around the village, even if they were older.
There’s a picture underneath it, and despite the urgency of the situation Naruto can’t help but take a peak, lifting the first picture frame gently by the edge as to not leave any fingerprints on the glass. The second frame is newer, polished mahogany, but the bottom corner of the frame is dented and the glass above it is cracked, like it’s been dropped or thrown against something.

Naruto’s breath catches.

The picture is of a man and a woman, again standing behind three kids. The man is ruffling the silver hair of a young boy with a mask over his face, who is glaring at the dark haired boy across from him. The woman has an arm around said boy’s neck and is giving him what must be an excruciating noogie considering the look on his face. A sweet looking girl stands between them, giggling, the square clan markings on her cheeks crinkling as she laughs.

The man has gold-blonde hair and blue eyes, his smile kind and soft and obviously besotted as he gazes over. The woman has hair as red as a Konoha sunset, grown down almost to her ankles, pinned back from her eyes. The look on her face is playful and smug as she rubs hard against the boy’s hair, her eyes glinting with mischief. Her skin is dark in a way the man’s is not, but in a way that Naruto’s is.

A picture of his parents.

His hands are suddenly shaking, and he puts the picture down before he accidentally drops it. They look exactly like Kurama had had said they would, but seeing them is somehow different, somehow more real.

He looks so much like his father that it’s no wonder Jiji sees phantoms around him, but the shape of his face and the tone of his skin are clearly his mother’s, who even in the stillness of a photograph looks as fierce as Kurama described her.

A pulse of contaminated energy in his stomach reminds him painfully why he’s here, that he has a parent here and now, still breathing, that needs him.

He puts the frames back carefully where he found them and picks up the key ring nestled next to the frames. He picks the one off the top that he’s seen Jiji use to open the spares box, and runs a finger over the others keys until he finds the one radiating chakra. He counts the number of keys before it, and then lifts it carefully from the ring and shuts the drawer. He goes to the bottom drawer in Jiji’s desk, using the key to pop open the reinforced metal box he finds inside. He goes to the row of keys labeled ‘Archives: Spare’ and snags the first in the row. He closes and locks the box behind him, just in case a wandering shinobi peers inside.

He ducks into the hallway, clear of Anbu now that the Hokage is not longer here to protect, and walks silently down the hall to the door to the Archives. He tucks himself into the corner of the door syncs his chakra to resonate with the subtle rhythm of the wood and plaster of the wall.

It doesn’t take very long for the door to click open and the chunin librarian to exit, a prim shinobi with dark hair and wide set eyes. He yawns, exiting the short hall and turning down the corridor towards the restrooms. Naruto slips inside before the door can close completely.

The classified jutsu room is at the far back behind the shelves on B-rank Taijutsu, and he navigates the maze of books and scrolls with practiced ease. He has two minutes to get inside. Three tops.

The lock for the Jounin key is obvious, it’s in the door, but Naruto has to move a small bookcase over to get at the second one, which makes an unfortunate amount of noise he can’t help. He does it fast, wincing at the groan and scrape of the wood against the wall, and puts Jiji’s key in the slot.
as soon as he’s uncovered it. A twist and a chirping noise, and the chakra alarm is disabled.

He pulls the shelf back into place and slips the Jounin key into the lock on the door, letting out a sigh of relief when nothing screeches or blows up in his face, but immediately curses again as he hears the scrape and click of the library door being opened. He darts in fast, waits, and when he hears the doors start to close he shuts his own door at almost the same time, and hopes to every deity he doesn’t believe in that the Chunin didn’t hear it. He waits, ear pressed against the door, for a full heart-pounding minute, but he hears no footsteps coming towards him.

He hears almost nothing, actually. Even with his keen ears, the room is eerily quiet.

*Soundproof.* He realizes.

He lets out a breath, loud in his own ears.

He turns, surveying the room before him. It’s not as small as he originally figured it would be, both walls lined with tall bookshelves laden with scrolls. There are no windows, so Naruto will have to rely on his internal clock to tell him when to get going. He has about seven hours to dawn, and ideally he should be out in six.

No time to waste, he tracks down the shelf of medical ninjutsu and pulls down the entire layer of scrolls and texts, laying them out on the floor, and gets to work.

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It takes him nearly an hour, but he finally finds something that sounds like what he’s looking for. The book he finds it in is old, the leather spine cracked and the ink faded on frayed pages. It’s some kind of journal listing chakric ailments, and one of the chapters reads *Chakra Corruption*.

He reads it with more focus than he would a jutsu, committing everything it says to memory.

*Chakra Corruption*

**Definition:** Alteration and disruption of chakra’s nature due to outside forces, resulting in a sickness of chakra vessels. This can be a primary or secondary affliction, depending on if the disruption is peripheral or central.

**Symptoms:** Severe lethargy, inability to keep conscious for long periods of time, soreness radiating from point of contamination, fever, blood toxicity, and inability to properly mould chakra. In severe primary afflictions of the central chakra system, symptoms can also include nausea and vomiting of coagulated chakra. Cases this severe must be treated immediately as prolonged suffering of this affliction can result in death.

**Causes:** Certain rare poisons have the ability to cause this condition, but it is most commonly caused by repeated chakra exhaustion followed by the over imbibing of artificial chakra pills. As a result this condition is also known as Campaign Fever. In rare and often unrecorded cases, extreme emotional turmoil or upheaval has been known to cause this condition, particularly in those inclined to Yang energy or with poor Yin control.

**Treatment:** The only known treatment for Chakra Corruption is transfusion. First, as much of the corrupted chakra as is safe should be drained from the patient. Once this is done, stable chakra should be fed into the patient’s system slowly over the course of several days. The most severe symptoms should abate immediately, though lethargy and fever may persist for one to two weeks as
the chakra system rids itself of remaining corrupted chakra.

No.

This can’t be happening.

This can’t be it.

Naruto throws the book to the ground, feeling the prickling sting of tears threaten the corners of his eyes. He lets them come, because he’s tired and devastated and in pain and there’s no one around to hear him. All this, and Naruto’s useless.

All this only to find out that Naruto can’t even help. Worse, Kurama’s condition is probably his fault.

Extreme emotional upheaval.

It was the only thing that made sense. Kurama doesn’t need chakra pills, can’t be poisoned. And the only thing he knows that Kurama has any emotional attachment to is Naruto.

Goddammit.

He cries until he can’t see, because he can do nothing. The one thing Kurama needs, the thing that Kurama has given him without reservation, is the one thing Naruto can’t give back.

Chakra.

His seal, Kurama’s prison, won’t allow it.

As tears fall onto his knees, darkening the fabric over his legs, he tries to reach, tries to find Kurama in his seal. But whatever door Kurama slammed is still shut, and the burn against his stomach hasn’t abated.

He can’t let this happen. He can’t. Kurama is a creature of chakra; Naruto has no doubt that this could kill his bijuu if he lets it.

He can’t let it.

He puts a hand over his seal, feels the heat radiating off it even through the layers of bandages. Suddenly something fires in his brain, synapses connect, and hope flares.

The seal.

The seal is the problem. If he can alter it, change it somehow so that he can feed chakra through it…

He vaults to his feet, starts tearing through the shelves in search of anything he can find on Fuinjutsu. His frustration mounts and mounts as he tears through scroll after scroll and finds nothing that could help him, nothing more complicated than storage scrolls or barrier tags. He knocks over the chair tucked in the corner, the only furniture in the room, and is only absently glad the room is soundproofed. He leans back against a tall bookcase, staring despondently at the mess of scrolls and open books he’s left behind, and sees it.

Behind the chair he’d knocked over, tucked along the edge of one of the bookshelves, is a keyhole.
It looks the same as the one Naruto used to disable the alarms.

He moves over to it, not daring yet to hope. It could respond to Jiji’s alarm key, but it could also require an entirely different key that Naruto doesn’t have. If that’s the case, if an alarm goes off and the Anbu find him, then Naruto would be expelled from the academy. He would never be a ninja, not in Konoha.

But if he doesn’t try and there’s a chance, then Kurama will die and it will be all Naruto’s fault.

And that makes the choice easy.

He slips Jiji’s key into the slot, sends a desperate quiet “Please.” to any being that might be listening, and turns the key.

A click, a whir, the working of mechanisms he can’t see, and suddenly the bookcase beside him swings open a crack.

No alarms go off. No Anbu crash through the door.

What the hell would Jiji say?

“Thank the seven gods of luck.” Naruto murmurs, feeling old just saying it, but he feels it’s necessary both for the situation and in homage to the old man.

He opens the secret door, which swings on heavy, creaky hinges. It leads down a short staircase into a small dark room filled with stacks of files and reports piled on the floor. There are kanji seals painted all over the walls, presumably to prevent intrusion from outside the library.

Naruto slinks down the stairs, leaving the bookcase ajar behind him. There’s no jutsu scrolls save for one massive one sitting atop a desk at the back of the room, nearly as long as Naruto is tall. Nothing else that could potentially tell him how to alter a seal as complex and powerful as the one holding Kurama.

He takes a deep breath, and drags the giant scroll off the desk.

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Kinjutsu. Forbidden techniques. Naruto swallows heavily as he continues to read through the Jutsu. The scroll paper is thick and heavy; the ink scrawled across it is disturbingly simple for its contents. Naruto reads it end to end, copying the things he knows he won’t remember. He has no idea what he might need later, what might help. There’s instructions for a shadow clone technique that doesn’t make sense because it makes too much sense, details about a chakric security system around something called the Shrine of Masks, and descriptions of a technique that uses a flying thunder seal, whatever that is. Towards the end, he finds something very familiar.

His seal is marked down in extraordinary detail under the name Seal of Eight Trigrams. According to the notes scribbled onto all side of the thing, it’s a hell of a lot more complicated than anything else in here. He has no idea what some of these terms mean; fasteners, distribution curves, dimensional pocketing? And there’s nothing inside that gives even a hint as to what they could be. Kurama had taught him some things, basic constriction, enough to make his own storage scrolls and a few types of customized barrier tags, but nothing near this complicated.

He copies down every word anyway, pens each scrawl of notes in excruciating detail, and tucks that specific scroll not in his pack but in one of the hidden pockets inside his shirt. It’s a start, but there’s not enough information, not enough for him to go on. He needs more help— a seal expert to
teach him or something, but he doesn’t know any.

...Except that he does, just not any that are alive.

He rolls the scroll back up and turns his attention to the stacks and stacks of files.

*Four hours left. Better hurry.*

He starts flipping through the files, careful not to disturb their order. They’re alphabetical, so it’s not hard. As he flips by the Ts into the category he’s looking for, his eyes catch on a different file, four folders up from the one he needs.

*The Uchiha Incident.*

Naruto’s mind flashes unbidden to Sasuke, to images of the massive empty compound Naruto has seen him heading towards after school. Through some instinct he doesn’t understand, he pulls out the file. There’s a strange symbol on the front, the Kanji for the word ‘root’ in bold strokes above the formal kanji for ‘copy’. He flicks it open with his thumb.

Nausea rolls sharply through his gut at the sight of the pictures inside. He reads quickly, his hand at his mouth, horror rolling through him at the thought of doing something like that to another human being, let alone *family*. A few sentences stand out over all the others.

*Root issued.*

*Mission Complete: Single survivor*


At the back of the file, in Jiji’s handwriting, is a note.

*Never again. Danzo has crossed a line. Root is to be disbanded effective immediately. Under no condition will he be allowed to operate without my direct supervision, not after this mess. I will see to it that the boy is protected. It was Itachi’s last wish.*

Underneath it is more writing in unfamiliar script.

*Funerals were seen to as you asked, but you should know – eyes missing.*

Naruto has no idea what the hell that means, and he’s starting to resent the feeling. Something doesn’t feel right though; something’s off, so he takes a copy of this file too. He slips the folder back where he found it, shaking his head like it’ll help banish the horrors from his thoughts, and moves on to the file beneath it, the one he was after to start. It’s thicker by far, filled to the brim with reports and photo paper. It reads *Uzushio: Destruction*

The smell of mildew greets him as he opens it, the scent of forgotten reports and decade-old shame. He scans through, the pages seeming fragile in his touch as he thumbs through sheet after sheet of writing and pictures. Most of its nonsense and even more of it’s useless, the only exception being a
set of maps detailing troop movements. The reports aren’t parallel, contradict each other, and again he finds the Kanji for *root* stamped on every other page.

One report seems different— it’s written on different paper, crinkled with water stains and small tears like it was written in the field. The first part of the page is illegible, but Naruto can just make out the end.

—All dead or missing. *Cannot tell Kiri and Iwa nin from Uzushio shinobi. Too many of both, far more former than later. Repository not found by either parties, Storm is forcing back both Kiri-Iwa and Konoha forces. Unable to continue search.*

Repository? Something seems off about the way it’s written, like a proper noun. Kurama had taught him enough script and he’s read through enough history and jutsu to know that isn’t normal. *Storm* is written in the same fashion. When Naruto flips the page over, he finds a disturbing note scrawled on the back.

*The Island doesn’t want us here.*

*Whatever hospitality or tolerance it once offered has been rescinded with our failure.*

*We cannot even bury the fallen.*

*Only the Uzumaki could calm it’s wrath, and the Uzumaki are dead.*

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By the time he’s finished cleaning up the mess he’d made in the in the upper room and securing all the doors, it’s only an hour before the building starts to flood with early risers. He makes it out of the library and down the main hall without a fuss, and he’s almost home free when he turns the corner towards Jiji’s office and physically smacks right into a shinobi.

He flails and jolts back, swinging a hand up to grip his nose where it had impacted the ninja’s ribcage with eye watering force.

*Smooth dumbass.*

His brain registers several things at once— guy, *senbon, Tokubetsu Jounin,*— before panic sets in and it’s all just a jumble of *shit I’m gonna be expelled and Kurama’s gonna die and shit shit shit.*

But then the man releases a pained breath and Naruto looks up, his freak-out temporarily stalled.

The Tokujo looks familiar, though Naruto can’t put a finger on why. He’s got jaw length honey hair pulled loosely back from his face, eyes the color of caramel syrup, and there’s a senbon grit between his teeth. Other than the clench of his jaw and the pained hiss of breath Naruto is sure he heard, there’s no sign of the pain the man is clearly feeling— but Naruto can practically sense it coming off him in waves.
“Dammit.” The man hisses vehemently, pulling a hand through his hair where it’s falling out of it’s loose tail, but he schools his features easily enough and looks down at Naruto. “Hey, what’re you doing here kid? It’s godawful o’clock.”

Naruto fumbles for a second because he’s a shitty liar and he knows it, but stops rooting for an answer when he senses something other than pain rolling off the man before him.

Guilt?

Naruto has no idea how he knows that– the only emotion showing on the thirty-something’s face is boredom.

Naruto’s instincts seem sure of it though, and when he stares up at the man for a moment, blinking, the feeling intensifies until he starts to see it surfacing in the back of the shinobi’s eyes. Naruto rubs at his face and the Tokubetsu seems to misinterpret the action in junction with his red and watery eyes.

He’s instantly and obviously uncomfortable, and he puts his hands up like Naruto is some kind of mine he accidentally stepped on and if he shifts the wrong way he’ll blow his leg off. “Where the fuck is Iruka when you need him.” He mutters under his breath, low enough that if Naruto’s hearing were any less keen he wouldn’t have caught it.

“What are you doing here?” He asks harshly, his voice a little rough, because the man looks more in the spotlight than Naruto feels. The guilty tang to the air intensifies so that Naruto can practically smell it– acrid and lingering like vinegar and missed opportunities. Naruto rubs at his nose where it impacted bone. The man offers a smile that’s more like a grimace, but doesn’t answer his question.

“You okay, kid?” he asks back.

“I could ask you that.” The words are out of Naruto’s mouth before he can overthink them, and are softer than he intended them to be because sue him, he’s exhausted, and now that he bothers to take a good inhale through his poor battered nose, he can smell the metallic tang of blood underneath the shinobi’s clothes. “You need a medic or something?”

The forced smile drops right off of the man’s face and his senbon clicks audibly against his teeth as his jaw goes lax, the shinobi’s eyes narrowing and his forehead wrinkling in confusion.

Naruto just blinks up at him, confused by the scrutiny. “What?”

“How do you figure?”

“Uh, because you’re injured?” Naruto says, because that’s kind of obvious.

Except maybe it’s not, because the ninja’s eyes widen again for a fraction of a second and then suddenly cloud. The man sways, snaps an arm up to brace against the wall. The facade crumbles at the edges in a breath hissed between teeth and a pained slouch of shoulders, like air released from a balloon. “Shit.” He croaks. “Sorry kid, but I don’t suppose your sensei is about?”

It’s Naruto’s turn to be confused, because what has that got to do with anything? “Iruka-sensei? He won’t be here for a while, I don’t think. Don’t you need to be in a hospital?”

The man shakes his head. He’s gone from pale to sickly in under a minute, and clammy sweat is building on his forehead as he struggles to keep himself upright.
“No… hospitals…” He mutters, and then he’s falling forward.

Alarmed, Naruto moves to catch him, bracing his shoulder against the shinobi’s chest as the man slumps forwards. He’s heavy, heavy enough that Naruto almost drops him, and just like that Naruto’s stuck with seventy-five kilos of unconscious shinobi he didn’t ask for.

“Aw come on…” He groans at no one in particular.

For a second he debates just dropping him in front of the shinobi wing of the ER, but he discards the idea almost as soon as he thinks of it. Iruka-sensei’s house isn’t far— it would be just as easy to drag him there than it would be to haul him to the hospital. He just hopes he won’t get in trouble.
Reminder, Resolve

Chapter Notes

For the record, this entire chapter almost didn't happen. But my roommate found it in my folder of random shit and demanded it be a thing, so thank her not me. Moving on. I regret nothing.

Iruka brings his second cup of coffee for the morning to his mouth and takes a swallow, flipping through mission reports at his kitchen table while he debates on the merit of a third dose of caffeine. He figures another mug decreases the likelihood of him actually strangling Kotetsu to death at the mission desk, but also increases his chances of being too nice to Anko on accident and having to deal with her unsubtle harassment/flirting all day.

Just as he decides against it, figuring more caffeination would be worse for both his health and his sanity, there’s a soft, hesitant knock on his door.

Iruka freezes immediately, his mug halfway to his mouth.

Not a single person Iruka could be considered friends with would ever knock like that. Only two people he knows would bother knocking at all, the first being Hayate, who is chronically polite, and the second being Gai– whose pounding usually startles Iruka’s neighbors and occasionally breaks his door. The rest either just barge in or are overly paranoid Jounin who tend to fall through his window late at night.

Iruka scoots his chair back and gets to his feet. He’s not dressed yet– he hadn’t planned on going in early today so he’s still in his civs– a pair of grey sweatpants and a navy longsleeve, hair loose around his shoulders. He pulls a kunai out from under the table and slips it into the waistband of his pants, covering the handle with a tug of his shirt.

He’s prepared for a lot of things when he eases the door open, but the last thing he expects to see is the familiar swath of blond hair belonging to his favorite student, hunched beneath Genma’s sorry unconscious carcass.

Blue eyes blink up at him, entirely too red and exhausted for Iruka’s liking, but the bright smile offered to him is genuine, if tired. “Hi, Iruka-sensei.”

He swings the door open immediately. “Naruto?” He asks, dipping down to relieve his unconscious idiot of a friend from his student’s small shoulders. “What’s going on? What happened?”

Naruto leans out from underneath Genma’s weight as soon as he’s able, an oddly graceful bend for an almost ten-year-old. “Uh, I think he’s mostly okay, but he passed out in the hallways outside Jiji’s office.”

Outside the Hokage’s office? What the hell was Genma doing there? Unless…
“You moron, Shiranui…” he growls softly, throwing the other shinobi’s limp arm over his shoulder, looping his own around the man’s waist to haul him upright against his side. Naruto hovers nearby, looking uncertain. Iruka can’t help but smile a little. “Think you could help me with this idiot, Naruto? Knowing him he’s going to need stitches, do you remember where I keep my med kit?”

Naruto nods smartly and ducks past Iruka into the apartment, vanishing around the corner into the bathroom. Iruka drags his friend to the couch and begins undoing his jounin vest; eyes searching for the red he knows must be beneath the thick fabric of the flak jacket. He finds the pooling stain of crimson over the flesh of Genma’s right side, a long swath of it visible in the underside of the jacket like a slash of red paint. The blood is invisible against the standard shinobi longsleeve, so Iruka will have to get him out of it before he can see the extent of the damage. The shirt is otherwise clean and untorn, which raises Iruka's blood pressure because it means the idiot literally went home and changed before he thought of seeking out medical attention. He wants badly to punch the stubborn moron, for that and for apparently passing out on one of his kids, but it will have to wait until Genma is conscious for it.

He puts two fingers to the Tokujo’s neck to check his pulse, just as Naruto reappears with Iruka's med case in tow, worry apparent on his young face. “Is he gonna be okay?”

“He’s going to be fine.” Iruka replies, and is relieved to be able to say so with confidence; Gemma's pulse is throbbing evenly beneath his fingers and even though it’s not as strong as he would like, it’s not weak either. He looks up at his student, eyes tracing in a cursory check of the boy’s current state.

There are still bags under Naruto’s eyes that would put Ibiki’s raccoon mask to shame, dark bruise-like crescents beneath his bright blue irises. There’s more life to them now than there was yesterday at least, a strange stubborn sort of drive that’s gained foothold since Iruka last saw him. “What were you doing in the academy building so early? Looking for Sarutobi-sama?”

Naruto gives a delayed little nod, averting his eyes. “I… ah… couldn’t sleep.” his voice quiets to nearly a whisper. “Was having nightmares.”

Iruka doesn’t ask. He can only imagine what kind of things might be rattling around in the poor kid’s head at night. “Why didn’t you take him to the ER?” He asks to keep himself from prying. “I’m sure it would have been easier. Did he say something?”

Naruto nods. “He said he didn’t want to go to the hospital, and he asked me where you were, so I figured if he was looking for you anyway it would be okay.” The blond pauses for a moment. “I don’t think he wanted anyone to know why he was hurt.”

That makes sense to Iruka, he’s more than familiar by now with Genma’s tendency to cover up just about anything in order to avoid having to explain himself, but the fact that Naruto came to that conclusion about a man he’s hardly met is… startling.

Iruka gives the kid as bright a smile as he can, reaching up from where he’s crouched at Genma’s side to ruffle gold-blond hair in an effort to relay some kind of comfort. “I’m sorry you had to do this. He must have startled you.”

Naruto shakes his head, but his eyes are brighter. “I think I might have scared him, not the other way around.” He says sheepishly.

Iruka chuckles a little at that. He can imagine how his friend might have reacted, having run into
on accident the one person in the village he’d been told, like Kakashi, to avoid, but he finds it
humorous mostly because Genma’s inability to deal with children is hilarious on the worst of days.

“Could you get the needle and thread out for me please?” he asks, using a soft chakra flare to cut
through the fabric of Genma’s top. Naruto does as asked with a more enthusiastic “Ya, sure.” than
Iruka was expecting, considering how tired he must be. To Iruka’s knowledge, Naruto’s never been
much of an early riser.

Iruka peels the blood soaked layer back to reveal three parallel gashes along the length of Genma’s
ribs. The cuts are long, running the upper edge of the obliques before curving inwards toward the
navel, the length of Iruka’s hand from wrist to fingertip. The wounds are clean and unmistakable;
too thin for kunai, too deep for shuriken, too uniform for ninja wire. There’s a small red line even
with the gashes where a fourth weapon grazed the dip behind Genma’s ribcage.

A fourth finger.

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To Iruka’s surprise, Naruto insists on watching over his shoulder.

He doesn’t seem at all squeamish of the blood and pull of tissue as Iruka works, stitching the edges
of the wound together. When he’s finished, he makes a sequence of hand signs he wishes weren’t
so damn familiar, and crosses his palms over Genma’s wounds.

“Medical Art: Energy Stitch.”

A soft turquoise glow envelops his hands, the warm hum of chakra seeping into the skin beneath
his touch.

“Whoa…” Naruto says in his ear. “I didn’t know you were a medic, sensei.”

Iruka chuckles. “I’m not a true medic, but I do have a specialty in field medicine, which this moron
here seems to think is the equivalent.”

Naruto blinks curiously. “What’s the difference?”

Iruka shrugs, toning back on the chakra as the wounds begin to pull closed around the deeper
stitches. “A true medic-nin wouldn’t need stitches at all. My chakra control isn’t quite good enough
to properly heal damage deep enough to cut into muscle, but a real medic can not only heal deeper
wounds, but also damage to bones and chakra vessels.”

“That’s awesome…” Naruto marvels, crossing his arms over the back of Iruka’s shoulder and
resting his chin on them. “My chakra control is sucky though, so I probably wouldn’t be any good
at it.”

And that won’t do, that won’t do at all. Iruka finishes his patch job a turns to look his student right
in the eyes. “You know what I think, Naruto?”

“Hm?” the young blond answers, eyes still on Genma’s newly healed wounds.

“I think you could be whatever you set your mind to.”

Naruto’s eyes widen, and for a second he’s the same vulnerable little boy Iruka almost tripped over
outside Ichiraku, the one that still flinched when Iruka put a hand on his shoulder. Iruka smiles
warmly over his shoulder at him. “There’s no doubt in my mind that if you really wanted to, you
could be a brilliant medic, chakra trouble or no.” Iruka’s smile curves sideways. “But I also think that that isn’t quite what you want, is it?”

“What?” Naruto asks, obviously off balance.

“You seem to me more the kind of ninja that would prevent your comrades from being hurt in the first place.” Iruka states softly, tilting his head. “Am I wrong?”

Naruto shakes his head. “Do you think I could do that though?”

Iruka snorts a soft laugh. “I think you’d be good at it. More than that, I think it’s your Will of Fire.”

Naruto makes a kind of adorably frustrated face. “Jiji keeps talking about that but he won’t tell me what it means. It’s all ‘you’ll understand when you’re older’ and stuff.”

“That because it’s different for everyone, kiddo. Not everyone has the same kind of fire because not everyone is driven by the same thing. Your will of fire is the thing that drives you further than anything else, the fuel you use to do things other people wouldn’t manage in your shoes.”

“Like protecting precious people.”

The answer is so immediate and sure that Iruka is a bit incredulous of it, but then something clicks into place in Iruka’s head like a puzzle piece, a fragment he’s been missing that changes his view of the blonde boy in front of him, a subtle shift, but a powerful one.

For an instant, reflected in Naruto’s bright eyes, he sees terrifying potential.

Iruka has seen potential before, it’s his job to scout it out, pull it from hiding places, ensure that his kids know full well what they can be if they put their effort forward. It’s easy in students like Shino and Tenten, kids that already have an idea of who they are and what they want to be, an idea of how to push themselves forward. It’s harder in students like Shikamaru or Choji, whose potential either sleeps the day away, or is buried under layers of doubt. Iruka had, mistakenly, placed Naruto in the later category.

By the look in those eyes, Naruto knows how strong he can be, and even if he isn’t fully aware of it, something in him is, something in him knows what he’s capable of given opportunity and means.

And from the sliver of it Iruka can see, the latent possibility is bottomless.

An idea is forming in his head out of nowhere, summoned by this newly completed picture.

Naruto tips his head in animal curiosity at his silence, clearly waiting for whatever Iruka is thinking of telling him.

And how did I overlook instincts like that? Iruka wonders.

Naruto’s not exactly a tactical thinker, but with senses like he’s been displaying, he obviously doesn’t need to be. Iruka hadn’t been looking for it, because intuition like that, animal intuition, is something Iruka hasn’t seen outside the Inuzuka.

Or Kakashi. His brain supplies as an afterthought.

“Do you know what the definition of specialization is?” Iruka asks. The boy shakes his head and sits down on the edge of the coffee table. Iruka makes himself comfortable as well, leaning back against the base of the couch and pulling a knee up to rest his hand against. “A specialization is a
set of skills outside of the normal range of abilities ninja are taught. I have a Chunin level specialty in field medicine—most teachers are required to have some kind of non-combative specialty, in case of emergencies.”

“Like a Tokujo?” Naruto asks.

Iruka nods, inclining his head towards Genma. “Tokujo like this idiot gained their rank through a Jounin level specialization, or two, in his case. It’s a lot easier than becoming a full rank Jounin. Have you ever thought about what you might want to specialize in? As a Chunin or as a Jounin?” Because now Iruka is thinking about it, is curious to see what Naruto might choose to become.

Naruto shakes his head and rubs the back of his neck, looking suddenly uncertain again. “Not really. I’m not actually sure how all of it works.”

Iruka nods and stands. He’d assumed as much. Normally he wouldn’t be talking about these kinds of things with a student who hasn’t yet graduated the academy, but for Naruto, it’s obviously not a question of if he’ll graduate, only when.

“Why don’t we have some breakfast and I’ll tell you all about it? I could use another cup of coffee, I think.”

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A shinobi never wakes slowly. There is no soft transition into awareness through soft hazy light and absent thought, no easy surfacing from darkness. For Genma it happens in an instant, hardly a second from one state to the other, a snap straight from unconsciousness into perfect clarity. He doesn’t open his eyes, doesn’t let them flicker, does not allow his body to tense. Habit born of long practice in the field transformed into an instinctual tick he couldn’t break if he tried. He’s perfectly still, not even a hiccup in his breathing from one state to the next, but apparently that doesn’t matter.

“I know you’re awake you moron.”

Genma blinks his eyes open warily, wincing at the headache that greets him by way of the glaring midmorning sunshine and large amount of blood he probably lost. He hates anemic hangovers. They’re almost as bad as the actual thing.

But the pain he’s currently in has nothing on the pain he’s about to be in, if the look on Umino Iruka’s face is any indication.

“Please tell me that’s your third cup of coffee.” Genma whines. He’s not proud of it.

Iruka drums his fingernails against his ceramic mug with for too much cheer to be anything but homicidal. “Fifth, actually.” He says with a tight-lipped smile, and ya, Genma’s fucked. Raidou will be finding bits of him in Iwa.

Ibiki had warned him too—‘Don’t be friends with Iruka’ he’d said. ‘Bad for your health’ he’d said. God sometimes he wishes he’d listened. Anyone who could tolerate hanging out with Anko had to be batshit.

But it’s so easy to be friends with Iruka; he’s smart, he’s funny, you never have to worry about him hitting on your significant other, and he’s afraid of literally no one on the face of the planet. He egged Danzo Shimura’s house when he was fourteen. How could Genma not be friends with him?

In fact the only time Genma has seen Iruka afraid is when it’s for someone, and usually the second
he’s not afraid for you he’s pissed, usually at you for doing something stupid enough to get you hurt. Considering Genma hasn’t quite been eviscerated, he figures he only gave Iruka a mild start.

He tries for a smile that lands far too close to a grimace to be convincing. “Uh… how much trouble am I in exactly?”

Iruka narrows his eyes, so that was obviously the wrong thing to ask. “You bled all over my favorite student.”

Genma cringes visibly, the memory coming back to him in flashes. “Shiiiiit.” He groans, pressing the heel of a palm to his eye and rubbing hard. “Is blondie okay?”

Iruka’s ire calms visibly and he sets his mug down. “He’s fine, he’s a tough kid. He was more concerned about you actually. I gave him something to eat and sent him home to sleep.”

Genma nods, remembering the dark rings circling red and watery blue eyes. “Ya…the squirt didn’t look so good.”

“He said he’d been having nightmares.” Iruka says pensively, staring down at his mug on the table. “He was looking for Sarutobi when you smacked into each other. Probably after someone to talk to.”

“He should have parents for that.” Genma growls before he can help it. The words are bitter and sting like acid on his tongue, but he won’t take them back.

The look Iruka gives him is sympathetic and exasperated all at once. “Now you sound like Kakashi.”

Genma sighs, letting the anger drain out of his expression, but not his blood. “It wasn’t Kakashi’s job to protect one of them.”

“Don’t.” Iruka says softly. “There was nothing that you could have done, any of you. We’ve all failed before.”

“Not like that.” Genma counters fiercely. “Not with these consequences.”

Iruka cedes that point with a tilt of his head, and then says, completely off topic, “I’m going to flay Inoichi.”

Genma blinks, momentarily thrown. It’s not like Iruka doesn’t threaten to murder Jounin rank ninja every day, he threatens the Sandaike about every ninth breath, (The God of Shinobi pulls the ‘too old for paperwork’ card a lot, from what Genma hears through the walls), but he can’t think of anything in the last few days Yamanaka senior has pulled that might warrant Iruka’s wrath.

“Something wrong with Ino?” Genma guesses. It’s usually a safe bet– nothing gets on the Chunin’s nerves quite like someone messing with his kids. Even if the culprit is a parent.

“She told me she was on a diet, yesterday.” Iruka says scathingly.

Whoops. Inoichi better haul ass for cover, because that means he’s been spending too much time out with Choza and not enough time making sure Ino doesn’t emulate her mother.

Genma should probably check how much time he spends with Iruka, since it’s apparently enough to be up to date on the schoolhouse gossip mill.
“Civilians.” Genma groans, knowing Iruka will catch his meaning. Genma not-so-subtly hates most of them, and sure, Ino’s mother is a strong elegant woman with a fierce protective instinct, but she also forgets that her daughter is *a ninja* and needs to be treated like the warrior she’s shaping up to be.

“That’s not the kind of mindset any ten-year-old should have, much less a ninja.” Iruka growls. “And it’s starting to get to Sakura. It’s contagious.”

Genma laughs, which was clearly Iruka’s goal because his lips quirk up at the corners and give him away. “Sneaky.” Genma chuckles, wincing when the movement of his ribs pulls at the fresh stitches in his side. He puts a hand over the bandages on his bare side, catching sight of the sorry remains of his shinobi top lying in tatters next to the coffee table Iruka is sitting on. “That was a brand new sleeveless you know.”

“That maybe you shouldn’t have put it on over fresh injuries.” Iruka snaps back. “What were you thinking, walking around that injured?”

“I was thinking if I could make it to your classroom I could pass out behind your desk in peace. Didn’t account for a tiny blond smacking into my open wounds.”

Iruka looks like there’s a reprimand itching to jump out from behind his teeth, but he swallows it and stares Genma down for a long moment instead. “Kakashi doesn’t know does he?” He asks after a long moment, inclining his head towards the wound.

Genma sighs heavily. “No. He thinks he missed me.” When Iruka raises an eyebrow at that, he shoots a glare back. “He wasn’t exactly all there at the time.”

“How bad?”

“No worse than usual.”

“That doesn’t reassure me, given the circumstances.”

Because Genma is a mature adult shinobi with A-rank Kill-on-Contact warrants in three countries, he doesn’t stick his tongue out at Iruka. Raidou would be proud.

Iruka must sense his petulance anyways because he snorts and sways to his feet. “Come on. I still have some breakfast left over.”

Genma rolls off the couch so fast he almost pulls his stitches. Iruka’s cooking is not something one turns their nose up at, mortal wounds or no. Iruka laughs at him the whole way to the kitchen.

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“Who makes curry for breakfast?” Genma asks, even as he stuffs his face with Iruka’s leftovers. Iruka’s kitchen was warm and homey in a way most people wouldn’t associate with a shinobi, covered in colourful drawings and little souvenirs of his students, taped and stacked on every conceivable surface. There are new ones since Genma was here last— an ink drawing of koi with Hanabi Hyuuga’s name signed in the corner, a little glazed clay figurine of a bumblebee that could only be from Shino.

“Naruto wanted to learn how to make it, it was as good a time as any.” Iruka remarks as he flips through a report, another cup of coffee by his elbow. “And chew your food, you’re an assassin not a four-year-old.”
Genma swallows reflexively and reaches for his mug of black tea to help wash it down. As expected it’s fantastic, not too heavy but also not too thin, with enough spice to set a lesser man on fire. “Did you give this to the brat?” he asks, wondering at the heat level.

“No, we made two pots. Naruto’s was tamer– he took it home with him.”

Genma glances at the clock. 10:34am, which means Iruka called in a sick day to take care of him.

“Umm, you sure the School’s not gonna blow up without you?” He asks around a spoonful of scalding curry, unwilling to stop eating long enough to speak without his mouthful.

Iruka raises his eyebrow around his coffee cup, and doesn’t deign that with a response. Instead he stares down at Genma’s nearly empty curry bowl with ill-disguised amusement “Does Raidou not feed you?”

Genma stops for a fraction of a second, swallows so hard it makes his chest hurt. “Are you insinuating something Umino?” he asks, planting his elbow on the table and leveling a playfully suspicious glare at the schoolteacher.

Iruka laughs and swats Genma’s arm out from under him for his bad manners. “You insinuate plenty all on your own. Plus, you have a thing for scars. It was only a matter of time.”


And the proof of that is obvious enough– Genma knows he’s hot. He’s known it since before he’d hit puberty. But he’s been shirtless this whole time and Iruka hasn’t so much as looked him over. He never has, at least not in a way that didn’t have to do with checking for injury.

“Just because I don’t have a libido doesn’t mean I don’t have eyes, Shiranui.” Iruka drawls, dry as a Suna dessert. “Besides it figures the one person you fall for for good is the only one immune to your charms.”

Genma smirks, puts his spoon down in his empty bowl and tucks his senbon back between his teeth.

“Other than you of course.” He says with a wink.

“Get out of my house Genma.”
When Naruto gets back to his apartment it’s late morning. The knot in his gut is a heavy weight, but he’s not anxious about getting caught. He’d cleaned up, wiped down his fingerprints, left all the keys in their respective places. This weight is something constant, a singularity in his chest that gives him vertigo.

What he’s thinking of is crazy.

Insane.

He’s never been that far out of the village before.

But he’s desperate, and he’s scared.

So scared.

Kids who haven’t passed the academy exam aren’t even allowed outside the city limits by themselves, and Naruto failed it. Twice.

But Iruka’s words are still bouncing around in his head. Faith he hadn’t expected gives him hope that this might not be as impossible as it seems.

“I think it’s your Will of Fire.”

The pain in his stomach is spreading, chasing up to tongue along his sides, though the intensity of it has subsided somewhat. When he goes to change the bandages he finds that almost all the gauze has been eaten away, leaving the cloth as nothing more than powdery ash pressed against his skin by the final layer of gauze.

He tests his seal one more time, finds the door open.

Dread rising like bile in the throat, he dives down.

He opens his eyes knee deep in muck, but instead of being angry and boiling it’s cold and slimy, thick like mud or tar. It smells horrible, like sulfur gas and rotting tissue, but the air no longer chokes him as it burns down his throat. The space is darker than it’s ever been– the only ambient light seems to be coming from Kurama himself. It radiates from the bijuu’s middle, a warm reddish gold glow pulsing out in soft bursts that radiate along the fox’s limbs and down his tails. It’s steady and slow and comes in twos, like the beating of a heart.

Kurama is still, body motionless just beyond the bars. The inner light falters the further out it goes, flickering and dying towards the tips of his tails and the ends of his claws. In contrast Naruto can
see purplish veins encroaching beneath the Kitsune’s red fur, corruption given form. He wades forward, reaches out for the bijuu, running his fingers along the fur of Kurama’s nose in that familiar gesture.

Tears threaten his eyes when some of the lush crimson fur, now darkened to burgundy, comes off in his palm.

“Kurama?” He asks, pleading. “Come on you stupid fox, wake up.”

But it’s no use, Kurama remains unconscious, his breathing slow and labored, and Naruto is alone again. He rubs his face against the chakra fur, tears pouring down his face. “Please…”

But no matter how hard he cries or how much he begs, the Kyuubi’s eyes stay closed. Naruto’s not sure why he thought it might be different, crying has never solved anything for him, never turned so much as a pitying glance. So when his tears have run dry he just sits, indifferent to the disgusting toxic feel of the rotten chakra around him. He keeps a hand in Kurama’s fur, and lets a different emotion replace despair.

He calls up every memory he can, from every corner of his mind.

A warm nose on his back, nudging him away from a fall.

Tails curled around him, comforting and protective, as he’s told stories of powerful creatures and old battles and the family he never knew.

Red eyes that warm from cold and callous to keen and mischievous.

Gentle corrections and grudging affection.

Intention surges up Naruto’s spine, his jaw tightens, his eyes flash to diamond hardness, and he makes up his mind.

He has work to do.

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He wakes to the smell of rain trickling in through the open window. He levers himself up, shakes the last of the weariness from his bones, and goes to check his packs.

The wind picks up as he throws his old bag over his shoulder, fingers of cool wind pulling through his hair. He takes a deep breath of it, letting the cool chill his lungs. He’s always loved the smell of rain.

He leaves his note for Iruka-sensei on the counter. He hates lying to his teacher, but he’ll be back before he can be missed.

He hopes.

Outside a soft drizzle is soaking the earth and grass. The sunset is both gorgeous and dangerous, shafts of rich red and purple light emboss the dark clouds ahead with a colourful warning.

The rain may be light now, but it won’t stay that way.

By the smell and feel of the wind and air, Naruto knows the coming storm will be massive. He can
feel it in the charge that’s building in the atmosphere, in the pressure against his skin as it starts to drop, in the hush that’s fallen over the usually noisy forests.

And he’s headed right for the middle of it.

He has no idea if he can do this, no idea if he’d make it under normal circumstances, let alone with this monster monsoon on the horizon.

No time.

No choice.

The rain helps conceal him as he dodges the patrols on his way out of the village proper. The forest outside Konoha is dark and maze like, but Naruto’s eyes are sharp enough to cut through the inky darkness.

He forms a concentration seal and starts to body flicker, darting up into the trees to leap from branch to branch. He feels tension snap tight in the air, feels the atmosphere grow heavy, and the storm breaks overhead.

In only a few minutes it goes from a sprinkling to a shattering, every drop slicing like needles, stinging his skin and ripping leaves off trees. Branches smack and drag against his arms, the bark of the trees becomes slick and hazardous. He loses sight of the path he’d been following almost immediately, but he knows, instinctively, which way is east.

So he forges his own.

He draws his chakra up with Kurama’s. The bijuu’s power is heady and toxic, but chakra is still chakra, and if he mixes it with enough of his own he keeps the true acid burn of the rancid energy at bay. It keeps him moving, and has the added benefit of draining some of the sickness from the bijuu’s blood and slowing the corruption. He thinks.

He hopes.

Time starts to bleed together. The storm is like a living thing around him, swirling wind and pelting rain, blinding lightning and roaring thunder. His central chakra runs dry and he grasps for anything he can use, forces earth chakra into circulation because it’s the first thing he can grab. The sensation is different, the wood beneath his feet and hands rumble at his touch as the power rips forth along empty channels, surging along his limbs and filling him with undaunted strength. It feels almost the same as when he first drew it forth, but the feeling is fuller now, rumbling energy that turns his bones from granite to steel.

When that strength bleeds away he draws on the next, pulls water chakra through in earth’s place. A burst, a moment suspended in time, and the rain stills against his skin, shielding him for a moment from further downpour as it races through his system to give him the energy he needs. His blood sings in his veins with it’s passing.

He draws fire up through him next, feels it scorch along his throat as he pants into the damp air, temporarily confused by the flashes of warm light he sees out of sync with the lightning strikes until he realizes he’s literally breathing fire.
He draws on wind when fire dies and feels the gales around him twist to whirl around his feet and launch his steps further than he’s usually capable of.

He saves lightning for last, the strongest of his chakra, and of all the elements it answers the most readily. It burns along his skin and through his veins with such potency it sears away some of the corruption, allowing him to breathe through the burning again as the electricity replaces that pain with it’s own. It turns the rain to vapor the second it touches his skin, leaves his footprints charred like lightning strikes, his breath charged like a thundercloud.

The darkness of the sky doesn’t subside, the rain doesn’t let up.

Only when he notices the trees beginning change and drift apart does the rain ease from cold shearing to warmer fatter droplets. The soaking softens further to a drizzle and then a sprinkle, and then the dark clouds pull apart and light filters through the cracks as if through stained glass— in vibrant reads and regal golds— and Naruto stops in his tracks.

It’s a sunrise.

Colours spill like water paints across the landscape below him, shining against tall grass, moving to dip and smudge over a cliff face that drops sharply into a swirling sea.

The coast?

Everything he’d read told him that it would be at least two days before he would reach this far. He’s only been traveling for one night.

He drops down into the soft plant life beneath him. Aching and cold as he is, the sunlight is a balm on his skin. The sea wind grabs at his sodden clothes, wiping droplets of rain from his hair. He walks to the edge of the cliff, gazes down a perilous drop towards bright reefs and sharp rocks. Other than the inherent danger of a fall, the edge is shielded by thick trees on all sides. A safe enough place to rest.

He pulls his clothes over his head and hangs them to dry on a branch in the sun. As he does he looks down to see spiderwebs of black veins crisscrossing his skin from fingertip to shoulder. They pulse uncomfortably, like there’s too much pressure in his blood, but the more of it in his system the less in Kurama’s, and the more time be buys himself. He does his best to ignore the creeping ache of the corruption and pulls something to eat out of his pack. He’s starving.

He spends the rest of the day napping on and off at the cliff’s edge, recuperating from his rabbit race away from Konoha. He knows to go north from here, but that’s all he does know— he has the crude map he drew based on the ones he found in the archives, but he’s no artist, so it’s a rough estimate at best.

He’s not sure what drives him to sleep right at the line of the bluff, but something about the sight of the ocean calms him down, eases some of the lingering anxiety and soothes his frazzled nerves. He sleeps there until he feels like himself again, until he can stand with confidence in both body and chakra. He scrappes to his feet, stooping to pick up his pack, and stands toe to toe with the precipice. He takes a last fortifying breath to chase the fog from his eyes and arm him against the pain, and turns to go.

As he does, something in the wind changes, softens from the regular ocean gusts to something that whispers across his cheek like a greeting. He turns his head, but the wisps of feeling is gone as fast
as it came.

Just my imagination.

He runs north as the sun reaches its zenith, chasing the gales that rise off the water. The land begins to change from dense forest to steep river valleys, and the sight of ocean currents whirling across rocky shoals marks the end of Fire country and the beginning of Whirlpool. He sees no people, but every once in awhile he’ll catch a glance of abandoned villages through the thick, bright greenery or across the ravines at a river’s edge. They’re simple and small; clusters of wooden houses overgrown with saplings and ivy. He gets the feeling he’s the first human being to be here in a long time.

As the day winds down into afternoon, he comes across such a village, nestled into a small bay pressed against the cliffside. He stands on a small ledge overlooking the array of crumbling houses, dark mossy browns offset by the cobalt brilliance of the sea beyond. It looks like a fishing village, or maybe a port– extensive docks lie stretched across the harbor in disrepair.

He slides down the steep incline towards it, oblivious, through the ache in his veins and the wonder in his eyes, of the easy grace in his movements now.

He’s unaware of the grace and confidence of his movements as he leaps from stone to stone when the drop becomes too steep, heedless of how readily his chakra answers his call on even the barest of instincts, how it rises to his aid the moment he has need of it. It lies ready in this time of crisis, prepared now to do whatever he asks of it.

He skids to a halt at the edge of one of the larger buildings, a barnlike structure with most of the roof caved in. The ruin is all sharp broken edges softened by the crawl of nature over the debris, taking back what’s hers. He walks the ruined docks carefully, moving slowly in case some of the planks don’t feel like holding his weight. It’s surprisingly solid construction for a bunch of wooden boards suspended over water. Something feels missing though, absent among the remnants. He leans over the edge of one of the docks, scanning the crystal water.

It’s the boats…

More specifically, the fact that there aren’t any.

Through all the ruin and rubble, there’s no sign of anything that might have once resembled seacraft. For all the obvious care that was put into constructing the docks, there isn’t so much as a broken dingy– in the water or in the debris of the village.

Now that I think about it, I don’t remember the reports mentioning Uzushio having ships.

He’d just assumed that they’d be like Kiri, that they’d have the same kind of armadas Kurama had told him were a staple of the Hidden Mist infantry. But he sees no evidence of masts or curved planks that might have once made up a hull, just draped sheets of old and torn fishing nets.

Standing at the edge of the dock, he finds himself captivated by the sea again. The warm sun of afternoon has turned it from the cool greyish blue of early morning to a warmer tropical cerulean, hinted with greens as it winds along the shallows and deepening to a darker navy as it marches off towards the horizon.

Naruto reaches down, leans over the edge and drags his fingers through the water. It parts like ribbons around his fingers, warmer than he’d thought, swirling in tiny whirlpools against his palm.
The water flows back against him as he pushes through it, an odd little current that swirls up around his wrist for a soft moment before sloshing back to normal level.

Another strange, elemental hello. Maybe he hadn’t imagined the first one.

*What is going on here?*

Like some kind of chain reaction, the wind kicks up suddenly around him, twisting to whirl around him once, twice, then chase past him in a playful glide, dancing off along the surface of the water.

Something pulls at him, tugs sharply at some kind of old instinct in his chest like a chain yanking taught at a place just below his heart. Something deep.

Something animal.

It draws like a magnet to north, fixes his attention across the sea. He takes a step off the docks onto the water, and if this was part of the ninja village then it suddenly makes sense that Uzushio didn’t have any ships. They hadn’t needed them.

The sapphire sea is warm and clear and teeming with hundreds of colourful fish. They dart beneath him as he races over their coral homes, chasing his sandals, flitting this way and that beneath his shoes. Naruto wonders if they’re used to this, if once upon a time they chased dozens of shinobi across the surface of their sea.

But the ocean is empty now, not a boat or soul in sight across miles and miles of uninterrupted water, stretching on and on until the blue of sea meets the blue of sky.

The wind comes out to play again, fluttering impishly, practically daring Naruto to chase it. He’s never been one to turn down a challenge, so he bolts after it, bounding over the swells to move with it. Something bright and spontaneous wells up in him, something that numbs the ache in his veins and chest as he leaps over the waves in twirls and twists, bouncing across the water and laughing.

His chakra wants to join the fun, so he lets it switch from Yang to Water, feels the texture of the sea beneath him change under his feet. He starts to ride the waves instead of running over them, sliding up to crest the surges and then pushing off from the top, twisting like a gymnast on the way down.

The wind and water respond to him— the breeze tucks into little whirlwinds around him, cradling him as if to slow his descent. The water joins in on the game, reaching up to meet him as he falls and rising up to aid him when he leaps again. The ocean steals his sandals and he doesn’t even notice, giggling madly as the sea tosses him again and the wind pulls at his fall, caught up in the strange feeling of camaraderie and welcome as the wind and water greet him like old familiar friends.

An island grows out of the distance like the back on an enormous turtle, a dark shape cresting over the horizon.

His companions turn from playmates into guides, urging him onward towards the shape. The pull in his chest gets tighter, a sense of foreboding warns him to be prepared for whatever he finds. The chakra in the water and wind is a tangible thing now, living things that grasp at his ankles and shirt, pulling him closer to what they must know is his mother’s home.

The ocean pulls as his calves, an askance to veer south. He does as asked, following a broad curve
across water that grows more and more still the closer he comes to the island. Most of the island is
ringed by sharp cliff faces adorned with strange stone columns formed in the shape of hexagons.
The reports he’d read called them ‘basalt columns’ though Naruto’s not so sure what makes them
special.

They halt their march to curve inward and form the entrance to a sheltered bay, which the wind
herds him towards as soon as he notices it. He bounds over the threshold onto the glassy lake-like
surface of the bay and something in the air changes, goes as still as the water beneath his feet.

Naruto can’t sense anything wrong exactly, but it feels like he’s somehow walked into the past,
like the entire island is frozen, suspended in time. The only movement comes from the water and
wind around him, and only then when it’s practically touching him, like his mere presence is
waking up something that’s been asleep for a long time.

Decades.

He steps off the water onto the beach, a long crescent of sand black as pitch, as stark against the
pale basalt stones as an ink spill on parchment. The sand ripples out from the touch of his bare feet
against the warm granules, a pulse that leaves an imprint like a rock thrown in still water. The
world around him is still and silent but for the subtle rush of air and lap of waves. Nothing moves
or breathes; no lizards skitter and no birds sing, just empty quiet.

Yet the chakra in the bones of this place is palpable. It sings in the air, the water, the sand beneath
his feet, and yet it seems to hold its breath.

As if still in mourning.

Naruto gets the feeling that he’s been given some kind of honor he doesn’t understand.

Breath held tight in his chest, he moves up the bank. The sand marks his passage across the beach,
little ripples that erase his footprints as he walks. The columns are natural stepping stones, and he
climbs them quickly, moves to stand at the crest of them. When he reaches the top, he understands.

The broken ruins of Uzushio lie stretched out before him. What must have once been beautiful
towers of golden stone lie shattered across the valley like clay pots. Brilliant red tiled roofs caved
in over the husks of buildings, warm cobblestones the color of butter lie cracked and upturned in
heaps. No growth has occurred here. No new trees sprout between cracked walls, no moss crawls
over upturned stone, no mold flecks wooden beams. Nature has withheld her reaching fingers. No
new life has touched this place.

Out of fear, or out of respect? Naruto will never know. Either way, he can sense them, the reasons
why he’s been guided here.

The bones beneath the rubble.
Fallen, Honored

Chapter Notes

Heavy chapter this time, but necessary. Creative liberties taken once more. Also it's still technically Tuesday, so I'm not technically late, but have a long ass chapter to make up for it anyways ;)

lots of setup for later stuff and next chapter we get to check in on how things are going back home...

Also we get Kurama next chapter. Did I mention that? No? Well now you know. :p

I regret nothing.

It takes two days. Two days of moving the broken stone and wood of buildings, two days of digging through rubble and river silt, two days of gathering remains. Because he won’t leave them here to rot. He won’t.

He only stops once, the first time he finds the bones of a child, younger than him. He cries himself almost sick, because these were people once, left here to degrade until their skeletons were bared and bleached in the sunlight.

There are other bones too, but they’re fragmented, like they’ve been trampled or torn apart by animals. Whatever force protected the bones of Uzushio, its grace had not extended to their enemies.

As he works, toiling to uncover person after person with hands sore from moving rubble and making hand signs, he gets the distinct feeling he’s being watched. It doesn’t make much sense—the entire time he’s been here he hasn’t seen hide or hair of so much as a mouse skittering through the brush, and just when he’s starting to wonder where all the animals have gone, he finds out he’s not as alone as he thought.

Uzushio was a city in a way that’s nothing like the scattered buildings of Konoha clustered around the Hokage Mountain. It was far smaller and far more complex—that much is obvious by what Naruto can gather sifting through the pieces of its civilization. The entire place was built around the river, from the point where it the valley widens to the river’s endpoint, where it pours into the sea. The buildings had been crafted to move with the land instead of against it, conforming to the elongated bowl of the valley from the western bay to the upward rise of the hills in the east. The river divides everything into north and south portions, and there are heavy stones and treated wood along the banks of it, indications of bridges that might have once crossed water’s breadth.

He hisses as he bends over to sink his hands into the silt, thigh deep in river water in a quest for the bones he can sense buried under his feet. The cuts and scrapes on his knuckles and the blisters on his palms sting like mad, but he’s worked his way through far worse pain than that in the last few days alone. He needs to use some more chakra soon—he can feel the seeping crawl of the corruption pooling again in the seal—he just wishes he weren’t quite so exhausted of his own. The crawling pressure of the rancid energy is starting to make him sick to his stomach.

As he’s digging through the soft muddy silt a shadow flashes past him through the water, a dark shape as long as his arm and stark against the river rocks. He catches a glimpse of something shining too before it’s gone again, lost against the currents of the river upstream. Just as Naruto’s
about to write the encounter off in favor of getting back to work, the shadow swings back around, curves to flick a graceful figure eight around his legs before settling to hover just shy of Naruto’s arm, still frozen in the water. A lean and beautiful fish idles past Naruto’s elbow, close enough that he could easily reach out and touch it.

It’s a… koi. Naruto knows the species from watching them in the decorative pools outside the Hyuuga complex, but this one is twice as long as any he’s seen, and other than the sleek carp body, it doesn’t look anything like the red and white variety that Hinata had been feeding when he asked about them. He immediately wishes he’d paid more attention to the informative little lecture she’d given him on the different varieties, because he’s not exactly sure how to classify a fish that looks more like a piece of jewelry than an animal.

He remembers that she’d called the ones she had been tending to ‘Kohaku’ Koi, and pointed out a few special ones that were all white but for a red dot on their foreheads, which she’d called ‘Tancho’. But this one is mostly black– no white whatsoever, with golden ridging down it’s back that looks like armor plating. It’s fins are long and flowing like ribbon, encrusted with more metallic gilding along the edges of the pectorals and the trailing ends of it’s tail like the trim on a silk dress. The fish’s scales shimmer like hundreds of tiny jewels, the golden accents stark against the inky black body. He remembers Hinata saying something about decorative breeding and black or metallic colouring being rare– this fish has both, and Naruto wonders what meticulous and selective care created this creature, and what the heck it’s doing swimming free in a river. The shining colours would be a beacon to predators, and Naruto has no idea how something so beautiful hasn’t been eaten yet. Maybe he was right, maybe there are no animals here but for this strange shining exception.

The fish looks at him expectantly, it’s big black and grey eyes alarmingly intelligent. Naruto doesn’t move, afraid that the slightest movement might startle it. All the koi in Hinata’s ponds had been afraid of him and had bolted at the sight of him. The young Hyuuga heir had commented offhand that they weren’t usually skittish creatures, and that she was sure that Naruto’s sudden appearance had only startled them, but the fish had kept their distance until he’d left.

This one doesn’t seem remotely fearful of him. Even when Naruto eventually straightens to pull his hand from the water, the fish flits closer, not away, its fins waving back and forth like ornamental fans to keep its place in the flow of the river. It seems to be waiting for him to do something– tail swishing back and forth exuberantly as he moves back towards his pack, and then he gets it.

It’s waiting for me to feed it.

Hinata had been giving her koi little chunks of melon and strips of lettuce, and the fish had gathered around her in a swarm to compete for her attention and her goodies. He has some cubed honeydew in his bag, now that he thinks of it, so he wades to the edge of the river, casting a glance back at where he’d left the fish.

For a fraction of a second he’s convinced it’s darted off, until he sees a flicker of gold much closer and discovers that the koi has followed him, and is swimming back and forth in the shallows by his ankles.

“Huh.” he mutters, fishing the little bento tub from his bag and opening the lid with his teeth. He plucks out a square of green fruit, grateful for the break from picking through ruins in search of corpses. The fish flutters back excitedly at the sight of it, its tail swishing behind it a soft rush of gilded ink.

Naruto plops the melon piece in the water and pushes it out towards the strange koi. “There ya go, eat up.”
The Koi looks at the food floating on the surface, but doesn’t go for it. Instead it watches as it begins to float downstream, fins flitting curiously, before it loses interest entirely and turns it’s attention back to Naruto, staring intently at the box in his hand.

Naruto makes a face at it. “What? My food not good enough for you?”

The fish does a strangely graceful little wiggle, an almost playful undulation of its sleek body from side to side as if responding to the sound of his voice. It swims forwards a little, and when Naruto doesn’t move it swims forward some more. In a sharp motion the fish bops its head against Naruto’s left shin, the one closest to it, and then backpedals to its original position to continue staring at the box of fruit.

An askance for something else.

...Which displays a lot of intelligence for a fish.

Unsure what exactly it wants, Naruto crouches down a little further, studying the koi closely. It stares right back, the odd expectancy in its gaze still present. Naruto plucks another cube from his box and the fish flaps excitedly again. It clearly wants it; it just seems to have an issue with his method of delivery.

Feeling a little silly for it, Naruto maneuvers the melon chunk so that it rests on his palm in the soft cage of his fingers, and dunks his hand underwater before him, holding it out this time instead of letting it float. The likelihood of the fish coming right up to him is–

But before he can even finish the thought the koi darts forward with a graceful swish of its sleek body and wriggles it’s head between Naruto’s fingers to get at the morsel trapped there, sucking up the treat before Naruto can even think to pull his hand away. Naruto watches with bewildered fascination as the fish gobbles up the goods. Once it’s finished it flits around his hand, nibbling playfully at his now empty fingers. Naruto giggles and sits down in the shallows, wiggling the fingers of both hands to divide the fish’s attention between them. The koi darts happily around in response to the attention, chasing the movements of his hands and darting between his wrists to chase the currents he stirs to life. He winces a little when all the movement aggravates the splits over his knuckles, prompting soft wisps of blood to twine from the wounds. The fish pauses in it playful darts, watching the smoky curls of red spiral up to dissolve in the river’s current.

It swims forward slowly, as if the Koi is afraid of startling him and not the other way around, closer and closer until it’s head is nearly pressed against his hands, resting the water between his knees, first knuckles touching.

He nearly jumps when he feels the unmistakable hum of chakra radiating over his hands, building until a soft golden shine begins the glimmer in the water. The glow rolls softly over his skin, seeping into the cracks and the crevices between his fingers like a balm. It rests there for a few moments before it sinks beneath his skin, the light vanishing entirely.

Left in it’s wake is clear unbroken flesh, the only sign of damage remaining at all the vine-like crawl of corruption streaking up from the chakra points in his wrists. When he looks up the Koi has vanished, the only clue of its presence remaining is a streak of golden chakra leading upriver.

This encounter is the first, and in the end there are five.
The second comes late that first night, when he finally stops to rest after pulling skeleton after skeleton from the southern half of the city, Uzushio nin and civilian alike, out from underneath debris and silt and the powdered bone of enemy shinobi. He figures the chakra reaching out to him from their bones is the result of some kind of seal, a power that calls to kin. He’s been lying them down in the only clear portion of the city he’s found, the only place not littered with destroyed buildings or earth upturned in some kind of attack. It’s a shopping plaza or a city circle or something, a round stretch of pale stone with a mosaic of a whirlpool in dark gray stone lain over it. The mosaic itself is cracked and broken, entire sections of it missing completely, but the pale stone beneath is whole and unblemished, not so much as a split in its surface.

Each time he lies another body down in the plaza he gets an impression, a flux of memory not his own that gives him an idea of who they were. A blacksmith, a chunin teacher, a hunter nin, a shopkeeper. With each one he begins to piece together what life must have looked like before the attack—Genin teams running drills across the water of the bay, civilians standing on the bridges and waving at shinobi walking across the river below, strange people in robes that aren’t shinobi, but aren’t civilians either. He knows that the broken building of wood and glass at the far end of the valley next to the waterfall used to be an aviary, knows that the tower that lies shattered across the river used have the Arashikage’s office at the top, knows that this plaza was used for ceremonies of all kinds, festivals and funerals alike.

He sits on a hill just outside of it, overlooking the circle of stone, and tries not to be overwhelmed by all of it; the grief, the loss, the pain. Because they’re not just corpses anymore. He knows them now in small pieces and flashes, knows what they could have been and what they never were, and it’s so much worse to know. Their spirits weigh heavy on him atop his own burdens, and now that he’s stopped to rest, he’s finding it very hard to breathe against it. His hands are the only things that don’t hurt him now, as if that strange koi’s blessing still lingers there, even the ache of the rotten chakra in his blood seems dulled.

He knows he needs sleep, but has no idea how he’s going to manage it with spirits racing through his thoughts, hundreds of moments from hundreds of lives never lived. He takes a deep breath against despair, because there is not just and pain and loss in the moments he’s seen. There’s life and light and pieces of souls, and maybe if he can’t push these moments and memories away he can bring them in, make sure that he remembers what no one else will ever know, make sure he can recall what Uzushio was, not what it is now.

Maybe he can hang their moments on his heart and remember for them.

And so he leans back against the broken wall behind him, stares up at the stars beginning to peek through the dim light of dusk left by the sunset, and makes room for their pieces with his own.

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A crack and a rustle jolt him from his head much later, when the stars have turned from scattered pinpricks to a river of light streaking across the sky. He turns and blinks, one hand planted on the brick at his back in preparation for fight or flight. At first he sees nothing but the expanse of the forest, oak and yew and the occasional willow, brush overflowing between the trunks. But then he blinks away the echoes of starlight on his retina and his eyes adjust to the wind of shadows cast by the wood.

An enormous stag stands between the thick trunks of two yew trees; it’s rack of twelve-point horns almost invisible against the winding branches. Naruto freezes, remembering Shikamaru’s words about how an aggravated stag can be just as dangerous as any predator—capable of lashing out with sharp scything horns and bone crushing kicks.
The stag doesn’t seem agitated though, and the only movement comes from its cupped ears as they twitch in response to the sound of Naruto’s feet against the grass and his hand against the bricks. The stag’s eyes are a bright mossy green that stands out from the charcoal grey of its coat like peridot stone, unnervingly steady and abnormally wise. For long moment it’s a staring contest—Naruto’s bright and startled blue eyes locked on the great hart’s soft emerald ones. Eventually the creature tips its massive head, its horns dipping with the movement, and steps out from the shelter of the trees. As the horns tilt they catch the starlight and flash golden, bright and out of place with the surroundings, unmistakably similar to the golden armor of the koi. Naruto gets the sense he’s being sized up and evaluated by this being of the wood, a being that, no matter how much it looks like deer and acts like a deer, isn’t one.

The hart steps forwards again when Naruto doesn’t move, its head dipping as it moves closer, taking a heavy breath through its snout. Its gaze shifts, flows from suspicious to curious, and it takes another few long strides forward until it’s eye to eye with Naruto, who is still crouched barely breathing against the broken wall. The hart exhales in a snort, its breath rushing past Naruto’s ear as the beast looks at him sideways, head dipping even closer until Naruto can feel the disturbance of the air above his head where the enormous rack of antlers sway with each of the hart’s smallest motions.

Then the creature ducks even closer, bumps a nose into Naruto’s chest and presses softly. A long moment of barely-there breaths, a long moment of trying to decide whether he wants to be freaked out or confused or anxious or all of the above, and then the strange motion changes. The odd press turns abruptly into a friendly nuzzle, a rub of rough warm fur against his sternum and an affectionate huff.

Naruto feels abruptly like he’s just passed some sort of test. Hesitantly he reaches out to run a hand softly over the beast’s neck, stroking the warm course pelt as the creature nuzzles around Naruto’s torso.

Though the fur color is different and the texture isn’t right, Naruto is reminded immediately and painfully of Kurama. His eyes well with tears before he can blink them back, and the next thing he knows they’re coming down his face in streams, his body beginning to shake with the effort of holding back sobs. The stag withdraws, blinking it’s large wide eyes, and for a while just watches him. Naruto doesn’t look away, there’s no point, no reason for him to hide.

The hart stamps a foreleg and chakra kicks up under it’s hoof, bright green like new spring growth, curling up around the beast’s leg and sinking into the earth beneath. The hart shakes its head and stamps again, the chakra rising up brighter and fiercer as the ground begins to vibrate and the creature takes off at a run.

Naruto follows it, bewildered, into the thick of the forest, watching with awe as the trees bend and part to make way for them as the hart darts between the trees and across outcroppings of rock with a grace that belies it’s size. He skids to a stop at the foot of a ravine and watches disbelieving as the stag continues to run, climbing the nearly sheer surface with the same ease as the soft slant of the valley.

Naruto channels more chakra, feels the acid-like burn of Kurama’s rancid chakra scorch through him in the absence of enough of his own to counter it, but he pushes through the pain and exhaustion and climbs anyway.

He reaches the top with knees scraped from sliding on the loose rock. The blood that runs down his shins is a shade to dark to be healthy, and his chest feels like it’s been the victim of a rockslide. The hart waits for him at the edge of the summit, watching him with wise keen eyes as he pulls himself
He stands at the edge of a ruin that must have once been some kind of temple. The wind is strong here, rushing off the ocean at speeds high enough to sting his eyes. He throws a hand up to shield them, staring at the broken tablets and mosaics that circle a set of stairs leading higher up the slope. His eyes travel along the length of the steps, widening at the expanse of them as they wind across the cliffs. When he turns he can see the ruins of Uzushio below him, curled in the safety of its valley on the island’s eastern edge.

The moon shines down on him now, no longer hidden by these very cliffs, washing the sparse grass and jagged rocks a silvery pale. In the distance at the end of the stairs he can see the outline of another temple, smaller than the ruin of the one he stands in, perched perilously along the narrow cliff’s highest point, far above the rest of the forest.

There’s a nudge at his back as the stag buts him softly between the shoulder blades to urge him forward, stepping around to shield him from the worst of the wind coming off the sea. Naruto twines his fingers the beast’s dark grey fur for comfort and stability, and they walk the steps side by side.

Naruto isn’t sure exactly where the creature is leading him or why, but his instincts are telling him that he’s safe here, that he has nothing to fear. His instincts have gotten him this far. He’s going to trust them now.

The path is long and winding, and by the time he reaches the end of it he’s being pulled towards two different kinds of exhaustion— the kind that’s telling him to drop where he is and sleep for a month, and the kind that’s telling him that rest is the last thing he needs.

This temple, unlike the other, is almost entirely intact; the only signs of wear being the erosion of time. The temple itself is little more than a gateway, the dark stone of the roof barely wide enough to be shelter in a rainstorm. It’s also old, far older than the other ruins here, and it’s decorated with beautiful if worn engravings of a massive tree whose branches and roots curl in twining knot-like patterns.

His companion snorts and steps back, nudging him forward again and urging him through the gateway to the edge of the winding cliff. Though Naruto waits, the stag doesn’t follow, seemingly unwilling to cross the threshold with him. Instead it folds its legs under itself and lies down on the other side of the gate to wait for him.

The edge of the cliff sticks out like a long flat needle with a rounded point, all grassless pale stone not unlike the kind that makes up the plaza.

Suddenly memories not his own flood through him, flashes of a pilgrimage, a journey to the precipice, people in long robes kneeling in the circle that represents the very center of the island.

*The heart tap. The convergence of world chakra. Something is supposed to be here that isn’t. Something far below.*

The words flow from deep in a memory not his own, an old secret, an answer when he doesn’t know the question.

He steps out onto the circle of stone and peers over the edge.

Far below him is a lake as wide as a village, filled with dark water gleaming under the moonlight like a mirror. It’s deep, so deep Naruto can’t even imagine a bottom; like a hole drilled so far into
the earth it might as well be bottomless. Chakra hums in the air, dark and fluid and oddly comforting. It’s so potent that Naruto can feel it whispering across his skin and ringing in his ears, can practically see it rippling through the air like the heat off a hot sidewalk.

At first he kneels like he’s seen the monks do in his memories, but it seems wrong almost as soon as he does it, so he shifts his legs so that they’re crossed instead. It’s the same kind of stance he uses when he managing or monitoring his chakra or talking with Kurama when he’s awake, a kind of stance used for meditation, not prayer. He rests his hands open on his knees, shifts his shoulders, and evens out his heartbeat.

As he calms himself something starts to change– the nearly empty expanse of Naruto’s chakra vessels seems to react to the energy around him, a strange sort of pull on the outside energy. The odd phenomenon is easily disrupted; every time Naruto shifts or fidgets or even breathes too deeply the process grinds to a halt, separating the two energies immediately until Naruto settles again and it all starts over.

Naruto never thought complete stillness could be so hard, but the urge to shift or test muscles or flutter his eyelids is stronger than he realized.

But each time he tries he manages a little longer.

At first he can’t even hold it for a full minute, but then he can hold it for two, then five, then twelve. After that he stops counting the seconds and the minutes, stops measuring time entirely and instead focuses on the pull and push and flow of the chakra around him.

The emptiness in his chakra vessels seems to create some kind of negative space, a space that exerts a kind of gravity on the chakra around him, like an empty cup dipped straight down into a stream. But moving seems to have the effect of turning the cup sideways downstream– the water flows more around the cup instead of inside of it.

But the longer he manages to keep himself still the easier the outside energy flows in, and the more he can feel his chakra levels rising. Eventually he senses equilibrium– no more negative space, no more flow. And when he opens his eyes and lets out a deep breath, he feels stronger than he has in days.

Now he doesn’t feel tired at all.

Even though the coming sunrise has already begun to turn the horizon from dark navy to soft grey, the hart is still waiting for him on the other side of the gate, steadfast and patient. It accompanies him down the steps the same way it did up, but this time it doesn’t bother shielding Naruto from the harsh wind. He doesn’t need the protection now.

The descent is quieter; the only sounds the clack of hooves on the hard stone and whistling wind overhead. Naruto strokes the stag’s neck in thanks, but no longer needs to hold on to be sure of his footing. In response the beast tucks its head over Naruto’s small shoulder, careful not to clip him with gilded antlers, and stays that way for the rest of the hike down.

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His third encounter comes is the form of an attack on two fronts.

The first is a sneak attack, launched while he’s distracted with the last few sets of bones mid afternoon on his second day in Uzushio. The only warning he gets is a shadow out of place among
the grass on the far side of the fallen Kage’s tower, a dark rush through the tall blades of green waving in the breeze. He stands, turns, and only barely manages to roll sideways before a flash of black and white streaks past him.

He bird coasts high, feathers gleaming golden around the edges against the glare of the sun overhead, and dives again before Naruto can get a better look. It lets loose a long screech that immediately tells him it’s some kind of raptor, though not any kind that Naruto has seen circling the nests in Konoha’s redwoods. The bird dips and circles, dives again, this time so close that Naruto is almost positive he can feel the swish of talons on the back of his neck.

Another caw, this one offended, and the enormous bird turns a wide circle above his head. He gets a good look at it while it does, noting stark black and white plumage as the strong wings ride the coastal winds. The flash of yellow wasn’t just the sun though, and Naruto can see now the lining of familiar gold along the bird’s primaries and the fan of it’s tail, a flash of more gilding shining at him from the crest of it’s head.

Twice might be coincidence but three times is a pattern, and the other two animal spirits of the island had no intention of hurting him. So this time when the bird dives, Naruto doesn’t duck or roll away. He holds his ground.

The raptor hurtles towards him in a long graceful dive, but even as it get’s close it keeps it’s razor talons tucked close to its body, and Naruto knows he has nothing to fear.

True to his instincts the bird pulls the dive last minute, raising its massive wings up to fan in a powerful backstroke that halts its forwards momentum half a meter from his face. It caws high at him, and in an instinct born from memory not his own, he hold his arm out in front of him.

More memory comes to him in flashes as the beautiful bird extends it talons to grasp his forearm, and he knows what kind of bird this is. It’s an osprey, the pride of the Uzushio aviary, prized for it’s precision fishing and hunting skill and used to carry the most sensitive of Uzushio’s information. The talons that grip his forearm are incredibly gentle for what they’re capable of– he knows full well that they could shred his arm to ribbons at even the slightest pressure.

“Hey there.” He says to it softly, turning his head to give the bird a few curious blinks. “You here to tell me something too?”

The bird tucks its head a little, the feathers on the back of its neck fanning slightly and then smoothing out again. It really is gorgeous– its feathers are a layered medley of black and white crested with gold at the edges, it’s head mostly white on a black neck but for two symmetrical streaks of black across its eyes like a bandit mask. It looks at him curiously with round yellow eyes, it’s head tipping back and forth. It lets out a soft kee and takes off again, gliding to perch of the bottom portion of the remains of the tower. He approaches and the bird leads him further down the ruin, towards the broken edges of what used to be it’s peak.

Naruto isn’t quite sure why it wants him to go there– Naruto had already pulled all the people left inside from it’s shattered depths just like he had with all the other buildings– with doton jutsu and by hand. He follows it though like he had the others, trusting the spirit of the island that seems to have manifested itself in the shape of these animals.

The osprey leads him to one of the few rooms in the fallen tower still relatively intact. Naruto recognizes it instantly.

It’s where he found the body of the Arashikage, along with the bodies of nearly a full dozen of her Anbu guard. Throughout the whole of the tower though, none of the bodies Naruto found were
civilians. Naruto knows it’s because she gave her life to a teleportation seal of some kind, a Kinjutsu that transported more than a hundred civilian lives to safety. She was an Uzumaki, like him, but he has no idea how closely they were related. Her hair had been darker than his mother’s, the color of garnets and blood, and her eyes had been topaz.

The soft swoop of the osprey’s flight draws his eyes to the corner of the room, where a shelf lies fallen over a short ornamental table. It alights on the floor beside the small space between the shelf and the floor and sticks its head into the hole. The bird is far too large to fit though, so it sticks its head back out and caws at him again impatiently. Naruto huffs, stepping over the rubble to get to it. “I’m coming I’m coming.”

The osprey hops sideways to make room for him as Naruto slips his fingers under the shelf and pulls. It’s dark oak and heavy, so Naruto channels chakra into his legs and upper arms to pull harder. Even that much chakra use though almost makes him sick— even though he has enough chakra to dull the ache of the corruption to ignorable levels, he can still feel it pooling in his veins and lodging in his joints each time he uses more of it. He no longer remembers how it feels to not have too much pressure in his chakra vessels and his lungs.

A groaning lurch and the shelf moves, scraping across the rubble and the opposite wall. He hears the osprey give a happy kee as it dives underneath, and then scraping sounds as it roots for something buried in the plaster. After a few too long minutes the bird darts back out and Naruto lets the shelf drop again, planting his hands on his knees as he fights the urge to hurl.

The osprey flaps its wings and perches atop the shelf in front of him, bobbing its head excitedly. There’s something shining in its beak, something that jingles slightly as the raptor tips it’s head back and forth.

“Whatcha got there?” He asks when he can manage to stand up straight. The bird doesn’t answer, obviously, and Naruto laughs at himself. “Fine, don’t tell me. I hope it was worth it though.”

The osprey’s only response to that is to tilt it’s head again curiously as Naruto starts to pick his way back across the rubble and out from underneath the shadow of the broken tower so that he can get back to work. He only has one more body to place in the plaza, and he can sense it’s nearby.

But the second he’s outside of the confines of the tower the bird dive bombs him again without warning, swooping to land on Naruto’s shoulder just as he turns. It ducks its head at him, shaking the shiny trinket in its beak. Naruto holds his hand out, and the bird drops it into his open palm.

It’s a piece of jewelry of some kind, though he’s never seen anything quite like it before. There’s a curled cuff like a small half-formed ring in some kind of shiny black metal. Both parts of the ring on either side of the gap bear an etching of a golden spiral, the symbol of Uzushio. The curved side is connected to two lengths of thin gold chain, each of which attach to a separate rounded stone with a needle-like point on the back. One is almost the size of the tip of his pinky finger and is some kind of rippling luminescent gemstone; the colours inside range from blue so dark it’s almost black to a bright purplish shine and every brilliant shade of rich blue imaginable in between. The gemstone itself seems to change as it moves, reflecting different nebulas of colour in ribbons and shards as he examines it dangling from his fingers. The other stone is entirely black— onyx, or maybe jet? – except for a soft etching of gold in the familiar shape of a tree with branches and roots twisted like knots.

“You want me to have it?” he asks, and the bird gives him a happy kee of agreement, leaning forward and using its sharp beak to preen a few stray strands of Naruto’s hair out of his eyes and tuck them behind his ear.
Naruto folds the odd piece of jewelry into the inner pocket of his shirt, right beside the scroll containing Kurama’s seal.

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Just as he’s placing the last of the bones of Uzushio with its fellows, Naruto spots a thief.

He looks up from settling the last body just in time to see the burglar crouching at his bag— a long lean wildcat with a coat of marbled black and gold, teeth clamped into the strap of his old pack. There’s a moment of total silence as the cat stares at him, eyes mischievous.

“Don’t…” Naruto mutters, rising as slowly as possible, but the cat’s eyes just sparkle as it shifts its shoulders in a playful wiggle. “It’s not funny, don’t do it… –shit!” The cat takes off with a lithe bound and Naruto tears off after it like a thing possessed. That bag has not only all of his sealing scrolls and changes of clothes, but it also has his last container of Iruka-sensei’s curry and there is no way he’s letting that end up anywhere but in his stomach.

The cat doesn’t go outside the plaza, instead it’s playing some screwed up game of cat and mouse as it darts around, slipping away each time Naruto is sure he has the stupid thing. It goes on until Naruto clips his foot on a section of the plaza and almost takes a header into a broken piece of mosaic, and when he rolls over a looks up the thing is standing right there staring down at him.

The wildcat licks its chops smugly and Naruto is reminded for an odd moment of Sasuke right after he’s just won a spar. In fact the similarities are uncanny. It leans back on its haunches as he sits up, batting its pack towards him as he crosses his legs beneath him.

He glares at the pack, not trusting it for a second. “So what do you want from me?” he asks, and the cat trots over, it’s fur rippling like a lava flow. It stops over a portion of pale stone where the whirlpool mosaic has been ripped up, just to the right of the chunk he almost smacked his head on. There’s a long curved line underneath it, out of place with the natural circles of stone, but the cat doesn’t call attention to it, instead it places a clawed foot over the stone, and when it’s sure Naruto is watching, it lets loose a pulse of chakra and lifts its paw. Underneath it, scorched in the stone in fiery lines, is a symbol of a moon twined together with a sun.

When he looks up the cat is gone, much like all the other spirits, and when he looks down again so is the symbol.

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That evening, Naruto pulls broken branches and leaves from the brush to use for kindling. He could have done this as soon as he found the last body, when the sun was still relatively high in the sky, but it had felt wrong somehow to just get it over with like that.

So he’d waited for the sunset.

Warm reds and buttery golds paint over the dust and old blood, cleansing the ground beneath the bones if only for a moment. He sets the tinder between the bleached frames, careful not to place any over the bones themselves. When he’s finished he sits before his makeshift pyre and makes four exhausted hand signs; snake, dragon, rabbit, tiger.

“Katon: Dragon Fire.”

Fire rolls, soft and seeking, across the inhabitants of Uzushio. It catches green first, then deepens to blue, heat furling from the blaze across Naruto’s face to make his eyes burn.

But he doesn’t turn away.
He watches until the bones are reduced to ash, watches as that ash is whisked away by the wind as it stirs out of the stillness. When the last of the bones have been rendered to dust the wind whips up, whirling the flame into a spiral, a firestorm that burns white hot for a spare few seconds, searing his eyes before it vanishes entirely.

Naruto looks down from the phenomenon, blinking flashes of white from his eyes, and his heart stops dead in his chest.

Before him, standing only a few feet from where the center of the pyre had been, is a wolf.

It’s enormous and black as pitch, it’s fur long unbroken ebony from nose to tail. It watches him steadily with unnerving eyes of pure silvery white, pupiless and luminescent.

He scrambles to his feet, and even that amount of motion is enough to make his vision blur and his stomach roll– the corruption is taking it’s toll now, and he’s nearly at his limit. If the wolf is planning to attack him, then there is nothing he could do to stop it.

But the wolf doesn’t move, makes no shift to indicate aggression. It merely waits, and stares.

Something connects, brings that old instinct in Naruto forward again, that animal sense of true north. His instincts haven’t lead him astray yet, not with Uzushio and not with Kurama, so he trusts them, gives into the feeling and trusts the animal part of himself more than the human.

Tired and damaged as he is, when he can barely stand let alone take another step forward, he meets the force in the wolf’s eyes with a challenge of his own.

This time the wolf does move. It shifts powerful shoulders, leans back on its hunches, throws its head back, and howls.

The sound rings in Naruto’s ears, powerful and haunting, and the entire island starts to quake. The air shakes with vibration as whatever spell that had held the island suspended shatters, as the curse of stillness breaks.

Like a first breath taken after so long without air, life surges through the earth on a gasp.

Sound roars to life around him, trees rubbing together in the flood of wind that races through the valley, water crashing through the river as if let from a dam. Naruto turns, watching movement dance across this once still pocket of the world.

A crunch, a crack, a resurgence of dormant chakra singed the air with its intensity as Naruto turns again to the wolf.

Light is splintering through the stone at the beast’s feet, flooding though unseen lines in the form of a looped five pointed star. It runs along unseen lines like liquid starlight, filling groves with chakra so concentrated Naruto can hardly stand to look at it. Another crack and a pattern unfurls along the entire breadth of the plaza, vaporizing mosaic pieces and debris as it twines into an unbelievably massive seal.

The wolf’s eyes catch his again, lightning cracking against the creature’s fur in cracks of light that split the air in the new chaos that breaks around them as clouds begin gathering dark overhead.

He tries to move forward but even a single step is too much for him now as nausea rolls from his stomach up his throat. He falls to his knees, hand snapping to his mouth, but it’s not enough and when he manages to turn his head it’s to vomit rancid chakra.
His head is spinning and his vision cuts out, but he can still feel the urgency building in the atmosphere, can still sense the storm that’s converging over his head, unnatural and angry.

Naruto senses a crackle of energy too close as teeth nip into the fabric of his shirt and yank him forward, forcing him to stumble upright in order to keep his balance. He blinks vision into his eyes again and finds the wolf has come to him, eyes bright and intent. Like the other spirits before it comes to his aid, tucking underneath Naruto’s arm to lend it’s strength to his.

It drags him to the center of the massive seal, to the point at the center of star. He expects the chakra raging in the seal to at least burn him, but the energy doesn’t harm him as he passes through it. He’s unsure if it’s because of the nature of the chakra or if it’s because the spirit of the wolf is protecting him.

When he reaches the center he finds only a tangle of lines that don’t make any sense– random curves and slashes that have no real order to them at. But he remembers Kurama’s teachings, remembers that great power sometimes lies in opposites, that true balance sometimes lies in contradiction, so he looks for order in the chaos.

If he hadn’t been given a hint he would never have seen the method in the madness, but in the odd swishes and half circles, he finds it. A moon and sun. Yin and Yang.

Another memory floods through him, the Arashikage’s memory–

_The defending storm is calmed by the blood of the eldest._

Naruto bites into his thumb, allows the blood to well against his finger and drip down his palm, dark and diseased, but still Uzumaki. He finds the center of the symbol, the place where the tines of the moon meet the center of the sun, and slams his hand down over it.

A boom echoes like a struck drum, a cleansing force sweeps from beneath him and the air clears of anger and tension, the clouds above his head disperse. Energy floods him, more than he can stand, a reaching power that pushes through him, sinks its claws into that space below his heart, and pulls him under.
The rain has been an insistent thing, heavy and oppressive, for days now. Sasuke watches it fall through the window of his room, eyes scanning the dark blanket of clouds still swollen with rain even after nearly three days of ceaseless torrents. Konoha hasn’t seen a monsoon this large in years.

It’s kept even the most hardened of shinobi from venturing outside for anything short of A-rank missions and runs to the grocery store, and as Sasuke knows firsthand, the downpour is capable of soaking through any number of layers in seconds. According to his alarm clock it should be dawn by now, but the dark layer of clouds has turned the day into a lasting midnight, not a ray of sun to be seen filtering through the roiling cover.

Frustration builds as he runs his hand through his hair roughly. He’s getting so sick of trying to train indoors. He’s been using the compound dojo to train these last few days, but the memories that lurk in the corners there ambush him when he least expects them to, flooding him with renewed pain and memories of his brother and father. His mother’s presence haunts the garden just outside the structure, where she used to tend flowers and poisonous plants, making that entire part of the compound a minefield of emotion.

Just as he’s resigning himself to staying in and thus another night of painful memory, his keen eyes spot something through the rain outside his window.

The mostly deserted street suddenly has a single occupant– a tall lean man with white hair and a crooked hitai-ate, a lone shinobi walking easily across the flooded pavement. Sasuke looks for indications of a rank but sees none– the man is wearing only a standard black sleeveless top with a custom mask attachment, pulled all the way over his nose, and regulation pants of the same standard shinobi variety. Other than a pair of bicep length reinforced gloves and a band of cloth wrapped around the upper part of his left arm, the man isn’t wearing anything else– no flack jacket and no cloak to protect from the rain. He walks through the downpour like it isn’t even there, no urgency in his step and no tenseness in his body language that might indicate discomfort.

He tells himself that he goes outside because he needs to go shopping fairly badly, he’s low on vegetables for stir-fry– nevermind that he forgets his wallet on his dresser.

In reality he’s curious– the man looks like a specter pacing an easy and familiar path, a ghost walking a pilgrimage.

Only when he makes it to the street does he realize he’s lost sight of the man entirely, the curtain of water cloaking any sign he might have left behind. The rain soaks through his overshirt in seconds, running down the lines of his neck and falling from his hair in fat drops. He grunts in disappointment and turns back– he has enough food to last him another day at least, when he hears
a soft splash and turns to see the man standing behind him.

The tall shinobi looks at him sideways through a single silvery eye, the other covered by his lopsided hitai-ate. “Where are you going during a storm like this, Uchiha-san?” The man asks, his voice neutral and low.

Sasuke isn’t surprised the stranger recognizes him, most all of the village knows his story and by default his face. What surprises him is the complete lack of pity or curiosity or anything noticeably recognizable as an emotion on the man’s face.

“I could ask you the same.” Sasuke snaps, not extending the same honorific, but the shinobi only blinks, unperturbed by Sasuke’s complete lack of manners. The man must only be a Chunin, Sasuke decides. Any Tokujo or Jounin worth their rank would have at least tried to put him in his place.

The man hums thoughtfully. “Apologies. My reasons for being out are private ones, you understand.”

That knocks Sasuke a bit sideways. The man isn’t talking to him like the academy student he is, but like he’s an adult on the same footing, with the same understanding.

“Then you’ll understand if I keep my reasons to myself as well.” he responds, a little scathingly to cover his surprise.

Again the shinobi doesn’t react, he merely inclines his head in concession to his point. “Fair enough.” He murmurs softly, turning to continue on his way. “Your ghosts are your own, after all.”

Of all the things he’d expected to come out of the shinobi’s mouth that was nowhere on the list.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

The man shrugs a lean shoulder carelessly, not bothering to turn back. “Whatever you’d like it to mean, Uchiha-san.”

That little statement does nothing to assuage the creeping feeling that for a moment the man had seen right through his walls and into the graveyard of half-buried pain he keeps bricked up behind them.

“Wait.”

Sasuke isn’t sure what prompts him to speak out, but it probably has something to do with the old familiar pain he’d seen lurking for a spare few seconds behind the elder man’s eyes.

The man stops and turns, and Sasuke sees it again, a flash of an unnamable ache behind strange silver irises.

“What would you know about ghosts?” he asks.

The man tilts his head, considering the question. “Enough to know that being haunted has nothing to do with the presence of the dead, and everything to do with the memory of the living.”

The words strike him like a blow to the chest.

He’d never considered someone might know, that someone might have lived through loss like he had, let alone this stranger. He finds he can’t muster the breath to speak a response.
The man regards him calmly for a long moment, then turns to the side, his body language open.

An invitation. Take it or leave it.

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He follows the shinobi stranger across the expanse of training ground three, through dripping trees and grass swamped with rainwater. Eventually they come to a clearing slightly raised above the ground surrounding it, a dark monument at the center.

Sasuke has never seen the mirror-like gem that is the Memorial Stone himself. His own family is buried in the Uchiha cemetery just outside his family complex, so he’s had no reason to until now. He knows that the memorial was erected for those who died in service to the village, and more specifically, for those whose bodies were never recovered.

With all the names written on the reflective surface Sasuke can’t tell which one the man’s eyes fix on, and for some reason he doesn’t want to know. It seems too private, too personal, and he doesn’t even know this man’s name. He’s not even sure why he’s here.

After minute upon minute of silence it becomes clear that the man doesn’t intend to speak unless spoken to, more than content to stare at the same point unblinking. He’s so at ease here in this solemn place that it’s unnerving.

“You come here often.” It’s not a question, Sasuke has his pride, but it’s spoken softly enough not to be an accusation or an insult, not that he thinks the man would care if it were.

“You could say that.” Is the man’s response, and the way it’s said, wry and slightly sarcastic, tells him often is an understatement.

Sasuke’s not too stupid or stubborn to understand that such behavior speaks of catastrophic loss. To visit the same name countless times, so often it becomes ritual and routine– well.

Sasuke knows what it’s like to be hollow inside, even if it’s not to this extent. He’s filled the void in his life with anger and hurt and drive to vengeance.

This man has left it empty.

“They meant a lot to you.” It’s not a question either, but Sasuke flinches almost as soon as it’s left his mouth.

Way to state the obvious.

“Everything.” The man replies, with the same casual air as one commenting on the weather. It’s a statement of fact, not of sentiment.

“What happened?”

“A mistake.” The shinobi says immediately. “One made in arrogance. I chose the wrong path, a path I believed to be the right one, and by the time I realized my mistake, it was too late.” He reaches up to brush a thumb over a name, and Sasuke has to turn his head away. “He died saving my life. And like the fool I am, I didn’t realize what I had until I lost it.”

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Kakashi slides through Iruka’s living room window just in time to see Kotetsu and Izumo roll
screeching across the carpet like a couple of manic tomcats, knocking over a lamp and jolting the coffee table sideways until they thump into Ibiki’s shins, after which Ibiki kicks Kotetsu in the nose and Izumo in the side and sends them rolling apart again.

Kakashi takes a moment to absorb the fact the Iruka’s hardly medium sized apartment is filled with shinobi; Raidou comes around the corner munching on rice crackers, Hayate and Asuma are playing Go at the small table across from the kitchen, and Anko is sitting on the floor skillfully painting Aoba’s fingernails turquoise. Almost all are either in their civs or nothing but towels.

“I missed something.” He states to the room at large, not truly expecting any response. Raidou harrumphs and gives him one anyway around a cheekful of cracker.

“You haven’t been back to your apartment all morning, have you?”

Kakashi blinks for a moment before his overwrought brain catches up to the implication, and then he scowls behind his mask. “The whole building?” He growls, because the only thing that every person in this room has in common is the fact that the all live in the same block of shinobi apartments, the one on the other side of the Hokage’s tower.

Aoba nods grimly from his seat on the floor, tilting his wrist so that Anko has better access to his thumbnail. He’s in a pair of loose sweats and nothing else, his dark spiky hair wilted down with water. “Lightning strike took out the main water pump. Hiruzen-sama sent someone to fix it, but they won’t be able to get at the machinery until the weather clears up a little.” He shrugs, then winces when Anko kicks him in the shin for squirming. “Hence the get together.”

“You do realize there are showers in the standby stations, right?” Kakashi remarks mildly.

Anko scoffs and brandishes the nail polish brush at him. She’s still fully clothed, which Kakashi finds surprising. “That water pressure is so shitty it might as well not exist! Those showers are barely fit to rinse off mission grime, how am I supposed to fucking wash my hair with that?” She whirls around, barely managing to keep turquoise polish from dripping on Iruka’s carpet, leveling a glare at Raidou. “Speaking of which, when the hell is your peacock boyfriend going to be done in there? It’s my turn next and I’ve been sitting here for twenty goddamn minutes!”

“I don’t know.” Raidou says mildly, holding a cracker loosely between his fingers “When are you going to finish those mission expenses I asked you for a week ago?”

Anko blanches a little and scowls, grumbling about stupid squad leaders and soul-sucking paperwork as she fishes a clear topcoat out of the round case at her thigh.

Kakashi finishes sliding all the way through the window, pulling it shut behind him as he tries not to jostle the bag in his hand. Kotetsu and Izumo’s wrestling match rolls them into the wall with a crash, knocking a painting off its nail with a thud. Iruka’s voice sounds from just outside the kitchen.

“If you two have so much goddamn energy you can go outside and heat more water for the tank!”

Ibiki snickers when the two fling their hands in the air and call ‘not it’ like absolute children, Kotetsu a hair faster than Izumo. The later growls and shoves his compatriot in the shoulder.

“That’s not fair Ko, I went last time!”

“A shinobi’s life is never fair, Zuzu.” Kotetsu says smugly, and gets a bloody nose for the hated nickname.
Iruka appears around the corner, a vein pulsing threateningly in his temple that spells disaster for anyone in his path. “NOW.”

Both Chunin scramble to their feet and are gone so fast that Kakashi swears they leave a dust cloud in their wake. Iruka then turns to level his gaze on Kakashi, who holds his takeout bag up like a shield.

“I come bearing tribute?” he says hesitantly.

But Iruka just sighs with relief and comes forward to take the bag out of his hand. “Please tell me that’s Ichiraku.”

“Shoyu with extra egg and green onion.”

Kakashi probably shouldn’t have said that so loud, because suddenly about six sets of eyes have fixed on the little plastic bag.

“Get your own, you vultures.” Iruka snaps, and waves Kakashi into the kitchen. The only other person in the room is Kurenai, and there’s a good reason for that—she’s fast asleep at the kitchen table, arms folded under her head, a mug of tea forgotten by her elbow. Kakashi would find it strange that a Jounin would fall asleep in any house not her own, especially one so loud, but Iruka, and by proxy his home, have always given off a sense of safety that somehow reaches even the most hardened and paranoid shinobi.

Iruka lowers his voice to a whisper as he pulls his takeout from the bag, somehow managing not to rustle the plastic. “You here for a shower too or did you want talk about something?”

Kakashi busies himself with finding a bowl and chopsticks for both Iruka’s food and his own. “I saw one of your students this morning. Sasuke Uchiha.”

“Sasuke?” Iruka says, surprised. “What was he doing out in this mess?”

“Wanted to get out of his house, I think.” Kakashi says mildly.

“That compound isn’t good for him.” Iruka whispers, handing Kakashi his bowl and settling against the counter with his own.

“Too many ghosts.” Kakashi agrees. “But it’s not as if anyone could make him leave it.”

“Was he all right?” Iruka says as he eats.

“No.” Kakashi says honestly. “But we… had a conversation. Not sure what he got out of it though, if anything.”

Iruka raises an eyebrow. “Oh really?” Kakashi glances away and Iruka sighs. “Fine, I won’t ask.”

About three minutes later Kakashi watches with some amusement as Iruka glances at the clock, seems to realize something, and sets his half finished ramen bowl on the table in favor of storming towards the bathroom. Kakashi eats quickly while he’s distracted, only barely managing not to scald his tongue when he hears Iruka’s voice vibrate through the walls.

“Get your ass out of there right now Shiranui or so help me YOU WILL BE DOING REPORT PAPERWORK FOR A MONTH.”

Several bangs and an undignified screech later Genma comes around the corner with a red welt on
his forehead in nothing but a towel wrapped haphazardly around his waist. Kakashi follows him back out into the living room, a fuming Iruka behind them both.

Kakashi perches on the back of the couch across from Ibiki as Iruka leans tiredly in the doorframe. “Your turn, Anko. Don’t forget your conditioner, you left it under the sink.”

Anko points a finger at Aoba as she stands. “Low flame for two and a half minutes. No more, no less, capiche?”

Aoba gives her a two fingered salute and goes through a couple hands signs, careful of his still tacky nails, until his palms glow with orange fire that he moves steadily over the fingers of his right hand, then his left.

“Hey Rai, where are my sweats?” Genma asks, only to take said pants to the face when he turns towards his partner. Genma glares, and Raidou continues not-so-innocently eating his crackers.

Genma flips him off as he pulls his pants on, rubbing the now free towel over his hair. He sits down in Anko’s vacated seat on the floor, looking curiously at the nail polish case as Aoba finishes flash drying his nails.

“She got any good purple in there?”

Aoba runs his fingers over the bottles. “You want lavender, violet, royal, or mauve?”

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The first thing Naruto sees when he opens his eyes is nothing at all.

He’s awake, he knows he is– no dream he’s ever had has hurt like this. His eyes are open, he can feel the flutter of his eyelashes against his cheeks as he blinks, but his eyes don’t seem to have caught onto the memo because all he can see is smooth endless black.

He draws his hands up under him, palms sliding over unnaturally smooth stone, and attempts to lever himself up. He doesn’t quite manage vertical the first time, since he underestimates how much effort it takes, but he manages to shuffle into a sitting position, one leg folded under his opposite knee. He still sees nothing but inky black, but it doesn’t alarm him quite so much as it probably should.

He hurts all over, from the skin of his arms and the back of his neck, all the way to the densest parts of his muscles. But this is a good ache, a healing ache– any sense of the creeping dull pressure of rancid chakra is gone entirely. So is most of his regular chakra actually.

He feels… different. Subtly so, like the corruption has left a mark behind, an imprint in his system, one his body seems intent on remembering. He feels stronger for his pain.

Naruto crosses his legs, placing a hand over his seal. The caustic burn is gone from what he can feel, so if the corrupted chakra has been purged from his system, then maybe…

He settles into a meditative state and drops into his seal.

After long moments in darkness even metaphysical light makes him squint, but when he blinks the
splotches out of his eyes he finds he hardly recognizes his own head. The ever present water and
dark prison bars are still there, but the flood of chakra seems to have given life where there
otherwise was none, and the water overflows with greenery. Winding vines and aquatic plants
bloom from water once toxic, curling up around the gate bars and floating in the shallows at
Naruto’s feet. Blue lotus flowers bloom all around, like the kind from the pond in Jiji’s garden, a
familiar and comforting sight so far from home. A mound of grassy earth rises from the water
beneath Kurama, who lies across the knoll the same way he had when Naruto last saw him.

He’s not awake.

Naruto knows it was probably too much to hope for, but his heart sinks all the same. The fox looks
better now though—his fur is too bright now instead of too dark, and the light pulsing out from his
center along his tails looks steadier.

But he’s also emaciated—there's hardly any meat on his chakric bones, ribs stark steps along his
sides, his face thin at the cheeks.

Naruto sits down in the water and takes a minute to compose himself. The corruption may be gone
but that’s hardly half the battle—now Naruto has to find a way to return what Kurama has always
freely given him. Now he has to find a way to give chakra to the Kyuubi no Kitsune.

He pulls back out of his head, opening his eyes to darkness again.

This time instead of searching for light, he makes his own, pulling a little of what fire chakra he’s
managed to regain into his hands as his fingers flick through hand signs; Rat, Tiger, Ram.

“Katon: Flickerflare.”

A flash of yellow sparks and cobalt flame fills the bowl of his palm, casting haunting shadows
across an expanse of glittering black stone. He pushes to his feet, holding the flare up against the
wall and watching as blue light reflects in speckled patterns across the skin of his arms.

The fire in his hand dims suddenly when he steps too close, sputtering and dying until Naruto pulls
his hand away and the fire flares back to life. It triggers a memory from the collective wisdom of
Uzushio that's hidden itself inside him, calling up details from a construction log from long ago.

Void stone. Chakra absorbing. To protect against sensor nin and chakric tunneling.

He turns away, making sure to keep the light of his fire away from the walls, and moves forward
through the dim. The cavern narrows into a hallway long enough he can't see the end of it yet, a
ceiling closing over the top where there hadn't been one before. There are recesses built into the
walls on both sides of the hallway about three feet up. He investigates the one on his left and finds
that the recess is lined with a different kind of stone, pale like the stone of the plaza, and filled with
small translucent yellow rocks about the size of his fingertips. He plucks one from its fellows and
examines it curiously, sensing a soft pulse of familiar chakra. The substance is too tacky to be glass
or gemstone, and smells strongly of tree sap.

Chakric Resin. The back of his mind tells him. Flammable.

He drops the crystal back into the basin and brings his flaming hand to the recess. It catches
instantly, roaring to life and racing off into the dark, lighting the path ahead as it goes. He lights
the other and watches as it chases after the first, casting amber light across gleaming black. He
follows the fire, watching the flames race until they split off somewhere ahead of him and
disappear from sight. He follows the hallway until it opens up into an enormous cavern, big enough
to hold his entire apartment tenfold under its ceiling. Lines of fire curl like ribbons around the dome, filling the cavern with warm light. Water circles the platform in the center, a mosaic of a giant stylized spiral.

Lining the edge of the platform are thirteen rashomon style gates, each one bearing the crest of a different Uzushio clan at the top and leading into another chamber. The gate directly across from him is twice as wide as all the others, and the crest at the top is that of a spiral circled by curved tines, transforming it into a sun. The Uzumaki clan symbol.

*The Uzushio Repository. Holding place of all Uzushio’s treasures, knowledge, and artifacts.*

If there’s a way to alter his seal, Naruto is sure he’ll find it in there.
Kintsukuroi

Chapter Notes

I swear I'd forget my head if it wasn't attached. Almost forgot to post this thing because of walking disasters. *cough cough*SIBLINGS*cough*.
Enjoy.
Also, for those of you that don't know–

Kintsukuroi: The art of repairing pottery with silver or gold lacquer, in an understanding that a piece is more beautiful for having been broken.

I regret nothing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Naruto is starting to understand that the Uzumaki were a lot more than just Uzushio’s largest clan.

They were the first clan, the founding clan of Uzushio, the ones that first settled on this island and started constructing the city that now lies ruined over his head. They were also considered the primary protectors inside the village; they handled internal disputes between the ninja population, were responsible for seeking out chakra talent among civilian families, and one of their primary duties was to protect Uzushio’s civilian population in times of war. In truth the Uzumaki weren’t that much bigger than the rest of Uzushio’s clans— most of the space in the Uzumaki section of the repository that made it seem so much larger is actually reserved for the contributions of ninja with no clan to call their own— those born either from civilian families or from shinobi ones not large enough to be considered clans by themselves.

The walls are lined with alcoves filled with jutsu scrolls and books and artistic diagrams, all under dozens of names engraved into the stone banners above them. The actual Uzumaki portion of the room is in the center towards the back, a circle of shelves filled with jutsu and odd artifacts.

Naruto ignores all of it in favor of the slanted mahogany shelves filled with tomes on sealing theory.

Within moments the floor of the repository is a disaster; open books lie scattered in a haphazard circle around him, long rolls of dark paper containing sealing diagrams in bright ink overlap each other on the stone floor as Naruto scours through their contents.

Like before, the collective knowledge of Uzushio remains out of reach until the moment he needs it, hidden right up until he comes across a symbol he doesn’t know or a term that doesn’t immediately make sense. Knowledge floods him in those moments and he begins to understand the different lines and symbols, how they’re used to direct and transform energy within a seal. He begins to understand the laws that govern different types of seals, their limits and the purpose of their designs, until he can look at a seal he’s never seen before and understand at a glance what it might be for, how it might work when chakra is added or subtracted or changed.

At the center of his chaotic circle, the scroll that holds the copy of Kurama’s seal lies unfurled.

Below it, just past Naruto’s crossed legs, a new one is forming.
The central construction of the seal has remained the same. Even if Naruto knew how to remove the seal—which he doesn’t, he’s come to understand that doing so would be a pretty terrible idea—one that would likely get him killed. The inner part of the seal is responsible for creating a dimensional space—a sort of pocket within the life force of a person in which a second life force is sealed. The intermediate portion of the seal is responsible for keeping the two life forces separate from one another. The outer portion of the seal is responsible for enforcing one life force over the other, in a sense closing the dimensional pocket and keeping the imprisoned life force sealed inside. Naruto’s seal is somewhat altered from the original—the intermediate portion of his seal, which deals with the negative space between the inner swirling part and the jagged outer part, is too wide to properly keep Kurama’s energy separate from his own. There’s also a small portion of it missing—a kind of barrier that might have prevented certain parts of Kurama’s energy from moving through the seal at all. But those filters are gone from Naruto’s seal, which is good, because otherwise he would have had to try and remove them in order to manage altering the seal the way he needs to.

Now all Naruto really needs to do is add.

The eight pyramids of scripture that ring the seal and make up its outer portion are responsible for the gate construct—the part of the seal that divides Naruto’s half of the seal space from Kurama’s. If Naruto adds a counterbalance, a seal segment of the same design and potency but with an opposite spin, he can turn the two parts of the seal into a shared space, one where both his energy and Kurama’s can exist without one holding precedence over the other. After that it’s only a matter of altering the seal’s law to allow chakra to be moved back and forth instead of just one way.

…Which is a lot more complicated than it sounds.

In order to manage it, Naruto needs to create a set of seal extensions known as Lines of Transgression. The Lines themselves are pretty straightforward, but have a great deal of rules and additions in order to get them to work.

So far, Naruto has it broken down into four stages.

After the addition of the counterbalance he needs to create a series of sixteen ‘bridges’ to cross the seal’s intermediate space, connecting the inner portion of the seal to the outer portion. They’d appear as little more than short lines crossing the seal’s negative space, but they would allow Naruto to connect his own energy directly to the seal space, and thus Kurama.

Second he would need to place ‘tapping points’ along the primary pathways of his chakra. They would serve as guides and anchors for the Lines, allowing them to move and draw energy and chakra from along the whole of his body. They’d be placed by a series of symbols that would brace the spaces where the Lines would appear. They’d be the most intricate part of the seal addition, and the most important, as the locations of the anchors would dictate where and how the Lines would move chakra. They would number in the hundreds, starting on either side of his neck and moving down along his arms to the backs of his hands, branching to move along the curves of his ribcage and down the planes of his back, tracing down his legs to the tops of his feet.

The third part would be the Lines themselves, which would, by far, take the most energy to place. He’d need to go slow, starting at the most far reaching of the anchors, the ones on his neck, wrists, and ankles, and then slowly add equal amounts of chakra to all five points until the Lines filled out the skeleton set by the tapping points.

The final part would be the bracers, circular seals that would lock the Lines in place and cause the tapping points and Line edges to merge, activating the movement of chakra through the central seal.
By the time he’s worked out all the kinks in his additions, drawn out all the minutest of details, he’s been working nearly a full day and hadn’t even noticed but for a stiffness in his legs and the painful rumble of hunger making itself known from a stomach too long ignored.

So he pulls out his container of Iruka-sensei’s curry and goes over his diagrams one last time. He needs some materials still, some ink and a transfer map, but the hardest part is done.

Iruka-sensei’s curry does a lot to help get his energy back up, and eating gives his brain a welcome break from all the work and helps relieve some of the headache from staring at ink on a page all day. It also makes him a little homesick.

Even though it’s only been a few days, he misses Iruka-sensei and Jiji and his bed and Konoha in general. But more than anything he misses Kurama, misses his constant presence and his rumbling laugh and his rough-around-the-edges affection.

So he finishes his curry, takes another deep, fortifying breath, and goes in search of the last few items he needs.

He finds the transfer map in a stack of paper rolls that when unfurled are longer than he is tall. They’re thick, almost like they’re made of canvas, and each one holds the outline of a person, each side bearing the front and back respectively. He mostly needs it because he’s on his own— there’s no one around to help him place the tapping runes on the places he can’t see or reach with an ink brush, like his back for instance. It allows him to place the runes where they need to be on the map, and then use chakra to transfer those runes to the correct places on himself. Some of the maps already have diagrams drawn on them, so he searches through the stack until he finds a blank one.

The only other thing he needs is ink— he doesn’t have enough in his bag to properly detail the whole map. Something tells him he won’t find any in here though, so he wanders back out into the main chamber of the repository.

He does a quick turn, his eyes scanning the clan symbols above the doors until they catch on one in particular, the symbol of a tapered droplet pieced by crossed senbon.

Clan Sumiran. His mind tells him.

As he ducks inside their section of the repository, he finds himself unsure of what exactly he’s looking at. There are shelves of scrolls and books, which he expected to see, but there are also shelves filled with row upon row of strange glass bottles, all filled with odd assortments of dark powders and bright liquids. He plucks one of the smaller bottles off the top of the shelf to examine. The smaller bottles, each about the size of a canteen, are the ones filled with liquids, ranging in colour from molten gold to luminescent cobalt. The one he’s holding is glistening amber, and when he tips it forward he sees a containment seal carved in the cork stopper. The yellowing label reads:

Entropic Tree Sap

Class 4B Reactant

All the small bottles have the same word written at the top of their descriptions. Catalyst.

The jars of powders that line the floor and lower shelves are larger, almost half his height, and though all the powders are the same charcoal black, each one reflects differently under the
flickering firelight, shining around the edges in greens and purples. All the labels read *Ink: Unmixed*.

The largest container stands just to the side of the shelves of bottles, a huge glass amphora that nearly comes up to Naruto’s shoulders. It’s filled to the brim with some kind of clear liquid that shines silvery despite the warm light. The label on it reads *Organic base: Pure*.

*All this for ink?* He wonders, stepping around the shelves until he almost trips over a stack of ink stones of varying sizes, some the same size as the one Jiji uses to sign documents, some bigger than Naruto’s head.

As confused as he is he doesn’t have time to look around too much– he just needs regular old ink to set the transfer map, but with all these bottles and mixtures he’s not even sure where to look.

Eventually he finds a container of ink powder that doesn’t seem to reflect any strange light– in fact it doesn’t seem to reflect any light at all– and drags it from the shelf. Foreign muscle memory takes over from there, knowledge that he doesn’t so much think as feel.

He lifts one of the larger ink stones from the stacks, finds a stirring rod tucked in a stack protected with silk cloth. It like he’s doing this for the hundredth time instead of the first as he mixes the base with the powdered ink until the consistency is right and there are no lumps or pockets of air.

When he’s finishes he brings the ink stone back into the Uzumaki portion of the repository, careful not to slosh any, and gets out his brushes.

Preparation takes another hour, if only because Naruto double and triple checks literally everything. Any misstep or tiny rune out of line and things can go very differently than he needs them to, and since Naruto doesn’t have the key necessary to lift parts of the seal, any alterations he makes now will be permanent. He can’t make any mistakes. Kurama’s life is on the line.

So Naruto, the dead last, the failure, has to do this one thing completely perfect.

He should be terrified of screwing up.

But he finds the only thing he’s scared for is Kurama, wasting away if he does nothing about it. Well this is him doing something about it, and he can’t be scared, he has to be sure, because if he thinks about the what-ifs and the maybes he freezes up, and he can’t afford to. Not even for a second.

He has the first part down.

The counterbalance had been pretty easy, just a matter of inverting and copying a piece of his own seal and placing it against the outer part. The bridges had required some more delicate maneuvering, but he has them done too, sixteen short lines across the gap in his seal.

Now the hard part.

The transfer map sits in front of him, detailed with all the tiny symbols that will form the tapping points. He’d trashed six of them before he’d gotten it perfect, every little circle, curve and curl in their proper place.

*Well, now or never.*

He places his hands on the edge of the canvas and channels his central chakra, Yang and Yin, to the surface of his fingers.
A low hum fills the air as chakra flows along the contours of the map, alighting each of the symbols in turn. The runes come to life and begin to flow off the paper, drawing towards his fingertips like a line of ants towards sugar. They crawl across his hands, winding up his arms to tuck beneath his sleeveless shirt. He feels them move across his skin like the flutter of hummingbird wings, soft and vibrating with energy as they settle into their places. After a moment they still, and then two by two release concentrated bursts of chakra that feel like needle punctures, burrowing into the main lines of his chakra vessels. When the pain subsides into a steady thrum of energy Naruto crosses his legs across the floor and goes still, folding his fingers in his lap and concentrating.

Energy, soft and seeking, pulses along his limbs and down the line of his throat, steady bursts of chakra along the spaces created between the anchors. Lines, solid black and two finger widths wide, grow between the anchors with every chakra pulse, painting across his skin until they converge at the center of his abdomen, merging there to circle the central seal.

As soon as they converge Naruto makes a series of hand seals– Snake for movement, Tiger for force, Ox for stability, and Dragon for balance– and dips his hand in the ink stone. He touches two fingers to the top of his throat and feels the bracer lock in a band of black around the tops of the Lines there. He goes through the hands signs and repeats the process for his wrists and his ankles, feeling the power of the bracers locking the Lines of Transgression and the anchors together, merging the whole apparatus into one final seal segment.

Sweat breaks out over Naruto’s skin like a broken fever, causing his skin to prickle with goose bumps as the change settles into his chakra systems. He waits as long as he can stand, just until the new changes seem stable, and then he dives back into his head in search of his friend.

The process is different; it feels less like falling now and more like taking a step back, like the little world is closer to the surface than before.

The black bars that separated the seal space are gone. The relief Naruto feels is so overwhelming that he needs a minute to catch his breath.

Other than that the space is much the same as when he last saw it, with the soft grassy hillock in the center of the water, surrounded by blooming blue water lotus, his bijuu lying across it.

Even from inside Naruto can feel his chakra now, humming all around the space, ready for him to draw on it when he chooses to. He has no idea how long it will take– Naruto’s resting chakra isn’t nearly enough to replenish what Kurama lost, not all at once, but he’ll keep giving for as long as it takes.

He makes himself comfortable in the water just shy of the earth mound and begins to pull his chakra into the seal space. He’s going to be here a while.

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The first thing Kurama becomes aware of, after so much time dreaming of nothing but black, is a sensation he can’t ever recall having felt before.

There are very few things that he can claim never to have felt. Until recently *protective* had been one, the desire to guard something from the things that might harm it. His siblings had never
needed protecting, and until a few years ago there was nothing he cared about enough to try and protect. This is something else though; strength flowing into him from some outside source, a familiar source, but Kurama can’t put a finger on why it’s familiar.

If he didn’t know better he’d say it was chakra, which is ridiculous. Kurama is a tailed beast. Even with only half of his energy Kurama has as much latent chakra as Shukaku on a good day. He has never needed more of it.

But then he remembers.

He remembers his insides rebelling against him, remembers forcing it down so his kit wouldn’t see, which only made it worse because it was his fault, his mistake and his hate that made him hurt, and the more he grows to care the more unbearable that becomes, and the more he begins to feel the one thing he swore he never would. Regret.

Kurama regrets the deaths of Minato Namikaze and Kushina Uzumaki.

Not because he cared for them in any fashion, but because their deaths meant that his kit never had a family, never had a home, never had people to teach and guide him and care for him the way he deserved to be cared for.

He may not have liked Kushina, Minato even less so, but he knows they would have loved his kit more than anything because how could they not?

He’s not sure why he’s coming back to consciousness now, with how much chakra he threw up he wouldn’t be surprised if he was in hibernation for years, if he ever woke up at all.

But now his senses are becoming clearer and yes, that is chakra he can feel, trickling through him slowly but surely. Not just any chakra but his kit’s chakra.

Which Kurama is pretty sure is very solidly impossible.

He blinks his eyes open, which takes more effort than it should, making his chakric gaze focus.

The air feels different, warmer and more open. Kurama is so accustomed to stagnation that the soft movement of wind around him startles him, almost as much as the distinct smell of greenery in air that should only smell of water and iron.

When his eyes adjust to the light the first thing he sees is his kit, sitting in the water just shy of the bed of earth he’s curled on, which he can’t remember having been there before. For one heartrending moment Kurama is reminded of the Sage of Six Paths, meditating on the jagged rocks at the old nexus of the world. The little blond brat is sitting there, hands clasped and eyes closed, sealing lines running down his body that Kurama knows weren’t there before.

There is no gate. The cage bars aren’t open, or unsealed, or left ajar– they are gone entirely.

The brat looks tired, looks older, and Kurama wonders whether he’s not still dreaming, maybe truly dead, even.

~Fishcake?~ He asks, to be sure that this isn’t something he’s imagining.

The brat’s eyes fly open and fix on him, wild blue irises red rimmed and exhausted. He blinks for a second, astonished, and then those eyes start to look dangerously wet. The first thing that crosses
Kurama’s mind is oh shit not the waterworks, and then the kit is on his feet with record speed and comes crashing into Kurama’s snout with all the force of a tiny hurricane. He curls an arm around the kit on collision to keep him secure, but it turns out the brat doesn’t need the support— he’s stronger than he was, more solid, and how the hell did that happen?

~Easy Kit. What’s going on?~ he says tiredly, looking around at the strange new place he finds himself in, no longer anything like the prison he remembers. He leans back, takes in the new lines running up and down the brats arms and neck and the change in chakra around him, and changes his question. ~What did you do?~

Naruto smiles wide and rubs the back of his head in that little nervous tick of his. His eyes are still wet. “It’s kind of a long story.”

Kurama extends a claw to brush the tears out of his kit’s eyes, not liking them there. ~Start from the beginning then.~

Naruto takes a deep breath and does.

By the end of the tale, surprised is the least of what Kurama feels. He’d known his Kit was something else, known he was capable of things that most other shinobi would never be capable of, but this? If Kurama weren’t able to see the truth in every sentence out of the brat’s mouth as he rambles on about storms and spirits and collecting bones, he wouldn’t believe a word of it.

But then again, this brat has always had a talent for surprising him.

~Okay let me get this straight, kid.~ Kurama interrupts as Naruto’s reaching the tail end of his explanation. ~You broke into the Anbu section of the Konoha Archives without getting caught, ran to Uzushio on foot in a monsoon, gained the allegiance of the island by burning the dead, opened the Uzushio repository by yourself, and reformed a class S seal without any help whatsoever.~

The brat has the nerve to blink at him, like it doesn’t make sense when he says it all at once like that, and then shrugs. “I guess.”

Kurama narrows his eyes. ~You guess?~

And before Naruto can so much as come up with an answer Kurama scoops the little brat in up a tumble, eliciting a shriek as Kurama rolls through the water with him, kicking up leaves and grass and lotus petals.

~What the hell you little pipsqueak! You go through hell and back and the only thing you have to say about it is I Guess? You’ve never been more than a mile outside the village limits in the whole decade you’ve been alive!~

The kit laughs and wriggles loose enough to thump Kurama on the neck. “You scared the crap out of me, asshole!” Naruto grumbles. “And I missed your stupid grumpy demon butt, sue me.”

And when Kurama looks down at this kid, this brat, smiling bright and still scrubbing tears from his ten-year-old face, all Kurama can think is treasure.

Maybe this is it. He wonders. All that talk of Kushina’s about love and family. Maybe this is what it feels like.

If it is, he understands now why she was willing to fight for it. To die for it. To raze the world to
the ground for it.

It’s the least of what Kurama would do. That’s for damned sure.

Chapter End Notes

First things first, some shout outs. Because seriously, overdue. Ilphros, for obvious reasons. Been there from the start, and your interpretations are killer. Senzo, Potkana, and Ambitious for much the same reasons. <3 For always having something awesome to say we have Cocoandbooks, AngelofDarkness4444, Totally-not-a-dragon, and kaa-chan. Most of you were also with me from the beginning so that too, seriously. Also, more recently Katec. The rest you you know who you are. Tis the season of being thankful and crap right? You best know you're awesome. Peace out. I Regret Nothing.
Chapter Notes

I know you were all hoping for the homecoming bit and all, but...
Well.
Wish I were sorrier.
Also, this was almost late. Again.
Actually am sorta sorry about that. Kinda.
Other than that though...
I regret nothing.

Naka River 2:34am

Night of the Uchiha Massacre

From the view off the edges of the canyon, the river below winds like a serpent, carving through the land in graceful sweeps as it rolls ever onward in its quest for the sea.

Somewhere far upstream, the water is being stained with blood.

The dark man standing on the edge casts his keen single-eyed gaze across the river’s surface, searching for any shift in the shadows of the water. His companion crouches at the edge beside him, a spiraling construct of wood and chakra in the shape of a man. “I saw him go off the edge, little brother. From that height the water would be hard as stone. He’s most assuredly dead.”

“We need to be sure.” The man insists, his eyes scanning for the slightest ripple out of place. “We cannot afford to be otherwise.”

The spiral shaped man only nods, lending his own senses to the effort, even though the man beside him hardly needs his help. “Shiro says it’s just started. The Old Man will be busy a few hours yet.”

The dark man nods, but doesn’t respond.

The silence stretches for long moments, a dozen minutes go by with nothing.

And then something.

The man’s gaze shifts, catching on a dark shape too large to be driftwood. He makes out the mould of shoulders, of an arm, the stain of red that follows in its wake. Too much red for a heart that isn’t beating.

A single powerful flex of muscles and the man launches himself from the edge, twisting midair in a graceful arc to land against the cliff’s vertical face, only to push off again and launch himself to the surface of the water. He stoops down even as he lands atop the river, dipping to hook his arm around the young man drifting through the water. As soon as the boy is secure in his grasp he leaps to shore, alighting on the thin strip of gravel beach that tumbles across the river’s edge. His companion is by his side instantly, though the man spares him no acknowledgement as he lays the
boy on his back and takes account of his injuries.

Both eyes are empty sockets, blood-black and hollow. His left arm has been torn clean from his shoulder by something sharp and jagged, perhaps one of the cliff hugging trees that cling to the edges of the riverbanks, judging by the shards of wood buried in the wound.

“Eyes are missing. Not a good sign. Think someone got to the corpse before us?” The White Zetsu comments, taking a step around the man’s side to get a better look. The dark man’s eyes catch on the boy’s left eye, and he shakes his head.

“No. The wounds indicate he removed at least one himself. And he isn’t dead.”

The Zetsu blinks, bewildered. “What do you mean ‘he isn’t dead’? He took a header to the equivalent of cement at two hundred meters.”

“A cliff cedar broke his fall.” the man states, gesturing two fingers to the boy’s missing arm. “And dead men don’t breathe.”

True to word, the boy’s chest is rising and falling in short starts and stops, almost imperceivable, which means he must have been conscious until only recently, at least enough to keep the water from his lungs. He’s showing no signs of succumbing to shock from his wounds, which displays an impressive will to live for a boy that jumped off a cliff.

“Best put him out of his misery now then.” The Zetsu says reluctantly.

The dark man doesn’t move.

After a long moment of stillness, the Zetsu narrows his eyes in confusion. “Little Brother?”

The man is suddenly in motion, pulling a kunai out of thin air to cut the black fabric of the boy’s shirt away from his mess of a shoulder. “Get me my creeper seedlings.” He demands, bundling the fabric of the shirt up and tossing it in the river. “Now.”

The spiral Zetsu responds to the order without hesitation or thought, unfurling his hand and pulling a sealing scroll from the hollow cavity of his arm. He unrolls it as he refurls his hand into a solid appendage again, forming a concentration sign over the seal within. A puff of smoke and a small seed appears in the center of the seal, a teardrop shaped seedling sporting half a dozen sprouts of thin vermillion vines.

The dark man pulls the wooden splinters from the boy’s wound with a soft tug of jutsu, the shards following his will easily as they work their way out of tissue to get to him.

The Zetsu scoops up the tangled cluster of vines and holds his palm out to his leader obediently. He takes the mass by the seed with two fingers, and even that amount of contact makes the vines start to writhe with life, seeking to grow and twine their way around him even at this slight touch.

“Shhhh.” The man whispers, calming the seedling with a comforting pulse of chakra. The vines still, but continue to grow and curl around his fingers. He presses the seedling into the bloody mess of the boy’s shoulder and channels his chakra into a more focused pattern as he directs the seed to grow. Mokuton, for him, has never required a hand seal.

The sprout gets to work, ready and eager to obey, vines seeking out major nerves and arteries, stitching some closed and healing over others, quickly moving to spread like a thick layer of skin over the boy’s wound, covering damage it can’t heal to prevent infection.
“Are you sure this is wise, brother mine?” The white Zetsu asks, eyeing the boy with trepidation as his eyes flutter. “A blinded Uchiha is still an Uchiha. If Yami finds out…”

“He will not. Enough have died tonight. If he was strong enough to make it through all this alive, he deserves to stay that way.”

The Zetsu nods in deference. “If you say so.”

The dark man casts as suspicious glance at his lieutenant. “If you find fault with my decision, Guruguru, say so.”

“It is not your decision I find fault with, only its implications towards your safety.”

The man scoffs. “I can take care of myself.”

“That was never in doubt.” The Zetsu defends, but sensing his commander’s irritation at being challenged on this matter, he bows to dismiss himself. “I’ll go make sure Shiro isn’t getting in over his head.”

“You do that.”

In an instant the Zetsu is gone, leaving the man alone with the prone form of the young Uchiha. The dark man sighs to himself, his mind whirring through possibility and probability, necessary precautions for an unnecessary choice, a choice he’ll make regardless.

The boy’s breath is coming in hitching, sobbing gasps now, and the man knows that unconsciousness for him is a relief— the pain of losing an entire limb is like no other pain. To lose a whole part of yourself that will never be yours again.

He leans forward and scoops the boy up with one arm, careful of his missing limb, tucking the boy’s head into his shoulder to secure him against his side. Thunder rumbles distantly overhead, an omen of rain to come.

Fitting, for all the blood that needs washing away.

The man walks up the bank, keeping his strides smooth and steady as not to jostle the injured boy in his arms, and begins to body flicker, leaping into the trees Fire Country is so famous for, movements just as rhythmic and steady to avoid aggravating the still vulnerable injury. Just because the boy hasn’t gone into shock yet doesn’t mean he won’t, and shock can be just as deadly as any fatal wound. Most adult ninja are strong enough of mind that such dangers are negated, but this boy, whatever rank he may be, can’t be older than fifteen.

He wakes just as soft rain begins to filter through the canopy, blinking sightless eyes and gripping the fabric over the stranger’s arm with surprising force as he comes to. The dark man senses the boy’s brief moment of panic, a spare half second of full bodied tenseness in preparation for fight or flight. But then shinobi conditioning kicks in, response over reaction, and the boy calms noticeably, taking in his surroundings through what senses he has, noticing the distinct lack of ill intent resonating from the stranger. The man’s hold is supportive, not restrictive— the boy could break free if he so chose.

“Where am I?” The boy mutters, his voice hoarse around the pain. “Why can’t I see?”

“You are in the wilderness of fire country.” The man responds evenly. “You cannot see because you do not have eyes.”
The boy shifts around, and the stranger has to adjust his hold as not to drop him. The teenager isn’t exactly small, even if he doesn’t seem to have finished going through adolescence just yet. He’s lanky and unwieldy, even one limb short.

The boy’s breath starts to come faster as he seems to realize that his eyes aren’t the only thing he’s missing, and the dark man almost loses his grip on him when he lunges with his one working hand to grip the empty curve of his shoulder.

“Easy…” The man growls. “Or I will drop you. And it’s a long way down.”

“It’s gone… what… what happened to me?”

“What do you remember?”

The boy pauses, taking deep shaking breaths against the pain and gripping the stranger’s shirt hard to steady himself. At least a Tokujo then, the dark man thinks, if not a higher rank than that. It takes a great deal of fortitude to manage pain so severe.

“Falling.” He decides. “I remember falling. Then pain, and then water…”

“Anything before that?”

The boy shakes his head, gripping harder. “Just grey. There might have been a voice, just before I fell… but nothing else.”

The stranger nods to himself. He had expected as much; the sharingan are deeply linked to the memory centers of the brain. The kid is lucky the only thing he seems to have lost is his past.

For a long while neither of them speaks, the only sounds the patter of the rain on the leaves in the canopy and the rush of air as the dark man leaps from tree to tree. Then the boy speaks abruptly.

“You saved me.” It’s not a question.

“I found you.” The man corrects.

“Liar.” The boy shoots back.

The man snorts. “Look, twerp. The only reason you’re here is because you possess, or rather possessed, a kekkei genkai that could cause trouble for me in the wrong hands.”

“I heard you talking with that man on the riverbank. He wanted you to kill me. You didn’t.”

The dark man grits his teeth. “Don’t read too much into it.”

It’s the boy’s turn to snort. There’s another pause before the boy asks; “Where are we going?”

“Lightning country.”

“Why?”

“You need medical attention I can’t give you, and I have things to do that don’t involve babysitting”

“You’re going to pass me off to someone else?”

“Yes.” The man says immediately, unrepentant. “You’re a target on my back as you are. Besides,
the Creeper Patch on your shoulder is a temporary fix, you’ll need a long period of healing, which you won’t find under my watch.”

The boy doesn’t talk for a long while after that.

Instead he waits, and assesses what he can.

The arm that holds him fast to the man’s side is an uncommonly strong one. He’s not sure how he knows that when he can’t so much as remember his own name, but he trusts his senses where he can’t trust his memory, and they tell him without a doubt this man is stronger than most. He holds him in place as if it’s easy, as if he weighs nothing at all.

The skin of he man’s arm is also odd in texture, too hard to be true flesh, with strange shallow striations that curve up from his elbow towards his shoulder. It reminds him, oddly enough, of scar tissue.

*A burn maybe?*

But that doesn’t feel quite right; the lines are too perfect and the texture too consistent— the man’s voice interrupts his thoughts.

“We are crossing out of Fire Territory. Quick word of advice, keep your mouth closed. Unless of course you’d like to bite your tongue in half.”

Before he can conjure a response to the man’s odd statement there’s a whirling sound and the entire world shifts around him, gravity pulling apart and twisting away beneath him, leaving his stomach in knots as his equilibrium tumbles off kilter and leaves him breathless. The entire process only lasts a few seconds, and when it’s over the air feels different on his skin, dry and warm but for the steady wind that raises goosebumps across the damp skin of his arms.

*That was Jikukan Jutsu*. He thinks, more than a little dazed, and not necessarily from the jump through space-time.

The man hadn’t even made so much as a handsign.

*The blood loss must be getting to my head*. He decides. *There’s no way…*

But the blood loss has apparently gone to more than his head, since his body seems unable and unwilling to expend the energy needed to truly right his equilibrium again, and he finds his senses growing dim. The last thing he’s aware of is the arm around him tucking tighter, and the the chest against his dipping with a put-upon sigh.

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Shizune's mood is understandably dour as she steps outside her room at the inn and slides the shoji door closed behind her, leaving master Tsunade snoring on her fuuton, a now empty shochu flask still gripped stubbornly between her fingers.

200,000 Ryo.


They’ve been here *a day*. 
Tonton looks up at her from her place cradled in Shizune’s arms and oinks forlornly.

Shizune sighs. “I know. You’d think I’d stop being surprised at this point.” She puts her nin pig down in the hallways softly, careful of the sound of her hooves on the hard floor in relation to late hour. Once righted Tonton’s hooves make no noise at all, even when she stomps a little and turns her head down the hallway pointedly.

“Of course.” Shizune says easily. “Go find yourself some of those truffles these woods are so famous for. I need some air anyway.”

Tonton scampers off and Shizune takes a moment to compose herself, taking a deep breath and running a hand through her short dark hair. She makes her way down the hall opposite the way Tonton ran off, running her hands through the hidden pockets in her sleeves. By the time she makes it out to the small garden adjacent to their room she’s found what she’s looking for, an innocuous looking silver case that could easily be mistaken for a pill box. She opens it as she leans against the wall, pulling out a cigarette and lighting it with a quick hand sign to light the air above her thumb ablaze.

She takes a deep drag and lets the nicotine settle her frazzled nerves and douse the frustration that’s been building in her all evening.

A handful of minutes later, a rustle not far from her almost makes her jump out of her skin. Her eyes lock unerringly on the pool of shadow beneath the cherry tree in front of her, and her hands go immediately to the wired shuriken in her sleeve, the half smoked cigarette dropping to smolder at her feet.

“What do you want?” She demands. Knowing the pulse of chakra when she feels it, though it’s not of a texture or consistency she’s ever felt before. It’s dark a fluid like a river at midnight, but there’s a sort of static she can’t fully interpret, like the taste of ozone on the air before a thunderstorm, like a natural disaster on a leash.

The man that materializes out of the dark is tall and lean, his face covered by the coil of a dark traveling scarf and the drape of a cowl over his head. He’s holding a bundle against his side with his right arm, and the one eye she can see is a dark and burnished ebony.

“Your assistance, madam Shizune.”
So apologies for the lack of update last week, I cite RL and airport drama. Extra long chapter to make up for it though, so thereshat. I'll make sure to warn you guys next time if it looks like I'm not going to make my update. I know you guys have been looking forward to this chapter in particular, so enjoy the boy drama. I regret nothing.

PS. Also, somebody asked me about the whole chakra-messages-left-in-Kurama's-seal-like-it's-an-answermachine, and since this isn't the first time I've been asked about it, I figure I'll give everybody an answer.

Naruto's alterations of the structure of the seal would have caused all the chakra in it's structure to mesh together, so any messages or chakra impressions would have been dissolved across the sealspace. This is all I will say on the matter, rant concluded. Still regret nothing.

Naruto watches the backs of his arms with interest as the bold rune-lined ink painted across his skin sinks away, invisible now that he’s no longer actively channeling chakra into the seal space. Kurama claims that rest alone should be enough for him to regenerate the remainder of his chakra now that he’s out of the danger zone, so Naruto leaves him to it. He has a bit of a puzzle to sort out anyway.

“What the heck am I supposed to do with all this?” He asks, running his eyes over the stacks of books and shelves of strange artifacts looping around the room. A fresh little wave of relief washes through him when he gets an immediate answer, Kurama’s voice and presence slotting back into his consciousness like a missing puzzle piece.

~You said you activated a blood seal to get in here, right?~

“Mhm.”

~That seal was likely the only thing protecting this place from raiders. Now that you’ve opened the box, so to speak, it’s likely that protection is gone for good.~

Naruto looks around at the plethora of treasures and knowledge strewn about in this section of the repository alone. The thought of any of it being torn apart or carted off by bandits is physically painful.

“What do I take?”

~This is your legacy kit. Uzushio let you in here for a reason. Best not leave anything behind.~

“How the hell am I supposed to get all this back to Konoha?”

~You puzzled your way around an elite level seal in little more than a day. I’m sure you’ll figure it out.~
He ducks out into the main portion of the chamber again and repeats his circuit of the room, scanning the clan names and digging for some kind of internal clue, something that will lead him in the right direction.

He’s not disappointed. His eyes catch on a clan symbol on the opposite side of the room from clan Sumiran, a partially unfurled scroll with three spirals tucked together on its surface. The longer Naruto looks at the spirals the more they appear to be moving, curling deeper and deeper into stone in some kind of hypnotic optical illusion. Clan Kikan.

Inside he finds a few shelves of books on several different kinds of theory, most having something to do with dimensional spaces or the dynamics of barrier jutsu, but almost the entire space is dominated by dozens of enormous scrolls, some that come clear up to his shoulders, much like the Kinjutsu scroll Naruto had found Kurama’s seal in. The similarities, however, end there.

These scrolls are ornate things, rolls of dark steel grey and shimmering silver and burnished gold. They’re organized by their size and their colours differ depending on how large they are. The smallest scrolls are a dark earthen brown like tanned hide and about as long as his forearm, the size up from that is steely grey and the length of his whole arm from wrist to shoulder, the second largest of them are bright silver trimmed in blue and come up past his hip, and the largest are brilliant darkened gold like a low hanging sun, trimmed in inky black along the edges, and are tall enough that the ends tap his collarbones standing up. There are exactly thirteen of these huge golden scrolls, and Naruto doubts that’s a coincidence.

~Clever.~ Kurama rumbles. ~That’s a contingency plan if I’ve ever seen one. Must have taken decades to draw up cargo scrolls that strong.~

Naruto picks up one of the smallest scrolls and rolls open the canvas-thick length of paper, eyes tracing the twisting lines of seal script inside.

“Whoa.” He murmurs aloud. The seal lines are so precise and intricate it makes his head spin– he can’t imagine how many hours it must have taken just to ink in the structures, let alone channel the needed lattices of chakra at the same time. Naruto doesn’t have the patience, much less the chakra control, to pull off even a portion of it.

“These look like they were made to seal specific stuff.” Naruto judges, based on the lock and key mechanisms he can see woven into the design. “Paper?”


Now that Naruto thinks of it the leathery scroll does look a bit like it was hewn from the bindings of books, like a hundred tome covers stripped off and stitched end to end.

“So like some kind of library scroll?”

~That’s certainly one way to put it.~

He places the scroll back on a stack of its fellows and reaches for one of the dark grey variety, longer and thinner than its smaller cousins. He unrolls the layered vellum and scans the contents.

The library scroll’s storage seals had been elaborately linked and tiny. These are larger with sharper lines and deeper curves, and the structures vary in clusters, separated by blank space. One of these clusters brings the distinct image of a sword to mind, while another reminds him faintly of shuriken.

“Weapons?”
~Likely. Arranged by type. If the pattern continues, the big silver ones will be for artifacts.~

Naruto refurls the grey scroll and reaches for one of the metallic silver ones lined in cobalt, rolling it out on the floor in front of him. This one flexes like a thin sheet of metal and the seals within are carved instead of inked, the lines filled with some kind of black lacquer. Kurama is right it seems; the seals inside are large, singular and intricate, cordoned off from one another by dividing wards meant to keep any chakra in the seals from mingling together.

He rolls the silver scroll back up and looks over at the large gilded ones.

*If the little ones are for books, and the grey ones for equipment, and the silver for clan artifacts, then what…*

He doesn’t finish the thought. He strides towards where the golden scrolls are leaning against the far wall on delicately carved wooden stands, glinting in the firelight. For the first time he notices the clan signs painted on the end of each one, and the fact that some of the golden scrolls are thicker than others— the one with the Kikan clan symbol is only about as wide as his spread hand, while the one bearing the Sumiran symbol is nearly twice as thick.

~What did you tell your sensei when you left?~ Kurama asks as he rolls out the golden Kikan scroll and starts going through the tomes nearby for instructions on how to work them. Naruto freezes, guilty.

“I uh… didn’t.”

~What?~

“I left him a note! What was I supposed to say? ‘Hey Iruka-sensei, I won’t see you for a while, I’m going to whirlpool country to *alter my jinchuuriki seal.*’ He would never have let me go!”

~I wouldn’t have blamed him, kid. It was reckless.~

“I don’t care.” Naruto insists stubbornly, a book on dimensional stacking theory open in his lap.

~I know, kit. All the more proud of you for it, really.~

Naruto ignores the surprised flush that warms his cheeks and tries to focus on the words and diagrams on the pages that detail mass capacities and chakra nets.

~So what did the note say?~

“I said I was going to be gone a week for training. I've done it before, so Iruka-sensei shouldn’t find it too strange. And he’s the only one that bothers checking up on me.”

~We don’t have much time left then. You figured it out yet?~

Naruto nods. “I think so. The library and equipment scrolls just have a weight limit, and the artifacts scrolls are keyed into specific objects so I just have to match them up. Also…” Naruto scans the scrolls, counting as he goes. “I’m pretty sure there’s exactly enough scrolls to fit everything, if I load it all right.”

~Best get to work then, brat. We need to get back before you’re missed.~

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Thirteen golden scrolls, thirteen repositories. He starts with the Uzumaki, the largest and thus the most difficult. It’s like the world’s most annoying puzzle game; the gold scrolls have specific storage seals for a set number of brown, grey, and silver scrolls, and Naruto has to figure out what fits where and with what and how much and it sucks. Naruto isn’t the most organized of people on a good day, and after all the time he’s spent sitting still his hyperactive energy is coming back in full force to the worst effect.

He finds out about halfway through sorting stacks of books to go into the leather scrolls for a third time because they fit in the first two but not in the freaking third, that his attention span obviously will not cooperate if there’s not some kind of crisis.

So hell, he invents some. He starts giving himself imaginary time limits for certain sections, which mostly works because he does need to hurry. It helps, a lot, and instead of it taking a whole day to do one repository, like he thought, it only takes him a couple hours.

~You function best under pressure, kit.~ Kurama comments offhand. He’s been sleeping on and off the whole time, really only surfacing from slumber to quip at Naruto as he darts back and forth around the room with stacks of books that go past his head and armfuls of weapon packs topped with rolls of strange serrated ninja wire. ~Not all that surprised.~

He does the Kikan clan next because it’s the easiest and he needs a break, before moving on to reassess the Sumiran clan’s section. By now he’s got it down to an art; he drags all the containers of powdered ink together and sets the catalysts down in neat rows beside them, occasionally checking back on the golden and silver scrolls for a reminder of what goes where. According to the seal sections on the golden scroll he can tell he needs six library scrolls, one equipment scroll and two artifact scrolls, all of which he unfurls close to the entrance to the room so he won’t trip over them until he needs them.

He’s so tempted at times to sit down and flip through some of the descriptions of the ink ingredients or the elemental effects of mixing in catalysts, but he doesn’t have the time– he has maybe a day and a half before Iruka-sensei starts to get worried, if he hasn’t already, and if Jiji discovers he’s been gone at all he’s in for a whole lot of trouble.

As he begins to clear the room, filling seal after seal with inkstones and jarred liquids and powders, he notices a strange chest in the back of the room. It’s relatively unassuming at first glance, a dusty black lacquer box that comes up to his knee. He kneels in front of it, giving the lid and experimental tug. It doesn’t budge. He smears a hand through the grey coating of dust in the top and starts when the entire box vibrates under his hand.

Gilded seals twist in clockwork patterns across the surface of the chest like the mechanism of some enormous two-dimensional lock. They spiral and rotate until one by one they click into place with audible snaps and the lid jerks upwards.

Wary now, Naruto lifts the lid slowly, crinkling his nose against the strong smell of pinewood and musty leather.

The entire inside of the box screams Kinjutsu.

Containment seals are carved on every flat space available, wards against whatever rests wrapped in leather at the bottom. Never one to be cowed, even when he probably should be, Naruto reaches inside to pull the bundle from its resting place. The leather is warm and supple, odd considering how old it must be, and lighter than he expected. He sets it atop the closed chest and slowly unravels the length of hide. The wrapping itself is also sealed, chakra containment wards of some kind painted on the inside.
Within is a macabre array of wickedly sharp needles, far too long and thick to be senbon. There are five sets in varying sizes, each one carved with odd seals Naruto doesn’t recognize and each set hewn from a different substance. One set seems to be made of bamboo, another looks like it was carved from bone or ivory, and another looks to be made entirely from volcanic glass.

“Hey, Kurama.”

~Hmm?~ Kurama mumbles sleepily, not opening his eyes.

“What are these supposed to be?”

Kurama does crack an eyelid at that, and Naruto can feel him peering at the world from behind his retina. ~Well what do we have here?~ he drawls softly, and Naruto ducks his head back a little so that Kurama can see the whole of the array through his eyes. ~If I’m not mistaken, those are tattoo needles.~

“Tattoos? For what?”

~For placing permanent seals on living skin. Seals that could not be undone through the work of chakra alone. Dangerous work, that.~

“So it is Kinjutsu.”

~Yes. Powerful stuff. Best keep it locked up until we know more, okay kit?~

Naruto nods and folds the needles carefully back into the leather before tucking the bundle into the chest and closing the lid. As soon as the lid shuts the gear-like seals lock the lid to the body of the chest with another cacophony of clicks and snaps. Naruto hauls it up and sets it down beside an artifact seal, only to find that there’s no more space in the scroll, and even if there was, none of the seals seemed to be keyed to this particular box. He checks the other silver scroll, just to be sure, and is starting to contemplate checking the equipment scroll as well when an image flashes to mind, another piece of Uzushio’s memory.

It’s a pair of scrolls, smaller than even the library scrolls. They’re jet black and metallic and strapped shut with sealed leather and metal clasps, one trimmed in silver, the other in gold.

Instinct guides him back into the Kikan clan repository, now bare of its treasures, where he pulls the carved wooden stand that had held the golden scrolls back from the wall. Naruto feels along the wall with both hands, searching for the warm pulse of chakra that would give away the cloaking seal…

He finds it at the base of the wall near the floor; a small compartment that becomes visible as he breaks the subtle cloaking seal with a sharp burst of chakra. A little too much chakra apparently, if the way the wall heats up and cracks is any indication. He pries the compartment open, hissing when it burns a little at his fingers, and pulls the two scrolls from their clever hiding place.

They’re extremely heavy for their size. Like lead ingots. He flicks open the clasps on the one lined with gold, unfurling it slowly. Like the golden and artifact scrolls, the substance that makes up this one is less like paper and more like sheet metal, the seals within carved across the surface and then filled in with gilded lacquer. This one in particular contains thirteen seals crafted with broad, powerful strokes, keyed into each of the thirteen golden scrolls.

I was wondering how the hell I was going to drag those things out of here. He muses, re-rolling the scroll and clapping it shut again. The seals within the platinum lined scroll are the complete opposite of the broad lines in its gilded twin, thin silvery lines that spiral in fractal patterns meant
to control and direct stray chakra. For sealing Kinjutsu.

Tools in hand, he returns to his task.

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Uzushio’s clans obviously prided themselves on their ninja niches. The jutsu and usage of seals he finds from clan to clan are varied and specific— one used seals only for mediation and sensory training, another worked only in in seals that generated or disrupted genjutsu.

The Tsubasa clan was known primarily for their work with ninja animals, a little like the Inuzuka clan back in Konoha, and they developed seals meant to bond living beings to one another and even some kind of jutsu meant for swapping eyesight. The most interesting portion of their repository is an enormous sealed glass case containing four massive blood contract scrolls as large as a full-grown man. Each one is bejeweled and decorated in vibrant colours and strange symbols; one is dark twilight blue covered in elegant golden patterns, another is amethyst with stylized designs of fire in bright vermillion, one is white and striped with azure like a tiger’s back, and the last is the colour of a bloody sunset covered in geometric shapes cast in eye searing turquoise. Below this case is another one, longer, and filled with nearly a dozen more summoning scrolls, equally decorated and as big as Naruto’s torso.

The Komorebi clan was a sort of sister clan to the Sumiran, and their treasures came in the form of powerful medicines and poisons, herbal cocktails that could keep you from death even if you were at the brink, and soft clear toxins that could keep you paralyzed indefinitely without the cure. They had maps and diagrams that detailed every nerve, bone, and muscle fiber in the human body, and detailed Fuinjutsu meant to hone chakra flares down to a knife-like point.

The Kurogane clan were skilled blacksmiths, capable of pounding sealwork into steel and silver, folding chakra into everything from swords and kunai to rings and bracers. Old and musty diagrams detailed the art of producing forge fires hot enough to sear together metal and chakra, and their Kinjutsu came in the form of a set of strange tools that Naruto can’t touch at all lest they burn his skin to the bone.

The Ido-Senshi were the most interesting, in Naruto’s opinion. They focused almost entirely on the art of Taijutsu, and their katas fell into five categories detailing a set of distinctive styles— Tiger, Dragon, Crane, Leopard, and Snake. Their training implements consisted of things like bands that restricted blood flow to the limbs and fabric so heavy that a single hand’s worth weighed as much as a slab of stone.

The Kinkoro clan ends up being the… hardest for Naruto to deal with, personally. This particular clan was home to ninja who made their living through trade— guarding shipments or moving goods important to the welfare of the village or securing trade agreements with other villages. Some of the clan weren’t classically trained ninja at all, they preferred the business of commerce and chose that trade over the militaristic life of a ninja. The clan was known for their wards and trap seals, but mostly, they were known for being the treasurers of Uzushio’s wealth.

A great deal of it isn’t even ryo, so much of it is art and jewelwork and great scroll paintings depicting foreign landscapes in rich colour. Standing amidst the gold and wealth, Naruto feels like a thief.

~It’s your inheritance, kit.~ Kurama assures from out of nowhere. ~If Uzushio didn’t agree, she would never have let you down here.~

Naruto doesn’t answer, at least not aloud. But when he swallows hard and takes a step forward into
the vault, it’s answer enough.
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He folds the last of the Ryokosha treasures into their respective seals, feeling both humbled and deeply tired all at once. He rolls up both the black scrolls and seals them shut with final sounding snaps. He’s finished.

They feel even heavier now as he straps them to his hip, and he can’t help thinking about how so much can be folded up and sealed down into something so small.

Instinct and memory pull at him and he lets himself be lead back down the long corridor and into the circular room where he first entered. He notices for the first time the intricate sun and moon symbol carved into the floor and the slanting grooves in the walls that spiral upwards in a corkscrew. He pricks his thumb with his canine until blood pools in his palm, kneels down, and presses his hand over the seal, bringing his chakra to bear.

A long high tone echoes over the walls like a wrung bell, and the circular panel of the floor lurches upwards, spinning upwards on the carved tracks. Below him, he can see the chakric fires of the repository dying out. Light of a more natural kind starts filtering in from overhead, and Naruto starts to feel tiny droplets of rain filter down to mist his face with water. The platform locks into place in the center of the plaza and Naruto steps off into a thick soupy fog that casts everything in grey except for the stubborn greens of the forest. Rain drizzles lazily overhead, and all around plant life blooms at its touch. Thick vines prickled with pale orange blossoms wind over the once desolate buildings, new pines and elm trees peek up from between heavy stones, the grass as far as he can see is coloured with wildflowers.

He takes a deep breath, lets the cool air chill his lungs. He walks down the hills, across the black sand beach, and steps out onto the water of the bay. When he turns back to tell the island goodbye, he’s being watched. A dark shadow appears through the white ribbons of fog and the wolf emerges from the gloom at the tops of the basalt columns, looking down at him with keen, unblinking eyes.

Naruto faces the dark beast, tucks his left fist into his right hand, and bows low. When he straightens, the wolf tucks a foreleg, ducks its head, and bows back.

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By the time he reaches the outskirts of the village, it’s past midnight. He’d slept the afternoon away in a redwood once he’d gotten far enough back into fire country, and hadn’t woken until late evening. Kurama is still asleep.

He’s crossed back into the village proper when it hits him like a blow to the chest. He feels suddenly like a part of him is being ripped apart, like some wound cord anchored deep within him has been wrenched free. It’s not until a pained and feral roar thunders through his head that he realized the *pain isn’t his.*

Sorrow and anguish flood him from Kurama’s seal, followed quickly by a frustrated guilt that is entirely his own. They mix and fold together, nothing to separate them, and Naruto is knocked breathless by the sheer *power* of the emotion. Tears burn his eyes and he lists sideways, clutching at the bark of the tree beside him so had that splinters drive through his palms as the wood cracks under his hand.
Another tailed beast has disappeared. Another of Kurama’s siblings is gone.

“Who was it? Who did we...” Naruto can’t finish the thought because he’s not quite sure how to end it. Lose? Fail? Both would work.

~Kokuo~

The word is no more than a pained moan– Kurama isn’t even fully awake.

Naruto stumbles into the street. He has no idea where he is and doesn’t have the presence of mind to care, practically tripping over himself until he finds himself standing at the edge of the street in the sallow lamplight, staring off in the direction the pain had come from.

He doesn’t move for a long while.

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Sasuke wrenches himself from the grip of his nightmare so violently he nearly falls out of bed. Cold sweat pools, clammy and unwelcome, between his shoulder blades as his lungs heave for air they don’t need in preparation to run from terror that isn’t real. Itachi’s sharingan eyes spin across his vision, dark and mocking where they had once been bright and kind, and it is that transition that haunts Sasuke more thoroughly than any ghost.

Why?

His stomach rolls and he swallows hard against the urge to vomit, cold prickling against his arms and down his back like the tips of frozen knives, cold that has nothing to do with temperature.

He braces himself up off the tangled sheets with one arm, pressing a hand over his mouth.

Get ahold of yourself, this is pathetic.

He takes another hard breath but his heart refuses to be calmed and his stomach roils with another bout of nausea. Sleep is far away now. His clock reads 1:40 am.

A walk to calm his nerves then.

It’s become so common that his walks through the village in the shittiest hours of the morning might as well be a routine. The route is always different but the purpose is always the same– a reprieve from his ghosts.

“Being haunted has nothing to do with the presence of the dead, and everything to do with the memory of the living.”

The strange shinobi’s words have been chasing across his mind for days now. What mistake could have been so terrible as to cause such pain? Whose loss could be so devastating it left such scars? Sasuke had lost his entire family, a brother he’d loved dearly, but somehow that man knew even greater loss. Somehow the loss of a single life had left a deeper crater than the loss of a clan.

He passes the Yamanaka flower shop, swiping a hand carelessly through the damp misting of humid dew across the broad windows. The monsoon had left the air stifling with humidity, even at night.

He turns the corner and stops dead in his tracks.
Naruto is standing on a street corner less than half a block away. Sasuke hasn’t seen the blonde boy in nearly a week and the thought of him hadn’t even crossed his mind until yesterday, when Kiba had run by the training grounds looking for him. According to the dog-nin, no one had seen hide or hair of the Uzumaki since before the storm set in.

He looks… different. It’s subtle, but the blonde boy seems stronger somehow; the perpetual hunch in his neck from tucking his head down is gone, and he holds his head higher and rests his shoulders further back.

The closer Sasuke looks the further his eyes widen.

Sasuke has seen Naruto cry only once before, long ago when they were both very young. He’d been sitting on the swings not far from the academy, practically bawling, and no one has so much as stopped to look at him.

This is very different.

He’s standing painfully still, eyes fixed on some vague point in the sky just above the treeline. He’s not sobbing, in fact Sasuke isn’t entirely sure he’s even breathing. The sorrow’s only tell is the stream of tears leaking steadily from the corners of his eyes, tracing simple paths along his cheeks to collect in droplets along his jaw. Naruto makes no move to wipe them from his face, no effort to disguise his pain. It’s a different kind of sadness from that of loneliness, from that of abandonment. Sasuke knows this brand of sorrow well enough to recognize it on sight.

Grief.

Sasuke doesn’t understand it. He stands, transfixed, eyes darting along what he can see of Naruto’s expression, as if that might give him some clue to solving this enigma. But it gives him no answers, only more questions—Naruto’s face is disturbingly steady, and the grief is written in the corners of his eyes, but nowhere else.

The sound of a shutter snapping shut, a light turning off at just the wrong time, and the moment is shattered. Naruto turns, catches sight of Sasuke standing in the shadow of the flower shop, and his eyes widen to saucers.

Another half a second, another moment of a deer caught in a spotlight, and Naruto’s expression grinds and shifts, turns from sorrow to frustration to fury in the space between Sasuke’s heartbeats.

And just like that, he takes off like a shot.

Sasuke’s brain must not be functioning, fried somewhere between the grief and the anger on Naruto’s face, because his body moves without his permission.

He gives chase.

He tears through the trees on the blonde’s heels, eyes tracking golden hair in the dark. Naruto is fast, nearly faster than Sasuke, and it’s starting to look like his instincts were right—Naruto has been holding back in class. Anger chases surprise through his system, because that means every spar, every fight, every win that Sasuke lorded over him was hollow.

Naruto is difficult to track in the darkness and someone with eyes any less sharp would have lost him between the trees within seconds. But even without an active sharingan, Sasuke's eyes are still keener than any Jounin’s.

He almost loses him anyway however, when Naruto leaps into the trees like a goddamn jungle cat,
and Sasuke almost takes a header into a briar in an attempt to follow him. But he senses chakra at work, has seen Chunin walk up trees like it’s nothing, so he channels chakra into his feet and leaps after him.

The first few steps turn the wood and bark beneath his feet to pulp, but Sasuke has always been a fast learner, especially under pressure, so he dials back the charge and keeps going.

Naruto is darting about in zigzag patterns, flashing back and forth through the woods like a flitting bird, gaining ground on Sasuke fast.

*Shunshin.* He realizes. *Body flicker technique.*

That’s definitely not something they were taught at the academy, but Sasuke calls what he knows of it from his personal studies and forms the correct hand sign. He almost crashes into an elm the first time when he overshoots how much chakra he needs, but it puts him that much closer to Naruto’s speeding form.

The blond darts left so sharply at one point that Sasuke shoots past him and is forced to backtrack, chasing him through a grove of trees so thick that the branches rip entire chunks off of Sasuke’s overshirt. He pulls it off with a frustrated growl and keeps moving, wincing as the branches rake across his now bare arms.

Naruto seems to know this area far better than Sasuke, which is becomes obvious when he cuts sideways off a blind turn to land unerringly on one of the rocks jutting out from the river rapids, leaping from stone to stone up the creek with grace Sasuke knows Naruto hadn’t possessed a week before. He follows blindly, unwilling to let the Uzumaki out of his sight for even a second, tracing Naruto’s path over the river stones.

The woods widen out suddenly and only the adrenaline in his system and his hard honed instincts keep him from running headlong into what’s waiting on the other side of the curtain of trees. Out of the dark comes Naruto’s voice, a harsh growl that rumbles deeper than should be possible for their age.

*“Doton: Crashback.”*

Before he can even contemplate how the hell *Naruto* knows a C-rank *earth jutsu* of all things, a crash of rock slashes in front of him, missing his right shoulder by a centimeter. He barely has time to leap over the first point of rock before the second comes surging up behind him and the two just of stone smash together with force enough to shatter bone.

He lands in a clear split down the middle by the river’s origin, winding from a waterfall basin pressed up against the far cliff. Naruto stands on the opposite side of the river, breaths panting out around teeth a tad too sharp to be normal. The red scrapes on Naruto’s face and arms are already fading, some kind of unseen chakra bleeding steam into the air as the cuts close and vanish. The sharp sting on Sasuke’s own arms only serves to sharpen his focus.

They stand in a deadlock, blue eyes fixed on black. Fury rages unchecked behind cerulean irises and Sasuke shifts his stance.

The spell breaks.

They lunge at each other, all power and no grace. Neither of them have any physical weapons, but their bodies crash and glance off each other like they themselves are the blades, each parry and clash shooting magnetic sparks into the air between them, drawing them back together harder,
faster. Jutsu neither of them are supposed to know as academy students fly through their fingers, and even though Sasuke’s jutsu classes are more powerful, he’s still only capable of spitting fire.

Naruto is something else entirely.

His jutsu are all C or D-rank, but he fires off one element after another with hardly a pause between them, and the landscape around them starts to change rapidly as a result. They go at each other full throttle, no hesitation, no holds barred.

And something in Sasuke starts to thrill.

Naruto like this is more than a challenge, he’s a goddamn equal, some bizarre perfect match, and he’s affronted and enthralled by the idea in equal measure. Sasuke lands more strikes, but Naruto's ability to roll with the punches exceeds Sasuke’s ability to do so, so every hit Naruto lands is worth two of his own. Naruto’s brazen attitude and unrestricted passion is still in every move he makes, but’s it’s honed down to a blade-like edge instead of the forced bluntness Sasuke is used to, and his usually inept energy has turned from aimless to deadly.

For the first time in his memory, Sasuke is forced to up his game just to match him. He can feel himself running low on chakra, but Naruto doesn’t seem to be having the same issue. Even as Sasuke shifts to rely more on taijutsu, Naruto lets another ninjutsu fly that sets his hair on end.

“Raiton: Sparkshot!”

An array of electric needles launches into the air between them, and Sasuke has to twist through the air and away from the river to avoid being electrocuted. It’s the first time Naruto’s used a Raiton and something in the atmosphere pulls taught, the unseen tension in the air comes to a head.

They clash again, even harder than before, and this time it’s Sasuke struggling to keep up. Naruto flights like an animal in human skin, quick and feral and brutal. Sasuke’s only saving grace is that the more rage and power he puts into his strikes, the less coordinated he becomes.

He lands a blow to Naruto’s solar plexus, hard enough to damage trees, and hears Naruto’s lost breath go past his ear. It barely slows him down though, and an elbow cracks across Sasuke’s temple in turn, making red explode across his eyelids and forcing them apart again.

They stand across from one another, that strange spell holding them still again as their eyes lock across the water. Sasuke feels blood, warm and wet, start to drip down his brow. Naruto stands straighter, spits blood into the grass and wipes his mouth on the back of his wrist.

Something changes.

The hostile charge in the air seems to clear and dissipate, leaving only that strange tension holding the atmosphere tight. It sits on a fulcrum, capable of tipping one way or another.

Then a small, sharp smile cuts the corner of Naruto’s mouth, a little wry, a little feral.

Something jumps into existence under Sasuke’s breastbone from nowhere at all, pushing hard on his throat so that a soft breath forces it’s way out between his teeth.

He feels a tiny smirk curve his lips entirely against his will.

Naruto’s sharp smile cuts wide into a grin that’s all teeth, into something potent enough to be a weapon all it’s own. The blonde shifts his leg forward, quick and abortive, but it makes Sasuke tense automatically. The smile reaches Naruto’s eyes, turns teasing.
A feint. A playful one.

That *something* in Sasuke’s chest swells, pushes his stomach and lungs out of the way to make room for itself dangerously close to the vital pulsing muscle beneath his ribs. On reflex he tries to squash whatever it is out of existence, tries to reach for his indifference and calculated anger in an attempt to exorcise this strange new sensation. He finds both are oddly absent, and in their place is a strange new energy that eaves him feeling both giddy and tense.

He feints back without thinking. Plays the game.

And just like that, it turns from a brawl to something else.

It’s not quite a spar, something closer to a dance, and a far cry from anything Sasuke has ever done. They fight with holds and twists, more showing off than actual fighting. Their blows are meant to be glancing, to bruise instead of break bones, all grace and no power.

They go on like this until they’re both exhausted, of chakra and of stamina, and to Sasuke’s annoyance, he realizes that Naruto’s reserves of both are deeper than his own, and the only reason they’re even is because Sasuke had been far more conservative with his energy than Naruto.

Sasuke’s muscles are burning by the end of it and they're both dripping in sweat. The fight has gone out of every cell, leaving them breathless and boneless with exhaustion when they finally finish how they started- standing feet apart with fire in their eyes.

For the first time, Naruto speaks.

“Crazy asshole.” He breathes, but it’s without heat, without that strange fury that had gripped him so completely not long ago.

“Idiot.” Sasuke fires back, but it different from all the times he’s said it before. It carries with it the end of something, or maybe not an ending.

Maybe a beginning.
When Sasuke had woken from his nightmare, when he’d wandered out onto the streets in search of a deep breath, this is the last place he would have expected to end up.

But here he sits, leaning against the worn bed in Naruto’s tiny apartment, staring pointedly at the far wall as he grudgingly allows Naruto to apply bandages and simple salve to the cuts on his arms. Naruto has been pretty quiet so far, which is strange; he hasn’t asked after Sasuke’s reason for chasing him down, something Sasuke is incredibly grateful for given that he still has no idea what the hell was going through his head, what stray synapse had misfired and sent him careening into motion.

In return, Sasuke hasn’t asked after the cause of the strange grief and potent fury he had been witness to. The result is an odd kind of hush made all the more glaring coming from Naruto, who, in Sasuke’s experience, never shuts up. But for all its strangeness the quiet is an easy one; he finds he has no desire to disrupt it.

Sasuke watches out of the corner of his eyes as Naruto works, trying to keep his mind off the other question he hasn’t asked. Here he is being bandaged for slashes and scrapes, and yet the only evidence of their battle on Naruto’s body is a scattering of already fading bruises, wisped away by unseen energy like so much smoke.

Is it some kind of Kekkei Genkai?

He wonders to himself. It’s none of Sasuke’s business if it is— outside of battle Bloodline Limits are private things, and Sasuke doesn’t know the blonde nearly well enough to ask about it. The only thing he does know, without question, is that Naruto is an orphan.

Sasuke casts his gaze around Naruto’s little apartment as a form of distraction, taking in the details. He notes that it’s surprisingly clean, if rather cluttered, mostly, oddly enough, with scrolls. Small and large, sealing and scribing, they’re tucked into every corner, piled up on the tables and stacked in neat pyramids along the floor.

“Didn’t realize you were this into reading, Dobe.” he remarks, plucking a scroll off a stack near him with his free hand while Naruto finishes tying off the bandage on the other.

“Ya ya, yuck it up.” Naruto grumbles, “I don’t get things well when people just talk at me, so I started looking things up myself. It works better.”

“Clearly.” Sasuke drawls, rolling open the scroll to find instructions for a C-rank wind jutsu, Great Breakthrough. “Are these from the archives?” he asks. Academy students aren’t allowed in the jutsu libraries, and definitely not allowed to check out C-rank scrolls.

Naruto winces faintly. “Technically no. They’re copies though.” He tilts his head and narrows his
eyes like a suspicious animal, and for the first time Sasuke notices just how deep the dark bruises around his eyes are— the Uzumaki looks like he hasn’t slept in days.

*If he was this exhausted when we fought, how strong would he have been fully rested?*

Sasuke finds he doesn’t like his own answer—because it means that without the subtle tip in his favor, it is very possible Sasuke would have lost that strange battle entirely. Unacceptable.

“You gonna tell on me, Teme?” Naruto asks lowly.

Sasuke snorts and hands the scroll to Naruto. “Not if you share.” The information stored in these scrolls is not a resource Sasuke is willing to pass up lightly, not if they can make him stronger.

Apparently Sasuke’s stomach has decided it’s quite done being nauseous, because it reminds him loudly of its presence right then, and of the fact that he hasn’t eaten anything since lunch yesterday. “You got anything to eat in this dump?” he asks without thinking.

“Hey.” Naruto snaps on reflex, but he looks more thoughtful than offended. “I might have some stuff for curry though.” He says as he stands.

Sasuke ticks and eyebrow to his hairline. “You cook?”

Naruto scowls at him. “I do live by myself, you know.”

“And eat food outside of Ichiraku takeout?”

“Oh, shut up. Are you hungry or not?”

“Depends, are you actually going to make something edible?”

Naruto snorts, offended. “If you’re so worried about it, why don’t you make it?”

Which is how he and Naruto end up squabbling for twenty minutes over the curry pot, about whether curry is supposed to be savory-sweet or vinegary-sour. The answer is sour, *obviously*, but both of them are too tired to put any real effort into arguing, so they end up making far too much of something in the middle. It’s not *terrible*, and at this point Sasuke is too tired to care, still bone deep exhausted from their fight earlier, if what they’d done in that clearing could be summed up in a word that simple.

He doubts it.

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The next morning is chaos incarnate, and sets the stage for much of Sasuke interactions with Naruto from that point forward. Before Sasuke is even fully conscious Naruto is a blur of noise and motion out of absolutely nowhere, darting this way and that in a panic while Sasuke rubs a rather horrible kink out of the back of his neck.

“The hell is the matter with you, Dead Last?” He growls, pressing his fingers into the muscle where his neck meets his shoulder to try and smooth out the knots that have formed there. He’d
passed out against the base of Naruto’s bed, by the looks of it.

Naruto freezes with a longsleeve halfway over his head to glare at him. “Class, asshole.”

Sasuke rips his eyes open all the way and tears his gaze around the room in search of a clock. “What time is it?”

Naruto finishes shoving his shirt over his head all the way. His hair is wet, now that Sasuke bothers to look, like he showered but didn’t bother drying off at all. “Eight forty-five.”

A drop of ice cold panic slides down his spine. He’s never been late for school. *Never.*

Sasuke forces himself upright, clipping his shoulder on the doorframe because his legs feel like they’re made of poorly layered rice paper. “I’m using your shower.” He declares venomously. He feels disgusting, with sweat dried in all the wrong places, his hair stuck to the side of his face with it. There’s no way in hell he’s going to class like this.

“The pressure is shit!” Naruto warns as he ducks into the kitchen, a roll of limb wrap between his teeth.

Somewhere in the back of his mind Sasuke knows this should feel much weirder than it does. Outside school he and Naruto were practically strangers, right up until last night, when nearly every assumption he’d ever had about the idiot had been turned on its head.

All but one, really. Sasuke had been right about one thing. They both knew pain beyond their years, he was sure of that now.

\[\text{~That was way too close for comfort.~} \]

“You’re telling me.”

He’d made it to class with maybe twelve seconds to spare, right on Sasuke’s heels, and the sneaky bastard had managed to avoid Iruka-sensei entirely, slipping by while Naruto got the lecture of a lifetime for not telling Iruka about his little ‘trip’ in person. Thankfully, Iruka-sensei seems to be under the impression that he took off *after* the storm hit, not before.

Shikamaru seems to know better though.

While Iruka sensei is busy detailing the stages of a genjutsu up on the board, Shika shuffles a little further forward on his desk behind Naruto’s seat. “Hey, you okay?” He mumbles, his tone as disinterested as always, but underneath the lazy demeanor Naruto can sense genuine concern, and feels guilt wash through him. He hadn’t told Shikamaru or Kiba where he was going, hadn’t even thought to.

He looks back at the Nara out of the corner of his eye. It’s kind of pointless to lie to Shikamaru– so Naruto doesn’t usually bother. “Better now.” He says truthfully.

The shadow nin watches him through lazily hooded eyes for another long moment, but then accepts his response with a barely-there nod and pillows his cheek against his arm again.
As he turns back to the front of the room, Naruto’s eyes land unerringly on the back of Sasuke’s head. He’s currently being fawned over by Ino and another Kunoichi-in-training that Naruto doesn’t know, who have him sandwiched on either side. Usually even Sasuke’s fangirls aren’t quite that annoying, since Sasuke has a tendency to get pissed when someone even thinks of invading his personal space, but the fact that he came to class sans navy overshirt seems to have garnered more attention than usual.

Their fight from last night has been dogging his thoughts, along with the shift in their relationship from mostly strangers too… something else. Naruto wouldn’t call them friends exactly, not yet, but he’s starting to think that there might be more to the Uchiha than his broody exterior lets on.

~He’s a good match for you, physically.~ Kurama grumbles.

“You don’t sound very happy about it.”

~I’m not. Historically, Uchiha are mentally unstable at best.~ The Kyuubi growls between his teeth. ~But you need a sparring partner that can keep up with you, and I must admit you have an interesting… dynamic.~

That’s one way to put it. Naruto thinks. The way they’d clicked together as they fought, brought out the best and worst in each other all at once. Naruto had been so angry, with himself, with the world, but Sasuke had taken that anger in stride and come back at him with a good deal of his own, a cocktail of emotions that in that state of fury, Naruto could practically smell on the air. Hurt, frustration, rage. But of all the things Naruto had sensed that night, none surprised him quite like the loneliness, potent and aching and terribly familiar. He’d never thought about it before then—surrounded by people like he is, you’d think there wouldn’t be room for Sasuke to feel alone. But Naruto knows what it’s like to feel stranded in a crowd, and in the end, Sasuke goes back to an empty house in an empty compound and is very much alone.

Naruto is startled out of his thoughts when he realizes that Sakura is looking at him, her eyes boring a hole in his skull from two seats to Ino’s left.

Unsure what she wants or what he’s done wrong, he tries for a smile that probably ends up looking nervous. To his surprise her expression actually softens, which is freaky, and she turns back to Iruka.

Naruto’s life definitely starts to get more interesting after that. For a couple of weeks Sasuke attempts to maintain the pretense that he only comes to Naruto’s tiny ass apartment for access to his scrolls, but after a while he starts turning up at Naruto’s glade at strange hours of the night when he seems to know Naruto will be there, and they fight.

It’s too intense to be considered sparring, but a lot of the animosity that was present in their first fight is gone now. On nights like these, it’s Naruto’s apartment that they go back to in order to lick their wounds, Naruto’s kitchen they make midnight dinners in, Naruto’s floor they sleep on. Sasuke spends less time in an empty house and more time studying katas with Naruto on the unmade bed and arguing with him over a the stovetop and testing new jutsu with him in the clearing. They still fight, a lot, but it’s different now, more camaraderie and less rivalry. Spars at school become little more than a game, play wrestling compared to what they do outside of class, and with this sparring on top of Kurama’s regular training, Naruto’s never felt more confident.
After a month of training with Naruto, it’s strange that it’s the little things that make him seize up the way he does. Naruto is a tactile person, and with how much time he’s been spending with the idiot lately, shoulder bumps and playful jabs against his side are things Sasuke is used to now. The problem comes with another kind of touch entirely. They’re rarer things, thank god, and usually only happen early in the morning or late at night, but still, they happen. The worst part is that Naruto doesn’t even seem to realize what he’s doing, warm careless touches like a hand on his shoulder or arm early in the morning when they need to get up for school, shoulders and necks stiff from sleeping on the floor with blankets and old cushions.

The worst one happens when Sasuke shoots awake in a cold sweat, but instead of the ceiling of his room he sees the cracked plaster of Naruto’s, because they’d fought and trained last night and he’d slept here like he usually did. He rolls over, trying to pull breath quietly back into his lungs as not to wake the Uzumaki sleeping next to him.

He should have known better really, because despite the fact that Naruto can sleep through a fire drill and not crack an eyelid, Sasuke breathing wrong is apparently enough to wake him up. Naruto mumbles sleepily and rolls over, still mostly out of it, and pushes a hand across Sasuke’s back like it’s the most normal thing in the Elemental Countries.

It’s not like Sasuke’s never felt warmth from touch before, he has, in glancing brushes and the remembrance of his mother’s hands on his shoulders and his brother’s fingers against his forehead.

But this is different.

Somehow the warmth of this sinks deeper, rooting in his bones and warming his marrow. It was just a simple touch, careless in its affection. Stupidly open.

But it shakes something in him, jostles his foundations hard enough to loose debris. Dust and cobwebs of accumulated hate and grief shake free from this life he’s built on revenge, not enough to threaten collapse, but enough to rattle timbers.

And Naruto, the oblivious idiot that he is, just rolls over again and goes right the fuck back to sleep, uncaring of the turmoil he’s just stirred up in Sasuke’s soul, unaware of how Sasuke’s arms are still shaking, but it’s with a very different kind of fear.

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The next event happens on an inconspicuous fucking Sunday.

Sasuke’s day has been shitty from the start— he’d woken up sweaty and disgusting and more exhausted than when he’d gone to sleep in the first place. The air was hellish and humid, the worst Fire Country has to offer.

By the middle of the day he’s cranky and exhausted, he’d been up training with Naruto until almost three in the morning, so he makes the decision without even really thinking about it, turning the corner around Ichiraku ramen with a bag full of curry-making supplies looped around his arm in case he needs an excuse to barge into Naruto’s apartment. He doesn’t bother using the door, doors
are for civilians anyway, and they way things are going Sasuke and Naruto are practically ninja already.

It’s not the first time he’s come through Naruto’s bedroom window uninvited, not by far, but it is the first time Sasuke shows up and Naruto doesn’t immediately shout at him to get the hell off the already cracked sill. Sasuke doesn’t care; he likes the window open anyway.

But there’s no shouting, no noise whatsoever, but Sasuke can feel the steady pulse of Naruto’s chakra inside, so he lets himself in.

Apparently he’s not the only one who thought a nap might be a good idea—Naruto is passed out on the still unmade bed, fully dressed, limbs akimbo. This alone isn’t what startles Sasuke, it’s what’s lying next to the bed that does.

A brand new futon, glaringly white against the warm colors of Naruto’s apartment, is spread out next to the bed.

Sasuke freezes in place.

Until now, Sasuke’s been entertaining the idea that this whole arrangement is temporary. Once he gets stronger than Naruto, once he learns all he can learn here, he’ll leave, search out other avenues of gaining strength, move along on his path.

But this rattles him again. It jolts him harder this time, and for longer, leaving him shaking at the window frame like he’s standing in a blizzard. The feeling shudders the framework on his house of pain and hate, building like a seismic wave that cracks walls and loses plaster. Something is stirring, deep beneath concrete foundation. Something powerful.

And that doesn’t make any sense. Whatever this is, this feeling of camaraderie and safety that he finds here, it’s supposed to be a weakness. Attachment, warmth, friendship even, it’s supposed to be an obstacle, a hazard, an anchor that will only drag him down, make him weak.

So then why the hell does it feel so strong? Strong enough to upheave everything he’s ever known if he lets it.

He should go.

The should push away this subtle welcome made with his pride in mind, should throw it back in Naruto’s face and forge his path alone.

But he’s so tired of frigid rooms and empty houses with too many hallways, he’s so tired of nights filled with old pain and older ghosts.

He’s so tired of being cold.

Naruto radiates warmth like he’s made of it. Surely he can spare a little for Sasuke, just for a while. Just for a moment to catch his breath.

He’ll hate him for it later.

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Naruto’s been spending a lot of time with Sasuke lately, so he really shouldn’t be surprised when
he get’s shanghaied by Sakura before class one morning, her unnaturally strong fingers fisted firmly in the back of his shirt as she drags him off to stand behind the training dummies.

“Okay, whatever I did I’m sorry please don’t kill me–” he babbles, right up until Sakura slams a hand over his mouth.

“Shut up.” She growls, looking around like Ino might be standing over he shoulder. “You and Sasuke came to class together this morning.”

Naruto blinks and pries her hand off his mouth. “So?” He asks, genuinely nonplussed.

“This is the fourth time this week.” She says accusingly.

“He doesn’t like his house, okay? Would you want to live in a place where your entire family was murdered?” He defends without thinking. “Why else would someone willingly stay in my shitty apartment?”

“That doesn’t explain why he’s staying with you specifically.” She presses.

Naruto grimaces. “We, uh, had a fight I guess.”

Now it’s Sakura’s turn to blink at him. “A fight?”

Naruto shrugs. “Ya, a fight. And now we’re sort of friends and stuff… Why are you looking at me like that?”

She’s staring at him like he has brain damage, which, if he does, is her fault, anyway. She doesn’t pull her punches. Ever.

“You guys have never gotten along. Ever.” She accuses.

Naruto shrugs again, slipping his hands into his pockets. “We still kinda don’t, to be honest. Not all the time anyway.”

Sakura just stares at him, and keeps staring at him, long enough that he starts to get uncomfortable and begins to edge around her slowly like one might skirt the presence of a feral bear. “Well anyway, we should probably get to class–”

Sakura grabs him by the arm and hauls him back around. “Will he be with you after school today?” She asks.

This time it’s Naruto who narrow his eyes. “Ya, its Friday. We have curry on Fridays. Why?”

Sakura folds her hands primly behind her back and pulls up the sweetest, fakest smile Naruto knows her to be capable of.

“No.” He says firmly.

“Oh come on! Just once? Plus its curry, Naruto, and I know you learned how to make it from Iruka-sensei. I heard Daikoku-sensei saying that his curry is the best.”

“Ya, but you don’t want food, you want to rub time with Sasuke in Ino’s face.” Naruto counters.

“So? Look, I’ll even buy all the stuff to make it. And I’ll get chicken to put in it too. Please?”

Naruto taps his foot, debating. His food budget has been running low lately, and it is his turn to
“Fine.” He declares. “But no fawning, and you have to tell Sasuke you’re coming. No surprise attacks.”

Which is how Sakura ends up at Naruto’s apartment after class, perusing some of the scrolls Naruto had left on the kitchen table while he and Sasuke have their customary sweet/sour debate over the curry. She’s kept her promise to keep the fawning to a minimum; apparently the draw of lording the whole experience over Ino’s head is enough for her to keep the fangirl in check.

“Energy Stitch? What’s this?” she asks, peering over one of the scrolls. She hasn’t asked where they came from, to Naruto’s relief, and doesn’t seem to care overly.

“Medical ninjutsu.” Naruto answers. “Iruka-sensei says it’s for field medics. I’ve watched him do it, it’s pretty cool.”

She looks up at him, obviously surprised. “Really? Can you do it? Did he teach you?”

“No, his chakra control still sucks too much.” Sasuke cuts in, earning him a hard elbow in the ribs.

“You can’t do it either asshole. And that’s too much vinegar.” Naruto snaps.

“Not enough vinegar, if you ask me.”

“Well I didn’t ask you, did I?”

They promptly dissolve back into their argument, unaware that Sakura is watching them now with disbelief and rising ire, right up until she stands up, shoves them both apart and shouts; “You idiots, it’s supposed to be spicy!”

Naruto and Sasuke both leap back as she snatches a spoon from Naruto’s hand and a kitchen knife from Sasuke’s, then promptly commandeers the stovetop.

Sasuke is still gaping as Naruto bursts into laughter, shaking with mirth as the Uchiha just stares on, dumbstruck. Eventually he turns his eyes to Naruto.

“Does she get like this a lot?”

Naruto swipes a tear from the corner of his eye. “If you piss her off enough, ya.”
Chapter Notes

Another mostly fluffy chapter, be we'll get back to plot and angst soon, don't you worry.
Next chapter is THE TEST, and yes, it will go very differently than Kakashi expects... I REGRET NOTHING ;)

It starts out small, which is exactly why Sasuke doesn’t see it coming. Little things, things that don’t mean anything right up until they do.
A book forgotten on the table.
An extra pack of shuriken on the shelf.
His spare kunai stashed beneath the bed.
Then a spare set of clothes in the closet.
His towel in the bathroom.
His best tanto by the door.
Then a whole duffle of supplies by the dresser.
His favorite oolong in the pantry.
His favorite foods in the fridge.
His goddamn toothbrush.

It hits him one night when he and Naruto are going over their training regimen for the week– he still remembers how surprised he’s been when Naruto had put his usual training routine down on paper for Sasuke to look at, for the given definition of routine. Some of the training Naruto had been doing were in things he hadn’t even considered, things like breathing and balance and fine motor control, and almost no two types of exercises were the same. Naruto has been training every part of himself, not just the parts that would be useful to battle or being a ninja, and Sasuke adopts the idea wholeheartedly. Any strength is better than no strength at all, and never before has training made him feel quite so strong before, sore in muscles he’s never used, drawing power from parts of himself he didn’t know were there.

He misses what Naruto is saying, something about flexibility and chakra control training, chopsticks halfway to his mouth. They’re eating a late night dinner of Ichiraku to replenish the calories they lost during training today, like they do almost every night. Sasuke is fairly convinced that Takeuchi says open this late just for them, specifically, just for Naruto.

It’s routine. Normal.

Sasuke has a chair at the tiny dining table. It’s his chair. He sits here every day. Naruto hasn’t
bothered putting his futon away in the morning for longer than Sasuke can remember now. They take turns buying groceries every few days. It’s Sasuke’s turn to pay.

He hasn’t even seen his house in weeks.

Because he lives here.

“Oi, asshole. Are you even listening to me?”

And even that insult out of Naruto’s mouth sounds more endearing and exasperated than any curse word has a right to be. The blond tilts his head and blinks, confused. He knows Sasuke isn’t usually one for zoning.

“You have carrot in your teeth.” Sasuke says, to cover his momentary lapse in brain function. “We’re doing flexibility on Thursday?” he continues quickly as Naruto runs his tongue reflexively over his incisors, glaring when he realizes said carrot is nonexistent.

“Wednesday.” He corrects. “That way we can put it between endurance and strength training and not die, maybe.” he says dryly.

He’s been spending too much time with Shikamaru. Sasuke decides. This time next year his sense of humor is going to be dryer than Wind Country.

“Fine.” He agrees. “How is Sakura’s line up, though? Is she caught up yet?”

“Almost.” Naruto mumbles around a mouthful of pork belly. “She still needs work on her chakra reserves, but her control is already way better than either of ours. Plus, she’s been trying to harass Ryouta-san at the hospital into giving her anatomy lessons.”

That thought is terrifying. While Sasuke is glad that Sakura seems to have shaken herself out of the worst of her fangirl phase after actual prolonged contact with him, he’s not entirely sure what kind of monster they’ve created by introducing her to the idea of medical-ninjutsu.

She needs to hurry and catch them up so that they can start training in a group formation. She has specific talents that both he and Naruto lack and bringing her into regular training will give them some experience as a unit before the actual selections at the end of the school year.

Sasuke has plans for that too, and has spent the last few weeks trying to manipulate events in his favor. If everything goes to plan, they won’t be separated anytime soon.

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He wasn’t exactly planning on telling Sakura what he was up to, but it becomes necessary Friday morning, when she starts balling up a piece of paper to throw at Naruto’s napping head two rows back. Sasuke catches her wrist, stopping her arm mid swing.

“Don’t.” He growls. “Let him sleep.” Sakura glares at him from her now permanent residence in the seat to his left, much to Ino’s continued confusion and indignation. Sakura preens under her frustrated attention most days, which Sasuke has discovered is very like her.

She pulls her wrist out of his hand but drops the projectile, looking put out. “But he’s done nothing but sleep during class lately!” She hisses. “Even if he knows the stuff in theory, he’ll fail the test if he doesn’t know at least some of the technical jargon!”

“That’s what I’m counting on.” Sasuke mutters, and she stares at him like he’s grown a second
head.

She glances back at Iruka-sensei for a minute to make sure he’s still turned away from her. “What
the hell is that supposed to mean? You want him to fail?”

She’s pissed now, which is bad news for Sasuke and his perfect record if it gets out of hand, so he
sighs. “Look, you’re top Kunoichi right now, right?”

She straightens a little, pride evident in the little smirk that pulls across her face. “Ya, so?”

“And I’m currently top Shinobi, right?”

Her eyes narrow at that, confused now. “Obviously. But what’s that got to do with anything?”

Sasuke goes silent as Iruka walks their way, feigning indifference to the conversation until the
Chunin sensei paces back down to the other end of the classroom.

“It’s an unspoken rule that the top Kunoichi and top Shinobi from each graduating class is placed
in a team with the lowest scoring student in order to even out the distribution of talent.”

Sakura’s eyes widen a little as understanding dawns. “And Naruto is the current underdog.” She
finishes for him, shooting a glance at the snoring blond behind them before leveling her emerald
gaze back on Sasuke.

Sasuke nods minutely, tucking his mouth behind his steepled fingers to hide his determined smirk.
“I’m going to make sure he stays that way.”

Sakura makes no effort to conceal her grin, leaning in conspiratorially. “I’m in. What can I do to
help?”

“You can tutor Kiba for starters.” Sasuke mutters. “Dog-breath is cutting it close.”

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“You do realize this is considered stalking don’t you?”

“It’s reconnaissance, jerk.”

“It’s stalking.”

“No one asked you, Shika.”

“Then why the hell are we here?”

“I need a scapegoat.”

“Great. Thanks for that. Troublesome… and you're a traitor.”

Choji shrugs his shoulders, uncaring. “She gave me dango.”

“Oh, did she now? She just dragged me here by my ankles.”

“There’s no point in trying to bribe you.” Ino says with some venom. “And shut up, I’m trying to
Shikamaru rolls his eyes so hard Ino can practically hear it from where she’s crouched in the bushes, eyes trained on the hospital’s front door. Shikamaru lounges with his usual lazy grace against the tree behind her, nestled so fully in the shadows of the branches that Ino has to concentrate to see him all the way. Choji is settled on the ground at his feet, absentely rolling the empty dango skewer between his teeth.

Ino knows that Sakura has been coming to the hospital lately, right after school in some cases, but what she doesn’t know is why. She’s is more than a little miffed that billboard-brow has somehow managed to worm her way into Sasuke’s good graces, but more irritating than that is the fact that afterwards she seemed to drop all the fawning, all the worship, and now she and Sasuke whisper to each other in class like they’re the best of freaking friends and Ino has no idea how it happened.

There has to be a trick to it. She’d decided. She has to know something I don’t.

When she’d asked Shikamaru for advice about it, he’d told her to ask Naruto of all people, and when she’d expressed her confusion about why the hell she would ask the class clown about Sasuke Uchiha, he’d given her the weirdest look.

“You really don’t know, do you? I thought you were supposed to be head of his fan club or something.”

Shikamaru won’t tell her what the hell he’d meant by that, so in retribution, Ino had hauled him into her stakeout. She’d grabbed Choji too, mostly because he didn’t whine about her odd behavior so long as she bought him snacks.

She hisses for the boys to hush when she sees a flash of pink rounding the far corner of the building, even though they hadn’t really been speaking in the first place.

Sakura has her hair pulled up from it’s normal straight flow into a high tail bound with leather cord. She looks tired and flushed, like she just came from sparring practice, but there’s also a triumphant semi-permanent smile on her face that Ino has never seen before, something self satisfied and proud. It makes Ino’s blood boil.

Sakura waves to a medic-nin taking a break to the side of the entrance and the older woman waves back, even going so far as to swing open the door for the young Kunoichi and offer her a reserved smile as she leaps by.

“The hell?” Ino mumbles to herself. The Konoha Shinobi Hospital staff are a notoriously stone-faced and unimpressed bunch of both current and ex-ninja.

“She comes here almost every day. Of course the staff knows her.” Shikamaru pipes up in response to a question she never actually asked.

“What the hell for though?”

“Rumor has it she’s been trying to bug Ikari-sensei into giving her lessons about being a field medic.” Choji says easily, rummaging around in his pack for one of his ever-present bags of crisps.

Ino blinks and straightens out of her hiding spot without thinking. “Ikari Ryouta?” She squeals. “Is she insane?”

“Possibly.” Shikamaru comments blithely. “But if he hasn’t scared her off yet, I doubt he ever will.”
At the head of the Konoha ninja hospital is Ikari Ryouta, top surgeon, ex-jounin, chief of staff, and possibly one of the angriest and most unapproachable human beings Ino has ever had the displeasure of meeting face to face.

She’d seen him exactly once four years ago, when her father had come back from a mission dangling from Choza’s arms, his leg severed from the knee down and the missing limb swathed in Shikaku’s protective shadows to preserve as much tissue function as possible. Inoichi had spent the next six and a half hours in surgery, Ino curled crying in her mother’s lap as they waited.

When Ikari had emerged at last, sweaty and obviously chakra exhausted with a scowl on his face, he had ignored Ino and her mother entirely. He’d turned straight to Shikaku, eyes hard and teeth grit. “He’s off missions for one month, pending regular healing sessions. No exceptions. If I see his name on a duty roster before that, I’ll chop his goddamn leg back off myself.” he’d growled, and then stalked off without another word, not even a glance in their direction.

Ino blinks at Shikamaru when he suddenly stiffens minutely, an eyebrow raised, staring over her shoulder.

“You guys aren’t talking about little old me, are you?”

Sakura’s voice comes from disturbingly close to her ear, and Ino can’t help it– she leaps and screeches, jumping forward so fast that she almost trips over Choji.

And Choji Akimichi is perfect, no one will ever tell her otherwise, because as she’s about to stumble and fall over herself in a ridiculously embarrassing fashion, Choji loops an arm around her legs to straighten her out, and doesn’t even complain when she uses his head to right herself, he just continues munching on his crisps.

Sakura stands up straight, her hands in the pockets of her sweats, completely unladylike and completely uncaring about it, a smug sparkle in her eye. Ino flushes to the roots of her hair in embarrassment.

“N-not everything has to do with you, billboard-brow.” Ino stutters, trying to steady herself both mentally and physically.

Sakura doesn’t rise to the bait. Instead she just smiles, knowing and carefree, and Ino is floored by it.

Who the hell are you? Ino’s brain asks, because this isn’t the Sakura she knows, the little girl crying on benches when people poked fun at her forehead or her hair color. This Sakura has her hair pulled all the way back from her face, fringe braided back into her ponytail to keep it securely out of her eyes. She’s wearing simple grey sweatpants and a dark blue tank top, no dress, no skirt, nothing eye-catching about her ensemble at all. But Ino finds herself staring anyway, because all the sudden Sakura looks freaking intimidating, confident and self-sure and what the hell.

Ino feels a deep green monster come to life in her gut, envy surging bitter at the back of her throat.

Okay.” Sakura says easily, like Ino didn’t just insult her, and points across to the boys. “Can I borrow Shikamaru for a second?”

Shikamaru blinks, confused, and answers when Ino’s tongue fails to articulate an effective response.

“Need something, Haruno?”
“Coffee advice. Have you started drinking it yet?”

Shikamaru tilts his head, considering. “Ya, a little. But this is for Ikari-sensei, right?”

Sakura nods. “He’s being stubborn. One of the secretaries said he has a weakness for special blends.”

“You’re gonna wanna talk to my old man, then.” Shikamaru advises. “If anyone knows what’ll butter up old salt-of-the-earth, it’ll be him. You can come over after school tomorrow if you want, he’ll be back from Suna by then.”

Sakura grins and gives him a wink and a grin. “You’re the best. You’re coming over for curry this week, right? I get to pick the flavorings this time!”

Shikamaru makes a pained face. “Can you promise it won’t turn my mouth to ash?”

Sakura snorts and sticks her tongue out at him. “Baby. But since you helped me out, I’ll tone it down just for you.”

“Curry?” Choji pipes up, suddenly interested.

Shikamaru looks down at him with a fond quirk of his mouth. “I’ll bring you some when I get the chance, big guy.”

Sakura’s smile gets softer at the gesture. “We’ll make extra so you can take some back with you.” She offers. She looks up then, clocking the sun’s position in the sky. “Got to go. See you tomorrow Shika! See you later Ino! Bye Choji!” she yells behind her as she runs off down the path again, and Ino just stares, and stares, and stares.

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Kakashi turns around the corner of his apartment building and almost gets mowed down by an academy student, a young Kunoichi with hair the color of cherry bubble gum that clips his shoulder at high speed, barely stopping to shout an apology before she’s tearing off towards the training grounds, throwing off energy like some kind of overcharged battery.

*What does Iruka feed those kids?* He wonders absently as he Body Flickers towards Genma’s apartment. He only half expects to actually find the Tokujo there– it’s a crapshoot as to where Genma will be on an off day, but he hadn’t been at the standby station, which leaves only a handful of places the Shinobi would go for a post-mission cool down.

Kakashi knows Genma isn’t in his apartment the second he lands on the balcony– Genma’s chakra signature there is so faint it’s unlikely he ever went home in the first place. That leaves two options; either Genma has gone to Iruka’s flat for food and R&R, or he’s at Raidou’s loft.

Kakashi has no intention of checking Raidou’s loft.

Thankfully, Genma does end up being at Iruka’s, through Iruka himself is oddly absent.

“Yo.” Kakashi calls from the living room window, eyeing the Tokujo as he lounges on Iruka’s couch.
“Yo.” Genma returns tiredly, without moving the arm he has thrown over his eyes.

“That bad, huh?” Kakashi says softly, rolling to his feet and making his way over. He leans against the wall next to the Tokujo’s head, out of his line of sight, and runs his eyes down Genma’s form. Almost the entirety of the man’s chest is swathed in bandages, and his right hand is secured in a chakra-mesh cast to keep it immobile. By Kakashi’s estimation he should still be in the hospital, but saying as much would make him a hypocrite, so he keeps his mouth shut.

“Two casualties.” Genma says slowly, tongue darting out around his senbon to wet chapped lips, his only nervous habit. “Chunin. Newbies. Ambush. Could have been worse, really.”

“Could have been better, too.” Kakashi says honestly. He’s never been one for false words or comfort in moments like this. That would also make him a hypocrite. “I would have thought you’d be with your partner.”

“Too banged up.” Genma growls, finally removing his hand from his eyes to pull his fingers restlessly through his hair. “Plus, Rai is still with the Sandaime. He doesn’t know.” He cranes his head around to look at Kakashi, amber eyes narrowed. “If you were hoping to go rounds, I’m afraid you’re SOL.”

Kakashi shakes his head. His demons have been quiet lately; he hadn’t come here looking for a fight. “Where’s Iruka?”

Genma shrugs, wincing when the movement pulls at whatever wounds he has hidden under the bandages. “Not exactly sure, I remember him shouting about how he was out of bandages, but he’s been gone too long for a supply run. I’d bet real ryo that he’s giving the old man an earful.”

“Sucker bet.” Kakashi drawls, slipping his hands into his pockets. “My name’s in the draw pool for Jounin-sensei again.” He says randomly, which draws a snort from Genma.

“You’d think they’d learn. How many brat packs have you failed now? Four?”

“Six.”

“Ha! When’s graduation?”

“Two weeks.”

“Poor kids.” Genma chuckles. “Asuma’s in the pool now too. I can’t wait to see how he deals with genin .”

Before Kakashi can answer that the door bursts open and Iruka comes through the door with Raidou on his heels. The man stops in the living room entryway eyes locked on Genma’s bandaged chest, and his scarred face pulls into a grimace, the worry in his eyes all but undetectable to someone who didn’t know him.

“God dammit Shiranui.”

Genma lets out a nervous chuckle and Iruka rolls his eyes. “He’s your idiot now, Namiashi.” Iruka says mildly, dropping a bag of med supplies on the countertop. “Get him off my couch.”

Raidou does as instructed, ignoring Genma’s indignant squawks as he loops his partner’s good arm around his shoulders. “Thanks Umino.”

“Don’t forget to change his bandages.” Is Iruka’s only comment, barely heard over Genma’s growl
Raidou only nods as he drags a grumbling Genma out the door, leaving Kakashi alone with Iruka. Only then does the teacher acknowledge his presence, turning to him and rolling the sleeves of his uniform shirt up to his elbows.

“Kakashi. Is something wrong?”

Kakashi smiles, letting it reach his eyes. “Just the fact that I no longer have someone to whine to about being picked for Jounin instructor again this year.”

“You can’t honestly be surprised.” Iruka comments, tugging the tie out of his loosening ponytail so he can pull it up more firmly. “You’re one of the strongest Jounin in the village, maybe even the strongest. Your number was up for sensei the second you pulled your name from the Anbu roster.”

Kakashi glares at him. “Me? In charge of kids?”

Iruka chuckles. “I didn’t say it was a good idea. Just a logical one.” He leans back against the wall opposite, posture easy and loose, and Kakashi wonders for a moment how the hell he stays so calm all the time. Kakashi has spent almost all his life with Anbu, and the only person he’s ever met cooler under pressure than Iruka is possibly Shikaku, and the man is Jounin commander for a reason.

“You going to fail this group too?” Iruka says, disapproving.

“Probably.” Kakashi says lightly.

Iruka sighs heavily, casting his gaze out the window, and doesn’t speak for a long moment. Then a fond smile unfurls across Iruka’s mouth. “It looks like Naruto is going to pass this year.”

Kakashi ticks his gaze back up from where it had drifted in the general direction of the kitchen floor. “Really?”

Iruka nods. “It might be close— he’s still failing the occasional test, but his physical training scores are high enough that it might not matter.” the small smile grows bolder. “And all test scores aside, I know he’s going to be a fantastic ninja.”

Kakashi takes a heavy breath, forcing down old memories that don’t belong in this moment. “I hope you’re right.”

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The night before the selection, Naruto hardly sleeps. Sakura had been over until late and they’d stayed up talking about jutsu and how Sakura had started goading Ino into spars outside of class and how Kiba and Sasuke no longer wanted to kill each other regularly. No one had mentioned the selections and Naruto hadn’t wanted to bring it up, all too happy to talk and squabble and wrestle playfully around the apartment until they either got tired or something broke.

Now it’s the middle of the night, and the selections are all he can think about.

“What if I end up with people who hate me?” He asks Kurama when it’s apparent he’s not going to get to sleep. “What if they get their assignments and they don’t want to hang around me anymore?”

~You’re an idiot.~ Kurama rumbles, ~If you think that little Uchiha and the Genesis are leaving
your life anytime soon. You’re an idiot for even suggesting it. Actually, you know what, get down here.~

Naruto doesn’t even think twice about it, he just closes his eyes and steps back, alighting easily in the water of the seal space, his legs crossed.

It’s been more than a year since his frenzied trip to Uzushio to save the life of his bijuu, and Kurama looks healthier than ever. The golden tint to his crimson fur has become permanent, and his eyes have warmed from the colour of blood to a richer amber. The Kyuubi sets his muzzle immediately in Naruto’s lap, sending the water around them rippling softly as Naruto scratches above his nose.

“But seriously though.” Naruto mutters. “What’s going to happen when we get our assignments? How can you be so sure we won’t just…drift apart?”

Kurama snorts, moving back a little so he can tap Naruto’s forehead with a claw. ~First of all, you are way to stubborn to let go of anything you love. Friends especially. You remember what you did for me, don’t you?~

Naruto makes a pained face. “That was different.”

~Was not, and you know it.~ Kurama fires back. ~And second of all, I think you’re vastly underestimating the deviousness of Uchiha. And while I may not like it, this one seems stuck to you for good.~

Naruto’s face scrunches in confusion. “What the hell does Sasuke have to do with it?”

~You’re kidding right? That brat has been plotting something for weeks now. And the Genesis is in on it. I’m pretty sure they want to hold onto you just as much as you want to hold onto them.~

Kurama smiles at him then, all sure, toothy grin, and Naruto believes him. “Thanks, you grumpy old demon.”

~Anytime, fishcake.~

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They get assigned to the same team. All three of them. They are team seven.

Sasuke doesn’t even bother trying to look surprised. The only emotion he’s radiating is smugness.

“You planned this, you asshole.” Naruto growls as he sets an eraser trap above the door. Their new sensei is late. By an hour. He’s lucky it’s not a bucket of paint.

“How could I have planned this? Everyone knows the assignments are random.” Sasuke says with false casualty, but Naruto can feel the excitement building under his skin from here. Sakura is giggling, swinging her feet on the desk, a full body tenketsu map open over her legs. She’s ecstatic about finally bribing the head surgeon at the hospital into giving her basic medic lessons, which she managed with some kind of River Country coffee blend that when brewed looked like rich hot tar. He knows because he's helped her brew the stuff at five-thirty in the freaking morning.

“Bull.” Naruto snaps, leaping back down to ground level. “You could have just told me.”
“It was more believable when you didn’t know.” Sakura explains, eyes still on her tenketsu map.

Naruto stares at her hard for a moment before throwing his hands in the air. “Never mind, I don’t want to know.”

The sound of the eraser falling alerts them to the door being opened, and they all turn at once to see a man standing in the doorway, staring, bemused, at the eraser on the floor. Naruto feels Sasuke freeze next to him, but can’t fathom why his friend is suddenly so nervous. Naruto has never seen this Jounin before in his life.

He’s tall and lean, a lazy hunch to his shoulders, and a black mask pulled up over most of his face. His hitai-ate is pulled crooked to cover his left eye, and he reaches up to brush chalk dust from strange silver hair.

“You?” Sasuke says harshly, obviously caught off guard.

The Jounin just gives them a counterfeit smile with his eyes. “Me.” He agrees. He straightens a little, addressing all of them instead of just Sasuke. “My name is Hatake Kakashi.” The man says mildly. “And I will be your Jounin instructor.”
Iruka is grading papers at his kitchen table during his first day off in months, going over the work of his new batch of first-year students over a cup of oolong.

There’s a sudden swish, a thud, a crunch that sounds suspiciously like the bottom frame of his window cracking, and Kakashi Hatake appears around the corner of Iruka’s bedroom, single silver eye wild. “I need your help.”

Iruka gives him a few stunned blinks, temporarily dumbstruck, taking in Kakashi’s obviously less than critical distress before he remembers what day it is.

“Oh my god you passed them, didn’t you?”

Kakashi slides down the doorframe with a defeated groan, dropping his head into his hands.

Another thud, the scratch of nails on his wood floors, and Pakkun comes around the corner as well, leaping onto the kitchen table with a skittering hop. “You gotta help us, teach. Boss can barely remember to water his plant, how is he supposed to take care of pups?”

Kakashi makes some sort of inarticulate noise halfway between a whine and a growl. “I’m not having this argument with you again.” He snaps as he raises his head. “They’re not cubs, they’re Genin.”

Pakkun snorts through his short nose, giving his ear a couple of careless swats with his back leg. “You seem to think there’s a difference.”

“There is a difference. Legally they’re adults.” Kakashi growls, but he sounds more like he’s trying to convince himself more than anybody else.

Iruka reaches forward to absently scratch the ear Pakkun’s been kicking and the ninzen rumbles contentedly. “So let me get this straight. You, Hatake Kakashi, have passed a Genin team? Who did you get?” Iruka asks. He hadn’t been the teacher in charge of the assignment this year, so he’s uncharacteristically out of the loop. He figures they would have placed Sasuke with Kakashi, by virtue of a shared Kekkei Genkai, but outside of that he has no idea.

“Uchiha Sasuke, Haruno Sakura, and Uzumaki Naruto.”

Iruka freezes, tongue balled up in the back of his throat for a long stretched out second, but then he can’t help it anymore. He bursts into inappropriate uncontrolled laughter, the kind that makes your
lungs sore and your eyes water, the kind that has him wrapping an arm around his middle a pressing a hand to his mouth in an effort to stifle his mirth. Kakashi’s glare sharpens but that only makes him laugh harder, wiping the tears from his eyes with the heel of his hand.

“Did you know they were absolute fucking terrors?” Kakashi hisses. Iruka doesn’t actually respond verbally, he’s still laughing too hard to speak, but he does hold his hand up flat and seesaws it back and forth in a ‘sorta’ gesture. Kakashi groans. “I don’t even know where the hell to start. Normally the beginning of training is based on building a fluid team dynamic, but it’s a little obvious they skipped that part entirely. I thought that teams outside Ino-Shika-Cho weren’t supposed to be predetermined.”

Iruka manages to get himself under control at long last, occasional hiccups of laughter still escaping from his throat. “They’re not, but I may or may not have accidentally told Sasuke about the Rule of Two-Thirds. For academic purposes, of course.”

Kakashi doesn’t actually call him on the bullshit, but his gaze says he’s not convinced. Iruka sighs as Pakkun curls up under his arm. “Why don’t you start from the beginning?”

~<Four hours prior…>~

Kakashi stares openly at his three new trainees on the green of training ground three, studying each of them individually. He knows the Uchiha already, or at least he should, but he can’t help but notice that the dark haired boy looks very different from when he’d last seen him.

Uchiha Sasuke’s eyes had been cold and jagged like sheet ice that night in the rain, cutting and fragile, broken and hiding it under layer upon frigid layer of hate.

These eyes hardly look the like they belong to the same person in comparison. It’s like they’ve hardened and softened at the same time, burning instead of glacial, like some kind of inner fire has been melting down the ice and it’s revealed nothing but iron underneath, ferrous metal rusty with disuse, but strong nonetheless.

He remembers Iruka saying some time ago that Sakura was something of a fangirl, an enamored duckling trailing in Sasuke’s shadow in search of scraps of affection. This can’t be the same girl he’d been talking about, this fiery-eyed Kunoichi hopping back and forth on the balls of her feel like she can’t wait to get moving, get working, a serrated smile daring him to look down on her.

The only one of the three that Kakashi expected iron from had been Naruto– the boy has always been stronger than most people see, Kakashi knows this, but it’s not just more iron that he sees in Naruto’s eyes, it’s confidence, surety, like he knows his worth now, and not a person on earth will be able to tell him otherwise.

So far? Definitely not the green little academy graduates he’d been counting on. Right off the bat he makes three mistakes.

Kakashi’s first mistake was evaluating them separately.

His second mistake was assuming they’d play by his rules.

His third and most forgivable mistake? Assuming they would perform at an academy graduate level.

As soon as the skirmish starts it becomes very clear that these brats have been practicing
techniques at a very not academy level thank you very fucking much, especially Naruto, who was supposed to have graduated with the lowest academy grades, who throws a Chunin level wind jutsu at him right off the bat.

His first bell gets snagged off his person a mere twenty minutes into the conflict, much to Kakashi’s chagrin, by Naruto and Sasuke working in tandem, more in synch with each other than Kakashi has seem most strike teams, so much so in fact that even though he’s sure Naruto is the one who snatched the bell off him, it ends up dangling in Sasuke’s hands and Kakashi can’t call them on it because he hadn’t actually seen the switch.

He only pauses to glare at them for a mere few seconds, but it’s yet another mistake on his part because Sakura, the sneaky brat, promptly swipes his second bell while his back is turned and Kakashi’s brain does a field conditioned reboot and reassess.

These are not Genin, these are little monsters.

Kakashi has done this test before, he’s failed academy student after academy student. None of them know what it means to look outside themselves, that the world means nothing without comrades at your back and friends at your side. In the first few minutes of his test, these three twelve-year-olds have demonstrated teamwork and ingenuity that could show conditioned Chunin teams a thing or two.

They’d planned this, Kakashi can see it in their eyes; the way Naruto is trying and failing not to smile the same way he would when he’s pulled a prank he knows he’ll get away with, the way Sasuke is glaring and grinning at the blond boy in turns like they’re having a conversation with just facial expressions, the way Sakura puts her hands behind her back and gives him a smile so sweet and false it makes his teeth hurt.

He ties the blond brat to the post because he can’t prove they’d broken his rules and tells them to break for lunch, minus Naruto, even though it’s hardly eleven. He’s floored again when the only person that pulls out any lunch is Sakura, and she comes out of her bag with not one bento, but three. She passes one to Sasuke and sets the other next to her, assuring Naruto that he can eat it later, patting the grass beside it reassuringly. When Naruto starts to whine about being starving anyway, Sasuke growls something that sounds like ‘idiot’ and starts giving Naruto bits out of his own lunch. Sakura catches into the loophole quickly and starts offering some of her own as well, and Kakashi gives up right around the time that Naruto wiggles an arm out of the ropes to take an offered rice ball.

There’s something very unfair about this. Kakashi decides. He can’t fail them now, even if he wanted to.

More surprising is the fact the he doesn’t want to. The iron in their young souls is so painfully obvious, but for all its strength the metal is rough– untested and untried.

Unforged.

He’s never seen more potential before in his life than he does now, staring at three twelve-year-old academy graduates sharing lunch together on the thick grass of training ground three. More than that, he sees a chance to break repeating history, a chance to make sure that this team never ends up like his did.

“I expect to see you three bright and early tomorrow morning.” He tells them at the end. He doesn’t bother mentioning that they passed. By the look in their eyes, they know.
“You gonna be late?” Naruto asks.

Kakashi smiles a little, hidden behind his mask. “Maybe, maybe not.” he says casually.

He will be.

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“I have no idea how to deal with them. Any idea I had about training went out the door this morning. They already know how to work their chakra and how to cloak their presence, and Sakura threw a punch today that almost broke a sapling.”

Iruka doesn’t seem to be sympathetic to Kakashi’s distress; he’s mostly just beaming proudly at the tale. “I thought Naruto might have been holding back in practice.” Iruka muses. “Looks like you have your work cut out for you.”

Kakashi glares at him again. Pakkun just rolls over for a belly rub, the traitor. “How am I supposed to know how to train them? This isn’t a case-by-case prodigy assignment anymore. They’re a team now.”

“You’ll just have to start from scratch then.” Iruka says simply, like the answer is easy.

“From scratch?” Kakashi mutters. He’s used to there being guidelines, expectations, rules to follow. He knows how to give orders not… nurture, not teach. That’s Iruka’s area of expertise. That’s why he’s here.

“They’re people just like anyone else.” Iruka explains. “They have weaknesses and strengths, doubts and dreams. They’re yours now, like it or not, so if you don’t know what they need to grow, you’ll have to find out.”

“But how?” Kakashi asks, pressing a palm into his unmasked eye. “Asking them?”

“You were an Anbu Captain, right? Watch. Assess. Find out where they’re strong and where they need strength.” He runs a hand down Pakkun’s back as the ninken starts to doze. “And when they need a helping hand or a push, give them one.”

Kakashi sighs, planting an elbow on his knee and running the other hand through his hair. “You make it sound so easy.”

“It’s not easy.” Iruka says bluntly. “But it is more simple than you might think.”

Kakashi mulls that over for a long moment, wondering how he’s going to organize ability tests that won’t be too much for Genin– he’s used to training mature shinobi, Anbu, women and men who know already what’s expected of them. In comparison Genin seem so fragile.

Or maybe not.

He’s known these three kids for only a few hours, and they’ve already given him a run for his money. He’s oddly eager to find out what they can do when pushed.

“There’s another thing, Kakashi.” Iruka says suddenly, and the tone of those words make him still; they’re soft and serious, said with the same quiet intensity that he’s heard the Hokage use when issuing an assassination contract. Kakashi’s single eye fixes on him immediately, taking in how
Iruka’s eyes have drifted sideways, unfocused. Uh-oh.

He waits.

Iruka seems to be contemplating how exactly he’s going to word what he’s about to say, and the trepidation building in Kakashi’s gut grows.

“There will come a point in time where these kids are going to need you for more than just training. It might be a week from now, might be a year. But you’ve gotten a group of kids that have been through more than most shinobi twice their age, two of which don’t have parents, and one of which grew up with civilians. At some point in time every one of them is going to need you to be there for them, and you can’t cut and run.”

Iruka’s words strike raw and deep, make his chest ache over unhealed wounds. He keeps quiet.

The Chunin’s dark eyes flit up and catch his, sharp and sad at once, more intense than most would think him capable of. Kakashi is reminded, not for the first time, that Umino Iruka is a very dangerous individual, strong in a way that has nothing to do with chakra.

“It doesn’t have to be right now, but sometime soon you are going to need to choose if you are going to let yourself care for these kids or not. You need to decide if you’re going to see Sakura as more than a promising Kunoichi, see Sasuke as more than the last Uchiha, see Naruto as more than a remnant of Kushina and Minato.”

The words are another hard punch to the chest, another ripple of pain over his ribs, but he keeps quiet. He waits, and he listens, because Iruka would never pull at his pain like this if the words didn’t need to be said.

Iruka holds his gaze for the entirety of his speech, never so much as blinking. “You can’t do this by halves, Kakashi, that’s not how it works. Either let them in, or shut them out, but you need to choose.”

At that he stands and moves to the kitchen, a snoozing Pakkun tucked securely in one arm, and busies himself with brewing something, leaving Kakashi to his thoughts. Even though the sun has set and the room had been washed in darkness while they talked, Iruka doesn’t turn on any lights. Kakashi’s grateful for it.

When Iruka comes back, he sinks to the floor next to Kakashi, Pakkun still curled to his chest, and presses a warm cup of coffee into his numb hands. Sugarless with a splash of whole cream, just the way he likes it. Iruka turns his head away politely while Kakashi takes a long drink, turning back only when he places the half empty mug on the floor between them. He reaches across, gripping Kakashi’s forearm firmly, grounding.

“There’s a lot more left in you than you seem to think, Kakashi.” Iruka says softly. “Don’t make a decision you’ll regret just because you’re afraid.”

The silence hangs for a long moment, but Iruka’s grip below his elbow remains steady. Slowly, carefully, Kakashi leans into his side. He doesn’t say thank you.

With Iruka, he doesn’t need to.

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It’s nowhere near Friday when the assignments come to a close. They have curry that night anyway.

“Guys.” Sakura says wistfully as she passes Sasuke some chopped flank steak to stir into bubbling pot of curry base. For once they’re not fighting over flavorings, too giddy with accomplishment for petty arguments. “We’re a team now. We passed. Hatake Kakashi passed us.”

“Of course he passed us.” Sasuke says archly, but Naruto can tell he’s preening under the arrogance.

“Did you see his face when Sakura knocked that tree over?” Naruto snickers, adding more ground spice to the pot. “Priceless.”

Sasuke hums in agreement and Sakura flushes proudly.

He hears the window smack open and Naruto, by virtue of having his hands free, ducks around Sasuke, placing a hand on the Uchiha’s shoulder as he moves so that they don’t accidently bump into each other and send ingredients flying. It’s happened.

He turns the corner into his bedroom just in time to see Kiba thump to the floor on his back with a dreamy look on his face, literal drool pooling at the corner of his mouth. “What the hell kinda sorcery are you guys working in here? I can smell your flat from four blocks out.”

Shikamaru materializes on the sill over him, raising an unimpressed brow at the dog-nin. “You,” he drawls lowly, “Are a mess.”

“Gimme a break Shika, I’m starving.”

The Nara rolls his eyes. “You look alright to me.”

Naruto laughs and offers Kiba a hand up. “Don’t worry dude, we ended up making three pots. Where’s Akamaru?”

“With my mom.” Kiba explains, taking the offered help up. “He got sick off something he ate yesterday, so he’s on lockdown until he gets it all out of his system.”

“That sucks.” Naruto says sympathetically, and then turns his head back towards the kitchen once his friend is upright. “Jerks are here!” he calls happily.

“Good! Tell Kiba to get his ass in here and taste this!” Sakura calls. Naruto doesn’t say anything because before he can even open his mouth Kiba has already hightailed it into the kitchen, a bit too exuberantly if Sasuke’s growl of ‘watch it, dog-breath’ is any indication.

Shikamaru leans his weight against Naruto’s side after he saunters inside, stifling a long yawn against his hand. “This whole ‘ninja’ thing is going to be a pain. I can already tell.” he mutters. “I don’t suppose you have any coffee lying around?”

Naruto makes a disgusted noise in the back of his throat. “Just that really dark River Country stuff that Sakura bought, if you’re okay with drinking sludge.”

“Perfect.” the Nara mutters, pushing upright.

The five of them cram into Naruto’s little kitchen as bowls are passed around, laughing and snapping and talking over the three pots, each one made to suit their three individual tastes. Kiba takes a bowl of Sakura’s first and then goes back for a bowl of Naruto’s, then Shikamaru surprises
them all by taking one serving of each and mixing them together in the same bowl as an experiment.

It turns out being the greatest thing Naruto’s ever tasted, and he’s not the only one who thinks so. Halfway through the round of tasting Sakura gets up and pulls out the deepest pot Naruto owns, a giant cast iron monstrosity that usually holds at least a dozen other pots nested in one another, and dumps all three curry concoctions together.

After everyone has been back for seconds (and in Kiba’s case, thirds), Sakura packs a tub up for Choji and they all make themselves comfortable on the floor of Naruto’s bedroom, both Sakura and Shikamaru nursing small mugs full of coffee. Sakura at least had watered hers down a little with milk and a good helping of sugar, but Shikamaru’s cup is undiluted and black as pitch.

“How do you even have taste buds?” Kiba asks, staring into the darkness of Shikamaru’s coffee cup like it might hold secret of immortality, or maybe just the trick to keeping the stuff down.

“It’s an acquired taste.” Shikamaru says mildly, taking another sip. Naruto is still surprised the stuff hasn’t turned his mouth black.

“How was the test, Kiba?” Sakura asks, grinning from ear to ear. “I hear you got put in a team with Hinata.”

Kiba flushes, switching immediately and predictably to defensive mode. “None of your business Haruno. Besides, I also got stuck with bug boy, who is a jackass.”

“Shino’s not that bad.” Naruto defends.

“Have you been in a room with him for more than twenty minutes? He spent the first half of our test correcting my grammar.” Kiba pauses, jumping trains of thought. “Kurenai-sensei is amazing though.”

“We have Asuma, but that was to be expected.” Shikamaru adds, taking another sip of his toxic mud.

“Ya, plus you already knew who you were going to be in a team with, so nothing was a surprise for you.” Kiba growls, before whipping around to face the rest of them. “Speaking of predetermined assignments, how the hell did you three swing this dream team?”

“Ya Sasuke,” Naruto drawls sarcastically. “How’d ya swing that?”

“Hn.” Is Sasuke’s only response. Sakura giggles.

“Speaking of which, Uchiha, it looks like you’re down another fangirl.” Shikamaru says with a grin.

“Finally.” Sasuke mutters, with real relief.

“Oh?” Sakura pipes up, looking far too smug to pull off her attempt at innocence.

Shika narrows his eyes. “Oh don’t act like you don’t know. Ino dragged me out of bed yesterday morning again, only this time it was to train instead of stalk you. I’m losing more sleep by the day and it’s your fault for getting her so riled up.”

Sakura grins, unrepentant.
Sasuke doesn’t notice Naruto going quiet until Shikamaru pipes up, sometime after he’s drained the last drop from his coffee cup.

“Something on your mind, Uzumaki?”

Sasuke looks up immediately at Shika’s words, eyes focusing in on the blond across from him.

Naruto’s gaze is downcast, and a wrinkle has formed across his brow that says he’s thinking deeply.

“Dobe?” He asks, and the word comes out gentler than he intended.

Naruto looks up immediately, but only meets his eyes for a bare second before his gaze flickers down again. “I…” he starts, but then he cuts off, chewing his lower lip in an uncharacteristic show of uncertainty.

“Whatever you have to say doesn’t leave this room if you don’t want it to.” Shikamaru assures, voice oddly soft, his eyes supernaturally keen. Sasuke’s missed something.

Suddenly the room goes quiet and Kiba leans over, eyes uncertain but smile comforting.

“Ya, dude. Whatever it is, our lips are sealed.”

It’s clear Kiba doesn’t actually know what’s happening or what Naruto and Shikamaru are talking about, but Sasuke has never been more grateful for the dog-nin than his is right then, offering his loyalty blind without so much as a clue to what’s going on. Sasuke appreciates this part of Kiba more than he’ll ever admit aloud.

Sakura blinks back and forth between the three of them, occasionally casting her gaze sideways to Sasuke in an attempt to put the pieces together. She’s not the only one lost, but Sasuke’s eyes never leave Naruto.

The blond sighs and finally looks up, cerulean eyes holding Sasuke’s for a long second before he turns his gaze to everyone else. “Do you guys remember inter-term break last year?” he asks.

Sakura leans forward to brace her elbows on her knees. “You mean the one where we had the huge storm that swamped the main road for days?”

Naruto nods.

“Yes, you disappeared for like a whole week.” Kiba murmurs. “Shika and I thought you died in a ditch somewhere.”

Naruto winces, guilt flashing across his face as his gaze turns apologetic. “Yes. Sorry about that.”

Shikamaru doesn’t say a word, only waits silently for him to continue. When he doesn’t speak up, Sasuke does.

“Where?”

It’s the only word he says into the long silence, but the question is clear, and Naruto knows what he means.

“Uzushio.”
Sasuke doesn’t miss the way Shikamaru’s eyes widen. “By yourself?” the shadow-nin asks, tone neutral, but Sasuke can see genuine surprise in the back of his burnished eyes.

“I don’t understand.” Sakura interjects. “What’s Uzushio?”

“Wait a minute, Uzushiogakure?” Kiba asks, incredulous. “Like the old village of the seal masters, Uzushio?”

Naruto nods again, wiping sweaty palms on his thighs before leaning back on his hands.

“Why?” Sasuke asks, another too-deep single-word question, and Naruto’s eyes dart back up to his.

For a fraction of a second Sasuke can see familiar discord swimming through the jewel tone blues, the same volatile mix of grief and frustration that Sasuke had been witness to one year ago. When Naruto doesn’t answer, Shikamaru does.

“Uzumaki.” the Nara sounds out the word in a long breath, stressing the first syllable of Naruto’s last name to highlight the similarity. “It’s where you’re from, isn’t it? Or one of your parents anyway.”

“My mom.” Naruto agrees quietly, and somewhere in the back of his head Sasuke is aware of Sakura’s too-fast intake of breath and the hiss of air between Kiba’s teeth.

Naruto tosses his head side to side as if to shake off the unwanted pity in their gazes. “Anyway, I found some things while I was there, things I want to share with you guys if you’ll let me.”

“You don’t have to do that, Naruto.” Shikamaru says suddenly, uncharacteristically fierce.

“Can someone please explain for those of us without inherent knowledge or 200 level IQs?” Kiba growls.

Shikamaru has the decency to look vaguely chastised, but he looks to Naruto first with brows raised, asking silent permission. Naruto sweeps his hand out in front of him in a gesture to go ahead. “Uzushio was a sister village to Konoha from its founding right up until it was destroyed in the third shinobi world war by an alliance of Iwa and Kiri.” Shikamaru says stiffly. “As far as we know, no Uzushio shinobi managed to survive the incursion.” he turns back to Naruto. “That’s all I know for sure, but I would guess that means the Uzumaki were one of their clans.”

Naruto nods to confirm. “I found out last year. My mom moved here just before the village was destroyed.” he pauses, casting his gaze sideways towards the window. “Not sure about much more than that.”

Sasuke’s brain catches somewhere around the word clan, and he promptly loses his train of thought.

Naruto, the intuitive idiot, picks up on his hiccup almost immediately, sending a halfhearted glare in his direction like he knows exactly what he’d thinking.

“Don’t compare, jerk,” he warns softly. “My clan was dead way before I was born. It’s not the same.”

The moron has the audacity to use air quotations marks around the word ‘clan’, like that somehow makes the word mean any less.

“Don’t make it into a joke, idiot.” Sasuke growls.
“If this is a joke it’s not a funny one.” Sakura says angrily. “You left the village limits to go to another country without permission? Naruto, if you’d been a ninja at the time, that could be seen as treason.”

Kiba gets up suddenly, striding quickly across the room to shut and lock Naruto’s only bedroom window. He comes back, sits down heavily, and turns around the room, pointing to and making eyes contact with everyone but Naruto. “Not a word outside this circle.” He says levely. “Capiche?”

“Obviously.” Sakura snaps.

“Of course, don’t be stupid.” Sasuke says lowly.

Shika only nods.

Naruto looks taken aback by the sudden seriousness in the room, looking both incredibly flattered but also more than a little annoyed.

“Can I finish my point now?” he grumbles.

Nods all around.

He takes another breath. “So anyway, I found some stuff there that was really important to their village.” He leans forward again, voice softer now. “So long as everything does stay between us and all that, I wanted to share it with you guys.” He looks to Sasuke and Sakura respectively. “I would have told you about it earlier, but I wanted to wait until we were all officially ninja.”

Sakura nods in understanding, but Sasuke just keeps staring.

It’s clear from the look in Naruto’s eyes that this is not just something he found lying around in a ruin. Whatever it is means a great deal to him, enough for him to drag up thoughts of parents he never knew, enough for him to trek across countries to find it.

Sasuke feel suddenly unworthy of whatever it is.

“Shikamaru is right, idiot.” Sasuke finds himself saying before he can stop. “Whatever it is, it’s yours to keep.”

Naruto eyes go from soft and uncertain to diamond hard in less than a second, a stubborn surety locking down inside them that tells Sasuke he'd have an easier time moving a mountain than changing his mind.

“And so are you guys.” Naruto states as fact. His tone invites no argument. “You are my friends, like it or not. And that’s exactly why I want to share this with you.” There’s an unspoken ‘got a problem with that?’ tacked on to the end of the sentence, directed right at Sasuke, and he swallows hard around the sudden lump in his throat.

Because this is just how Naruto is. Stubborn, relentless, determined, unconditional. He doesn’t do anything by halves. You are his, or you are not, and if he has decided to be there for you, it is through hell and back, and back again, to the end of time. He is Naruto’s whether he likes it or not, and by default that means that from this point forward, he’ll never be alone again.

Because that’s just the way Naruto is, and that fact would be no easier to change than forcing the sun to set in the east.
Naruto doesn’t waste any more words explaining himself; instead he sways to his feet and movies over to the nightstand, pulling open the disused bottom drawer. From within he sets aside a worn blanket and draws from beneath a dark cylinder trimmed in gold, as long as Naruto’s forearm and twice as thick.

“Is that a scroll?” Sakura asks as Naruto returns and sits back down, holding the strange object in both hands.

“That’s not like any scroll I’ve ever seen.” Shikamaru muses.

_No kidding_. Sasuke thinks.

The scroll is a glimmering black that reflects the light like polished obsidian, trimmed in shining gold and circled with two leather straps secured with metal clasps.

“It’s a mass freight scroll.” Naruto explains, flicking the clasps open with small twin bursts of chakra. As the clasps separate, patterns of light flare across the metal for a moment before going dark again. He carefully unrolls a foot of the shining black scroll, revealing a blooming design etched in shimmering gold lacquer across the surface. It practically radiates chakra; Sasuke can feel if from where he’s sitting.

“Almost everything I found is sealed in here.” Naruto says, tapping the back of a knuckle on the furled portion of the scroll.

“You can actually work these?” Shikamaru marvels, peering over the broad curling lines of script and curves of symbols.

“It’s in my blood, apparently.” Naruto says, smirking as if at some private joke, and that’s a non-answer if Sasuke’s ever heard one.

“What’s inside?” Kiba asks.

Naruto smiles wide. “Too much to show you guys right now, since we have training in the morning, but tomorrow? After training? I do want to show you.”

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That night, after Sakura waves her goodbyes at last, long after she should have already been home, Sasuke asks the question he’s been holding behind his teeth since after dinner. Since last year, if he’s honest.

After a long moment of silence and in a too soft voice, Naruto tells him about Uzushio.
Sasuke wakes to the soft light of predawn filtering through the cracked shades of the window, casting a silver filter over the shadows of the room. Even though he knows he’s only been asleep for a few hours at most, right now he’s never felt more awake.

Naruto’s story lingers in his ears, and he’d spent the night dreaming about what it must have been like, reading the pain and drive between the lines of Naruto’s story, imagining how it would have forged him. That night they met on the street makes so much more sense now, now that Sasuke knows the force behind the fury.

Naruto is lying on his stomach on the bed above him, his arm thrown carelessly over the side so that his knuckles brush the floor by Sasuke’s futon. Sasuke curls his own hand just shy of the blond idiot’s fingertips, and even though they’re not actually touching, Sasuke can still feel the warmth radiating off the idiot’s calloused hand.

*The hell. He’s like some kind of furnace.*

Sasuke figures it must have something to do with his metabolism; from what Sasuke has seen, he eats enough and often enough to put away more food than a couple of grown shinobi put together. The only other person Sasuke knows with that kind of appetite is Choji.

Deciding he’s lazed around enough, Sasuke pushes to his feet and stretches his arms over his head, gratified with the handful of pops that crack up his spine. Sneaking around is more likely to wake Naruto than any kind of morning stumbling, so Sasuke doesn’t bother being stealthy as he pads into the bathroom. The floor next to the sink is littered with jars and bottles with plastic caps, the result of Sakura’s experiments with different soaps and shampoos. Her finished products line the thin shelf to the left of the shower, about a dozen jars and bottles labeled with surgical tape and swirling red pen. He runs his fingers over the labels until he finds the ones he’s looking for, a scentless shampoo and a mostly empty bottle of off white conditioner labeled ‘Sakura’s special formula’. As stupid as the name is, the cream is light enough that it doesn’t weigh down his hair and is scented only lightly with sandalwood and cherry blossom oils, enough to be pleasant, but not enough to last long or give him a headache.

He starts Naruto’s shitty shower and waits for the water to warm up. How long it takes is a crapshoot on the best of mornings, anywhere from five minutes to twenty. As he waits he goes in
search of a bar of soap that doesn’t smell like a field of flowers, another product of Sakura’s more than periodic stay-overs, growling when he discovers that they’re out of his usual pine-scented stuff. He settles for stealing a bar of Naruto’s, the kind that smells mostly like lemongrass and faintly of jasmine.

By the time he rises the shower is billowing with steam, so he strips and steps in, wincing at the too hot water and adjusting the temperature.

Naruto is awake by the time he steps out again, having tucked the futon back under the bed so that he can do morning stretches in the cleared space. He’s just finishing up when Sasuke throws Naruto’s obnoxious orange towel at him but otherwise doesn’t speak, and Naruto responds with a yawn and a lazy wave of his hand, standing up and slipping past him into the now vacated shower.

It’s not routine, exactly, it’s usually half and half odds, which one of them will be up first, but it’s easy and comfortable in a way few things in Sasuke’s life have ever been.

He’s almost done with his own stretches when Sakura bangs too loudly on the door, stirring a disgruntled shout from the old civilian man that lives downstairs. Sasuke doesn’t bother getting the door, and a few seconds later Sakura lets herself in, carrying a triad of bentos under one arm.

“Hey, jerks. I brought breakfast.” She calls, but this time keeps her voice low so as not to upset old man Yamada.

Sasuke finishes his stretches and stands, rolling his shoulders as he ducks into the kitchen, whistling at the spread she lies out on the table.

“You must have been up early.” He remarks, pulling open the utensil drawer to retrieve their chopsticks.

“Didn’t really sleep, to be honest. You?” she asks, pulling out Naruto’s chair and taking a seat.

Sasuke shakes his head, handing Sakura her chopsticks and sitting down with his own. He leaves Naruto’s at the edge of the table. As an unspoken rule, last one to breakfast eats standing– there’s no room in the tiny kitchen for another chair. “We got a couple hours apiece, I think, but it’s no excuse to skip morning exercises.”

“Agreed.” Sakura says easily around a sweet omelet roll. “What time did Kakashi-sensei say he wanted us at ground three? I forget.”

“He said nine on the dot, but I doubt he’ll be on time if yesterday says anything.” Sasuke muses darkly.

Sakura hums in agreement, and then shoves abruptly to her feet. “I’m making coffee. Want any?”

Sasuke makes a face. “Doesn’t that stuff stunt your growth?” He grumbles, spearing a cherry tomato with one chopstick and popping it into his mouth.

“Ikari-sensei says that’s just an old wives tale.” Sakura says, brushing off his concern and rummaging through Naruto’s pantry for the dark bag of coffee beans.

Naruto comes into the kitchen then, still rubbing at his wet hair with a towel, and spots Sakura by the coffee pot. He makes a face. “I’ll never understand how you stomach that stuff.” he mutters, scooping up his chopsticks and snagging a bento off the table before cocking his hip to lean
against the counter.

“Come on.” Sakura whines. “You have to try it at least once.”

“No I don’t.” he counters, popping a piece of fried shrimp into his mouth in defiance.

Sakura ignores him, pouring three mugfuls of hot caffeine anyway, though she does have the decency to load Naruto’s with cream and sugar. She shoves the mug into his hand in such a way that Naruto has to either grasp it or lose his favorite amber ceramic cup to the linoleum.

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Sakura lopes into the hospital waiting area, clutching her warm covered mugs of bribery close to her chest. She honestly doesn’t understand Naruto’s problem with the stuff– it’s not so overwhelming once you get used to it, and the bitterness is easily counteracted by a bit of sugar and cream.

She skips up to the counter, still pleasantly giddy and tired from morning sparring with the boys, and plants her elbows on the counter.

“Morning Shiki-san!” she chirps, pushing one of the steaming mugs across flat surface “I brought you a pick me up!” The secretary looks up, glasses flashing in the fluorescent lights, and takes an audible breath through his nose.

Shiki Senri is the lone secretary for the Shinobi hospital and registered Tokujo, a tall, lean man in his early thirties with amber-blonde hair and dark blue eyes. He reminds Sakura a little of Iruka-sensei sometimes, in that all his power hides behind a genuine smile and a mild go-with-the-flow personality. But also like Iruka-sensei, cause trouble in his domain and Shiki-san can make grown-ass Jounin feel like toddlers.

“Are you trying to butter me up, miss Haruno?” Shiki asks mildly and with a soft smile, taking the cup with greedy fingers.

“Is it working?” Sakura asks, grinning.

Shiki takes a long drink before responding, and by the relieved sigh he gives as he sets down the mug, Sakura got his preference right. Half a spoonful of sugar, no cream.

“I’m ashamed to say it is.” Shiki admits with conspiratorial smirk. “Here to see the old grump, I imagine?”

“Is he free?” Sakura asks, grinning.

Shiki takes a long drink before responding, and by the relieved sigh he gives as he sets down the mug, Sakura got his preference right. Half a spoonful of sugar, no cream.

“I’m ashamed to say it is.” Shiki admits with conspiratorial smirk. “Here to see the old grump, I imagine?”

“Is he free?” She asks politely, though she knows the answer. Barring specific emergencies, Ikari-sensei spends the first few hours of his morning holed up in his office with paperwork. It’s really the only time he’s free to teach her anything.

“He is.” Shiki-san says, gesturing up and to the right with his pen. “Third floor down the hall, last door on the left. You know the way. Don’t dawdle, and don’t bother the patients.”

“Yes sir!” She says brightly, giving him a two-fingered salute and taking off towards the stairs.

“See if you can get him to finish signing his discharge papers before I die of old age, will you?” he calls after her, and she throws him an affirmative thumbs-up before she rounds the stairs. She darts keenly through the maze-like hospital corridors, staying well out of the way of the doctors and nurses and waving to the ones she knows as she passes by. She comes to a stop in front of Ikari Ryouta’s office, pausing to take a solid breath before giving the door three firm knocks.
“This had better be good.” a deep voice from inside growls, and Sakura opens the door a crack, just wide enough for her to stick her arm through to wiggle the remaining cup of coffee where the cranky head of surgery might see it.

There’s a sharp sigh and a shuffle of papers that precedes another heavy growl, though this one decidedly less grumpy than the last. “Oh get in here, squirt. I don’t know why you even bother knocking anymore.”

Sakura hip checks the door open, ducking into the dark office. The head of surgery leans sideways haphazardly in his desk chair, a file balanced on one knee, which is thrown over the chair’s arm. Ikari Ryouta is an ex-Jounin, (Sakura secretly suspects ex-Anbu), with dark skin and darker hair, face split brightly with steely blue-grey eyes. He’s only thirty-five, but the dark lines under his eyes and the semi-permanent scowl on his face give him the appearance of someone in their forties.

“Morning Ikari-sensei.” Sakura singsongs.

The man only grunts in response, not looking up, and holds his hand out expectantly as he chews the end of a pen. She presses the still warm cup into his hand and steps over the pile of binders to get to the windows.

“Shiki-san says you’re behind on your paperwork?” she comments as she hunts for the buttons that hold the curtains shut, balancing on one foot so that she doesn’t knock over another stack of files.

The surgeon doesn’t respond until he’s drained a good third of his coffee, relaxed for a handful of seconds before he puts the cup down with a clack on the mahogany desk and is instantly scowling again.

“He’ll get the discharges when I’m done with them, and not a second before.” he growls, wincing when Sakura finally finds the fixtures holding the curtains closed and proceeds to throw them open, revealing a pleasant, rolling view of training ground two. “Who said you could open those?”

Sakura turns on him, planting one hand on her hip and stuffing the other in the pocket of her sweats.

Even Ryouta has to admit that the girl’s glare is impressive, for a twelve-year-old. He would probably have never let her in his office otherwise.

“Don’t be a hypocrite, sensei.” she admonishes, the nerve. “Didn’t you spend a good half hour lecturing Aburame Shibi about how his vitamin d deficiency was due to a lack of sunlight?”

“Not sure how that applies.” he mutters, finally catching sight of the hitai-ate hanging around her neck. “About time you made Genin. Who’s the sorry bastard that got you for a student?” He pointedly ignores the irony of his statement, but by the wicked gleam in the new Genin’s eyes, Haruno doesn’t miss it.

“Hatake Kakashi.”

Ryouta snorts. “Couldn’t have happened to a better jackass.”

Sakura tilts her head, hopping back over leaning paper towers to the front of his desk again. “Do you know him, Ikari-sensei?”

“That idiot is the second worst patient I’ve ever treated.” he growls.

“Who’s the first?”
“Shiranui Genma.” Ikari snaps without hesitation, and Sakura snickers.

Ikari sits up out of his lazy slouch with a grunt, slapping his file down next to his coffee cup. “I suppose, now that you’re an official ninja and all that, you’ll be wanting to learn some actual jutsu.” he rumbles, surveying her with narrowed eyes.

Sakura flashes a cocky grin, completely uncowed. “You know it!”

Well she’s got guts; he’ll give her that.

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“This is stupid.” Sasuke growls, voice dripping with venom, teeth on edge and mouth set in a frustrated frown.

“Well this isn’t going well.”

~It’s going about as well as can be expected.” Kurama muses. ~He spent so much time and energy developing his fire pathways that I’m not surprised his system is off balance. It would probably be worse if we hadn’t saved water for last.~

“We could take a break?” Naruto says aloud. They’re sitting cross-legged on the water of the Glade’s basin, willow branches twisting between them in the soft breeze, the tips trailing through the water like idle fingers.

“No!” Sasuke snaps, his eyes flicking open to catch Naruto’s unimpressed gaze. It’s not the first of Sasuke’s angry outbursts Naruto has been witness to, and it won’t be the last. Naruto understands actually– this is probably one of the only areas of training where Sasuke’s natural ability doesn’t factor in, the only place he really struggles.

Naruto waits him out, not rising to the ire, and thinks oddly that his experience dealing with Kurama’s anger is useful in dealing with Sasuke’s as well.

Sasuke sighs, calming visibly and changes his answer. “Ya, fine. Whatever.”

~He’s doing better than he was.~ Kurama says idly as Naruto gets to his feet.

“It’s still giving him a lot more trouble than the other three.”

~Water is the natural counter to fire. It’s natural it would challenge him more than the others.~

“But Sakura didn’t have this much trouble with earth. How is it different?”

~The pink one’s inherent stubbornness helped her over that hurdle.~ Kurama explains. ~Water chakra relies a great deal on introspection and inner peace, and something tells me that your Uchiha has trouble with the ‘peace’ part.~

Naruto pauses as he stands, a new thought piecing itself together in his head.

“I think I have an idea.”

~Oh, I’m gonna like this one, aren’t I?~

Naruto waits until Sasuke is mostly to his feet, the prankster in him watching for the precise
moment when the Uchiha’s guard will be at it’s lowest…

“Suiton: Flash Geyser.”

Sasuke’s reflexes aren’t quite so slow that the spout of water actual hits him in the face, but he does swing back and lose his balance on the water, careening under the surface with an echoing splash.

Kurama dissolves into laughter in the back of Naruto’s head and it’s so contagious that Naruto bends over with mirth too, their amusement feeding off each other until Naruto quite literally has tears in his eyes and an ache in his chest.

Sasuke hauls himself out of the water, expression nothing short of murderous, eyes narrowed with all the indignant fury of a drenched cat. The look in his dark eyes promises swift revenge.

Half an hour later, soaked and exhausted, Naruto tells him to try his meditation again.

“What, now?” Sasuke asks, incredulous, but this is the Sasuke Naruto had been after– tired and relaxed, at ease in a way he rarely lets himself be, limbs loose and eyes soft around the edges.

“Ya. You might be surprised.” Naruto assures.

The Uchiha shoots him a skeptical glance, but listens anyway and crosses his legs, dropping into meditation after a few moments of controlled breathing. Naruto watches him all the while, waiting for any indications that Sasuke’s figured it out.

He’s rewarded for his patience when the lines around Sasuke’s eyes tighten and loosen in turns, the harsh set of his mouth smooths out, and he blinks his eyes open, not in frustration, but in wonder.

“Got it?” Naruto asks, tilting his head and grinning because he knows the answer.

Sasuke snorts, but his mouth curves up in a little half smile, half smirk. “Ya, idiot. I got it.”

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Kakashi fully intends on being at least an hour late to his first training session with his brats. Best to teach them patience early on, he reasons, but it's also a subtle form of revenge for yesterday, petty as it may be.

He fully expects to spend his morning wandering uselessly around the open market after he finishes his daily memorial stone visit, but looking back, he really should have known better.

Because the last thing he expects after he rounds the corner onto the market road is to be ambushed by three twelve-year-olds on a mission.

He’s learned his lesson this time though, has clocked their individual chakra signatures and memorized their movement patterns enough to not only to see their ambush before they make it, but to act in kind as well.

Naruto hurtles past him, missing him by a handful of centimeters at most, coming to rest crouching on a bakery balcony.

“Late!” he shouts, hands cupped around his mouth like Kakashi can’t hear him from around the
“Oh really?” Kakashi says with faux innocence. “I must have lost track of time.”

They chase him across town.

It’s starts out as a hassle, and at first he does generally try to shake them off, and even succeeds a couple times, but instead of running off he lingers nearby watching the three Genin come together to go over strategy and plan.

*Watch, assess.* The memory of Iruka’s voice tells him. *Find out where they’re strong and where they need strength.*

So Kakashi starts to evaluate them. He judges their speed and coordination, power and agility, reflexes and response times. He finds out that Sakura hits hardest but also gets tired quickest, that Sasuke is fast but needs to hone his physical strength, that Naruto’s endurance is off the charts but his economy of motion needs work.

And then finds himself actually, legitimately, enjoying himself. He finds the brats are far easier to talk to when everyone’s in motion, even though in typical settings that’s usually the opposite of how things work out.

He finds out that the reason Naruto and Sasuke move so well together is because they live in the same dingy apartment, close enough that if they didn’t anticipate each other’s movements they would run into one another constantly.

He finds out that Sakura has been spending her mornings taking anatomy and healing lessons from one of the angriest shinobi Kakashi knows of, and gives her personal bonus points for both cunning and nerves– even Kakashi has trouble dealing with Ikari when he’s whole and uninjured.

He finds out that all three of them train together most mornings, and that they eat together most nights, and that even though Naruto’s apartment is by far the cheapest and smallest of all their homes, it’s the one they spend the most time in.

It’s like he’s inherited a family in the making, a set of siblings born, by some flaw in fate, to separate families. They’re each outcasts in some way, but they’ve found grounding and acceptance in each other, and even at this point Kakashi can tell they’re going to be so so strong.

*Choose Kakashi.* Iruka’s voice says again in the back of his head, but there is no choice, not really, and some part of him wonders if Iruka knew that from the start.

*Probably.* He thinks. In Kakashi’s experience, there’s very little that Iruka doesn’t know.

By the time he lets them catch him, it’s almost evening. Kakashi would have tried to stop the game earlier, but, to be honest, he hadn’t wanted to.

He takes his new brats out for ramen. It’s the least he can do.

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Genma drags him out for drinks later than night, with much complaining on Kakashi’s part. Something about the new teachers drowning their sorrows in good old-fashioned sake binging. Kakashi is fairly sure he’s just doing it to piss off Raidou– the Tokujo had spent that entire
morning loitering in the standby station looking like he’d just taken a bite out of a rotten lemon. Kakashi figures they’re just having a domestic spat— they’ve been arguing about Genma moving in for weeks now, not that Kakashi will admit to knowing that.

If he starts being loose tongued with gossip, Iruka will stop telling him things.

They all meet at a dark booth in the shinobi only section of the establishment, Genma, Anko and Hayate on one side, so that they can laugh and make fun as a unit, and Kakashi, Kurenai, and Asuma on the other, for solidarity.

He’s seen this kind of thing go down before. He expects complaints, whining, grousing, the whole nine yards. This is the most Genin to graduate at once in over a decade, and with all the clan heirs and such involved, he expects the moping to be spectacular.

That's… not what happens.

It turns into a teaching technique swap almost immediately.

Kurenai is the first to hound Kakashi about it, demanding any ideas he might have on training more physical kids— she has both an Inuzuka and a Hyuuga in her lineup, and both clans are known for being heavily taijutsu reliant— Kurenai has always leaned towards genjutsu. She gives him tips in exchange on basic genjutsu properties and underlines that his kids need to understand theories like reality fragmentation, and Kakashi takes vigorous mental notes. She gives Asuma the same tips on coaching his trio, the latest incarnation of the Ino-Shika-Cho formation. Apparently he’s having the most trouble assessing Shikamaru, no surprise there, since the boy would rather cloudwatch than participate in training. Hayate is the first to mention that playing shougi always focused Shikaku when he got lazy with his work, and it sort of devolves from there.

Kakashi walks away from the night only mildly tipsy instead of smashed, and with a plethora of knowledge to use in training his brats; ideas on out-of-the-box ninjutsu from Asuma, kenjutsu and taijutsu tips from Hayate, a list of agility and speed exercises from Genma, stealth and infiltration assessments from Anko.

He’s actually entertaining the idea of going to Gai for even more ideas. He must be out of his mind.

Maybe though, it’s a good thing.
The glade is quiet, the atmosphere still, the only sounds the soft rush of the creek winding through the grass and the rustle of the breeze tangling the branches of the willow. Even the crickets seem to have quieted their song to a pleasant background hum, and Shikamaru hasn’t heard the shrill caw of a crow since he got here.

He likes it here. It’s peaceful, calming, easy. The green branches of the willow paint a gorgeous picture against the backdrop of the slim waterfall, the grass is long and soft under his fingers, and the clearing gives him an unrestricted view of the sky.

This is Naruto’s place, and Shikamaru can’t even be envious– the Uzumaki had opened it to him and Kiba with a careless offering, like the magic of this glade wasn’t something to be coveted and hoarded close.

Shikamaru would have hoarded it.

He would have kept this peace and isolation all to himself given the chance, soaked it in night after night if he’d been the one to find it first. Naruto is too generous for his own good, and this isn’t the first time Shikamaru has had cause to think so.

So he and Kiba have an unspoken code when it comes to him. If Naruto won’t be selfish, they’ll be selfish for him.

It’s why Kiba hasn’t told his sister and Hinata about the Glade, it’s why Shikamaru hasn’t told Ino that he knows where Sakura disappears to so early in the morning, and why Choji only knows where to find him in an emergency. They’re selfish with Naruto’s secret.

Sakura likes the secluded freedom the Glade offers, and she has no desire to share it more than she does already.

Sasuke is possessive of this place for a different reason, so far as Shikamaru can tell. A reason that has little to do with the place itself and everything to do with the person it belongs to.

Shikamaru had come here early to soak in some alone time, unbothered by teammates and senseis and expectations. There are several places in the Nara forest where he could theoretically do the same thing, but his father knows how to find him there and none of those groves have quite the same view of the clouds.

He folds his arms behind his head, scanning the wispy stratus clouds and the patterns the waning light weaves between them, tucking colour into grooves like dye seeping through pulsed cotton.
First day of training had gone better than he thought it would, though Shikamaru had purposefully kept his expectations low. Asuma seems like a decent human being, even though sometimes Shikamaru gets the impression he’s trying a little too hard.

He lets his eyes slide closed, enjoying the feel of cool, clear air in his lungs and the soft petrichor tang to it that flavors the atmosphere when night approaches. He feels the shadows stretch across the glade, can see their contrast against the low sunbeams in his mind’s eye.

His peace is interrupted by a high bark that signals the end of his alone time, and his eyes flutter open to Akamaru bursting through the trees, sans ninja partner. The ninken lopes right at Shikamaru, unfortunately, sliding to a stop to give his cheek a long thorough lick. Shikamaru grunts in disgust, pressing a palm to the excited dog’s chest to prevent further slobbering kisses.

“Well I see you’re feeling better.” he mutters, giving Akamaru’s ear a grudging scratch.

The ninken yips happily, tail lashing back and forth, and then jumps over the bar of Shikamaru’s arm to land jarringly square on his chest, giving the shadow-nin’s other cheek a lick as though to even it out.

Shikamaru scrubs his forearm over his face to clear away the dog slobber. “Kiba! Come get your ninken off me, he doesn’t listen.” he growls when Akamaru tries to maul his face again despite his protests.

“Hold your horses Nara, I’m coming.” Kiba shouts as he makes his way up the river and through the final layer of brambles. “Akamaru! Here boy!”

The dog’s ears perk up and he yips in answer before bolting off Shikamaru’s chest to leap into Kiba’s jacket. Kiba zips it after him to keep the ninken secure, and Akamaru’s head pops out of his collar with a shake and another bark.

Kiba laughs at the disgruntled look on Shikamaru’s face. “It just means he likes you, Shika, don’t look so scandalized.” he plops down across from the Nara, and Shikamaru folds his arms back behind his head.

They don’t talk for a while, and Shikamaru is grateful for the quiet as Kiba feeds Akamaru biscuits produced from somewhere under his hoodie. The dog-nin breaks it though, after the ninken is stuffed and dozing curled on Kiba’s legs.

“You been thinking about what’s in that scroll?” he asks, rubbing a hand absently over Akamaru’s back.

“Mhm.” Shikamaru affirms, but doesn’t open his eyes.

“Kept me up last night, thinking about it.” Kiba muses.

It had kept Shikamaru up too, but he keeps that little fact to himself. Kiba can be annoyingly overprotective when he wants to be, and he knows that Shikamaru requires more sleep than most people.

Kiba freezes suddenly and lifts his head, giving the air a few cursory sniffs. “Sasuke’s here.” he announces.

True to word, a few seconds later the dark-haired dark-eyed Genin ducks through the growth, brushing leaf matter from his shoulder.
“Hey Uchiha.” Kiba quips.

“Hey dog-breath.” He says amicably. “Hey Akamaru.”

Akamaru yips at the acknowledgment and rolls over in Kiba’s lap for a belly rub. Kiba complies, and shots Sasuke the necessary scowl. “Where’s the rest of the pack?” He asks, sniffing the air again as though he expects to find Naruto and Sakura’s scents on the wind just behind him.

Sasuke drops down onto the grass on Shikamaru’s other side, propping himself up with one arm and slinging the other around a raised knee. He’s wearing a low-necked quarter sleeved top, mission grade, and a pair of sparring sweats in Uchiha navy. Shikamaru hasn’t seen that crested overshirt of his for at least a month.

“Sakura is still at the hospital.” he explains with a sigh. “A bunch of Chunin got injured in a border skirmish with Kumo and she stayed back to help. Naruto just ran home to get the scrolls. He’ll be here soon.”

“Hey dog-breath,” Kiba says. “Where’s the rest of the pack?”

Sasuke shrugs. “Yeah…” he says lowly, and Shikamaru would have interpreted the word as careless if he hadn’t seen the way Sasuke’s fingers curled tight in the grass. “I know the way he was talking last night made it sound like he’d only picked some things up out of the rubble of the city but…” Sasuke shakes his head. “Truth is, it’s more like he’s got an entire culture stuffed away in those scrolls.”

“That's the second time you’ve made that plural.” Shikamaru states, leaning up on his elbows. “There’s more than one scroll?”

“There are two.” Sasuke agrees, flashing a peace sign to emphasize his point. “The one he showed you guys has most of what he found in it– the second one is specifically for Kinjutsu.”

“Spooky.” Kiba mumbles. “He’s bringing both?”

Sasuke nods.

A crash and a rustle sounds from behind them. “Gez, who died? You three look like you just came from a funeral or something.” Naruto shoulders through the brambles, the two shining scrolls strapped to his hip. “We’re gonna have to start without Sakura. By the looks of the hospital, she’ll be there a while.” he announces.

He plops down on the grass and unhooks the gold trimmed scroll, unrolling it with practiced efficiency. He’s wearing a high necked long-sleeve despite the muggy weather and worn black mission pants, the hems of both wrapped flush up to his elbows and knees.

Naruto tucks himself next to Sasuke, close enough that their knees brush, but the Uchiha doesn’t seem to mind it as Naruto spreads the obsidian scroll across the grass. There are thirteen seals in all, each one marked at the top by a different symbol. Clan symbols.

“Which one is yours?” Shikamaru asks, eyes scanning the intricate lines and quietly marveling at the beauty of the chakrawork.

Naruto hesitates as if surprised by the question, like he hadn’t expected anyone to care enough to ask. The response, however small, makes a familiar dark anger stir in Shikamaru’s chest. It’s that same burning he feels when he sees Choji eating by himself on the academy training grounds, or when he catches Ino frowning at her own reflection. It’s a frustrated emotion born from being
unable to change something all at once, from the fact that there is no easy or simple fix for certain kinds of hurts.

He has to remind himself that change is rarely easy and never instant, that the best thing he can do is be present and be patient, and only speak when he knows he can make his words count.

At least in this battle, he’s far from alone. Sasuke’s seemingly easy lean into Naruto’s side is a testament to that, even though the blond’s mental hiccup only lasts about a second. Naruto traces his finger along the scroll to tap the centermost seal, one marked with a spiral stylized into a sun.

Shikamaru allows himself a small smile. “Let’s start with that one.”

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When Sakura walks into the Glade an hour later than she’d hoped to, stressed out and exhausted of chakra, she has to blink a couple times to fully take in the scene before her.

The boys are pouring over scrolls and notes and talking over each other with energy and drive that would allude more to some kind of war meeting than it would to a show-and-tell.

“Kiba, pass me those genjutsu notes.”

“Fine but I want that Tsubasa clan Jutsu if you can find it. The one with the perception stuff.”

“Here. Who has the Ido-Senshi katas?”

“Give me a second, I’m still looking them over. I’m pretty sure I’ve seen these concepts somewhere before…”

Sakura snorts to announce her presence. “Gez, you four sure got into it without me.”

Naruto looks up, completely ignores her statement, and throws a scroll at her face. “Sakura, take a look at that. The Komorebi clan archive is filled with stuff like it. Maybe you can make some sense of it all.”

She catches the scroll easily and rolls it open, wedging her way between Naruto and Kiba to make room for herself in the circle of chaos. She scans the contents of the scroll, eyes catching on certain words and phrases as she deciphers its use. “Is this a medical scroll? For enhancing chakra precision for some kind of acute emergency treatment?”

“Dude, you tell me.” Naruto mutters, trading a long grey scroll with Sasuke for an earth brown one. “I’m not sure what half the words on that are supposed to mean.”

“Uzumaki,” Kiba says loudly. “The hell is a Chaos Wheel?”

“A sealing symbol meant to concentrate and redirect chakra in rainfall patterns.” Naruto answers automatically, and Kiba scribbles something down in a blank book by his thigh, muttering about asking his sensei about inherent chakra properties and about needing another notebook for this shit.

Shikamaru is quiet, eyes eating up the pages of a thick tome that looks older than Sakura’s father. Sasuke is mumbling under his breath as he organizes weapon sets, varying from strange looking senbon and shuriken to long hooked scythes that he has to lay sideways so that nobody accidentally nicks themselves on the wicked sharp blades.
“I need all the katas for the weighted chains.” He announces suddenly without warning, and the boys stop what they’re doing to hand him a dozen or so scrolls that he rolls up and lies next to the aforementioned weapons. It’s all alarmingly efficient.

“What do you need me to do?” She asks Naruto, folding up the scroll she’s holding.

The Uzumaki leans back behind him, grabbing hold of a huge golden scroll and scooting back in the circle so he can set it over his knees without poking anyone in the eye. “We’re reorganizing and cataloguing everything by type so that it’s easier to find and use,” he explains. “Each big gold scroll has the contents of a particular clan’s legacy. Silver scrolls have artifacts, Grey scrolls have equipment, and Brown scrolls have books and non-storage scrolls. I was kind of in a rush so it was all really terribly put together when I sealed everything.”

“That’s putting it mildly.” Sasuke quips from his other side. “Who stuffs history and weapon katas into the same scrolls?”

“I didn’t actually have time to open them, jerk!” Naruto defends, and then turns back to Sakura. “We’re going through the paper stuff mostly right now. Scrolls and books and things. Anything sealing related goes to me, give Shika the theory and history stuff, Kiba gets the jutsu scrolls, Sasuke’s in charge of katas, any kind of non-jutsu training and, more recently, assorted pointy shit.”

Sasuke smacks him in the arm with the flat of a tanto blade. “Idiot.”

Naruto laughs. “Anyway,” he scoops up an assortment of scrolls and books that had been resting on the grass next to him and deposits them in front of her. “We saved you everything with medical jargon in it.”

Sakura squeaks in excitement. “Aww, you shouldn’t have!” she chirps eagerly, pressing a careless and obnoxious kiss to her friend’s cheek before digging into the font of information he’s placed in front of her.

“ Weirdo.” Naruto mutters, rubbing his cheek, but the word is fond.

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Late that night, as they pick up after themselves in the Glade, Naruto puts one of his gold scrolls down and gestures to Shikamaru.

“Hey, can I talk to you for a second?” He asks softly, and Shikamaru raises a single eyebrow. They’re a good distance away from everyone else, picking up some papers that had blown loose from a folio.

“What is it?”

“Something that’s maybe very classified.” Naruto says without preamble, and Shikamaru does freeze at that.
“How classified are we talking, here?” Shikamaru asks carefully, already sifting through possibilities and plans without really thinking about it.


Shikamaru shoots him the most unimpressed look he can muster. “Really, Naruto?”

Naruto makes a pained face. “Will you help me out or what? Yes or no question.”

The answer is yes, obviously. The reason why Shikamaru only has a couple of friends is because he’s willing to do just about anything for the ones he has. That Shikamaru will keep what he hears to himself is a natural given.

Shikamaru just nods, casual as can be. “It’s about Sasuke?” He asks conversationally. Naruto relaxes visibly.

“Yeah.” he says softly, bending down to pick up another paper scrap. “It’s about his brother. The massacre.”

Shikamaru nods again. “What exactly do you need?”

“To make sure it’s valid.” Naruto says, even quieter than before. “I’m not… I can’t tell him unless I know for a fact that it’s not…” he seems to be struggling with words so Shikamaru finishes for him.

“You want me to make sure the information is genuine. That all the facts add up.”

Naruto nods.

“Where’s the file exactly?” Shikamaru asks.

Naruto reaches under his shirt and pulls a thin folder from one of the hidden pockets. He hands it over, and Shikamaru tucks it quickly into his own shirt. It’s obvious the Uzumaki has thought this through.

“I’ll see what I can do.” Shikamaru promises.

Naruto nods, eyes warm with gratitude. “I owe you one. Anything you need, anytime, just name it.”

Shikamaru nods back, pressing a hand to the file in his shirt. He’s pretty sure he knows where to start.

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Chasing down their sensei for everyday training has become something of a team 7 morning chore. They give him fifteen minutes, because Sasuke had said something about Kakashi visiting the memorial stone most mornings and they’re not heartless, but after that he’s fair game.

But even though finding Kakashi-sensei isn’t all that hard, catching him is something else. Kakashi-sensei is the fastest shinobi Naruto’s ever met– it’s scary almost how close the three of them can be to catching up to him, and then the Jounin will just straight-up vanish, appearing a few meters away to lecture them on their form.

“Efficiency of movement, Naruto.” Kakashi singsongs at him when he lands too hard on a tree and
cracks the branch he’s standing on. “That jump required half as much energy as you gave it.”

Naruto grumbles, but does his best to adjust. Kakashi pushes them hard though, which Naruto appreciates, and doesn’t patronize them outside of occasional teasing. They’re still stuck doing D-ranks, which sucks, but they’re doing more a day than all the other teams, according to Sakura, which is enough to placate him.

Mostly. That’s not to say he doesn’t still complain about the myriad of ‘missions’ they’ve been doing that could be qualified, at best, as chores.

~It’s below your skill levels. All three of you.~ Kurama grouses, but it’s an old argument and Kakashi-sensei knows Naruto’s opinion on the matter. And Sasuke’s. And Sakura’s. He seems to enjoy annoying them, but he gives them harder workloads in training to compensate, so Naruto can’t complain that much.

At lunch a two weeks into training, Kakashi-sensei throws it into casual conversation over ramen while Naruto’s mouth is full.

“You three have the rest of the day off training.” he says, easy as can be. “I’m signing you up for a C-rank tomorrow, so no all-nighters.”

Naruto chokes on his soft-boiled egg and ends up coughing so bad that Sakura spends the next few minutes slapping his back.

“About time.” Sasuke mutters. “What kind of mission will it be?”

“That depends on what’s available, brat.” Kakashi says happily in response to Sasuke’s attitude. “But I’m hoping for something long and arduous like a border crawl or something.”

“Senseeeei, don’t be an ass.” Sakura gripes. “We can do a real mission, you know we can.”

“I do, but learning skills and applying them in practice are two different things. I want you to be prepared.”

Naruto swallows down the last of his coughs, but anything he might have shouted before gets caught in his throat. In Kakashi-speak, asking them to be prepared is pretty much the same as asking them to be careful, and as low key as it is, Naruto can sense the salt and citrus tang of worry radiating from him.

“Whatever mission we get, we’ll be prepared.” Naruto says earnestly. “We’ll take it seriously, sensei. Promise.”

Kakashi looks down at him, and Naruto feels the worry ease a bit. “Good.” He says, pushing his untouched ramen across the counter towards Naruto. “Go ahead, you’ll need it more than I will.”

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~Don’t forget to go over your equipment tonight. You have everything you need, right? You took what you could use out of the scrolls earlier? You bought enough rations? Made enough exploding tags?~

“Yes, Kurama, we bought everything we need. We went over it twice before we checked out.”

~What about the little Genesis? Does she have everything? Did she buy her rations?~
“Kuraaaama.”

~What? I’ve put a lot of work into you three brats. I’m not about to let you twerps get stabbed by some missing-nin or stranded in enemy territory.~

“It’s a C-rank. It’s not like we’re going off to war.”

~A lot of things can happen on a C-rank.~ Kurama insists.

“You’re a worse worrier than Iruka-sensei.”

~Lies.~

A knock brings both Naruto and Sasuke’s heads up from their weapon check. “I got it.” Naruto says, shifting to his feet. By the time he makes it to the kitchen he can feel the chakra on the other side of the door, so he doesn’t hesitate swinging it open.

Sakura shoulders in with a stormy expression and nothing resembling a greeting. “I’m staying here tonight.” she states crossly, stalking over to rummage through the pantry. She’s got nothing on her, no pack, no waist pouches. She’s in a pair of soft ratty civilian sweats and a tea-green t-shirt, like she’d been about to go to bed.

Naruto watches for few seconds as she storms around the kitchen, opening and closing cupboards and doors with no obvious purpose, before scooting stealthily over to the shitty coffee maker and starting it up.

Eventually she seems to run out of steam, plopping down into Naruto’s chair at the kitchen table and dropping her head into her hands. Naruto opens the fridge to pull out the carton of milk and pulls the sugar across the counter to fix Sakura a cup of sweet, creamy coffee. He doesn’t try to comfort her, she’s too stubborn for that, so he just leaves the coffee cup in front of her and exits the kitchen.

Sasuke is leaning on the other side of the wall next to the doorframe, obviously eavesdropping. “She okay?” he asks in a whisper.

“Give her a minute.” Naruto whispers back.

Sasuke nods, and they go back to the main room where they’ve been cataloguing the equipment they might need tomorrow.

A few minutes later Sakura comes in and settles herself between them, her back leaning against the front of Naruto’s shoulder and her legs sprawled over Sasuke’s lap. Her eyes are red, but neither of them mentions it.

“Parents can be so stupid sometimes.” She mutters, sipping at her coffee. “Civilian parents especially.” She corrects.

“We wouldn’t really know.” Sasuke says blithely, tucking an arm over her knees but otherwise not looking up.

Naruto snorts, wrapping his own arm around her side, and starts to divide everything into thirds instead of halves. Who needs parents anyway? They’re team 7. They have each other.

They’ll be fine either way.
Meaning of a Monster

Chapter Notes

Whoops. Sorry this is late guys, but this chapter kind of... got away from me. And by got away from me, I mean sprinted away like it was on fire. This thing is easily more than twice my normal chapter length, holy shit, and, warning, charged with angst and feelings. And I'm not even sorry. Enjoy this monstrosity, it ends in a cliffhanger. *evil laughter* I regret nothing.

It’s still dark when Kakashi perches on Iruka’s window frame, maybe an hour or so before sunrise, but the kitchen light is on so he lets himself in, unsurprised to find the Chunin’s bed unoccupied. He knocks softly on the wall in respect to the hour.

“Come on in!” Iruka calls from kitchen.

Kakashi slips inside and finds he’s caught the academy sensei in the middle of his morning routine, a set of senbon and a couple of kunai set out on the table next to a roll of limb wrap, a kettle boiling merrily away on the stove. Iruka is in the process of tying up his hair, his flak jacket draped over a kitchen chair.

“Morning.” Kakashi greets, lingering in the doorway.

“Morning. Tea?” Iruka asks back.

“If it’s not too much trouble.”

Iruka turns to the cabinet and pulls out a tin before fishing in the cabinets for mugs. “You’re welcome to a rice ball if you’d like one.” Iruka offers, a little too cheery.

Kakashi takes a seat at the table and helps himself to a salmon one while the Chunin’s back is turned, humming in thanks.

“I wasn’t actually expecting you to be up this early.” Kakashi says after he’s finished, and when Iruka turns around his smile is week at best. “Did something happen?” he asks.

Iruka rubs his temple with a knuckle, letting his smile fall to a frown. “Someone tried to take a kinjutsu scroll from the archives last night. Got caught by the chakra alarms. I have to go in early to help sort the whole mess out.” Iruka grumbles.

Kakashi tilts his head to the side in confusion. “Why you? Surely the on duty Anbu can handle it, let you sleep.”

Iruka sighs heavily and sets one of the steaming mugs in front of Kakashi, curling a hand around his own cup. “It’s not that simple. The offender was a teacher.”

“Who?”
Iruka grits his teeth. “Mizuki.”

Kakashi sucks a sympathetic breath between his teeth, but Iruka glares at him before he can say anything.

“Don’t start. I should have seen it coming. His behavior has been off for months.” Iruka chides himself, grabbing a roll of limb wrap and setting about looping it over his shins, tucking senbon into the folds.

“You two were friends as kids though, right?” Kakashi says, taking a sip from his tea while Iruka is preoccupied with the wrappings.

“We grew pretty far apart as we got older.” Iruka explains. “I don’t think he ever got over the fact that I’m not attracted to him, or—” he stalls, waving his hand absently like he’s searching for an appropriate word.

“People in general?” Kakashi finishes.

“Exactly.” he affirms, reaching for a few freshly sharpened kunai and slipping them into the pouch on his thigh. “Anyway, what brings you here so early? I doubt your Genin will appreciate the pre-dawn wake-up call. I know for a fact that a certain Uchiha doesn’t take that very well.”

“I am perfectly aware of Sasuke’s tendencies to react violently to specific… surprises.”

That startles a laugh out of Iruka. “You are such an ass, you know that?”

“I probably have bruises somewhere to prove it.”

Iruka snorts at that, but his mood seems to have improved already. “So what are you up for, if not to torture your Genin?” he asks.

Kakashi hums. “Just… finishing my morning routine early. The brats have their first C-rank in a few hours. I figured I’d get a head start.”

The fact is that Kakashi hadn’t slept much last night at all, wondering if this decision was the right one. It’s not as though he’s that worried about the mission, C-ranks can be arduous, but there’s usually no real combat involved with anyone but common bandits. The issue is he knows that this is the end of harmless D-rank missions for good— once his brats know what an actual mission feels like, they’re not likely to want to do anything else.

There goes all his free time.

“Normally I’d say it’s too early to send a team so green on a difficult mission so soon, but I’m not actually worried.” Iruka says easily. “It’s well within their abilities, and if anything does go wrong, there’s no one I’d trust to protect them more than you.”

Of all the responses Kakashi had expected, Iruka’s easy acceptance had not been on the list— Umino Iruka is usually a champion angry worrier, and Kakashi had been counting on a lecture at least.

“Well.” Kakashi drawls, carefully not acknowledging the last part of Iruka’s statement. “That was less violent than I expected.”

Iruka throws a shuriken at him to make up for it.
Later, when Kakashi pauses at the threshold of another window, a smaller window, he’ll wonder at the small something growing in his chest, wonder at the new warmth creeping through his cold bones.

Naruto’s apartment is even smaller than he thought, nothing more than a triad of small rooms; a main area that is both bedroom and living space, with only a bed, nightstand, small shelf, and closet within, a short hallway leading to a tiny square kitchen and a shut door that likely leads to the only bathroom. It’s hardly enough room for one person, let alone the three Genin sleeping curled together like a mismatched family of alleycats, tucked under each other for warmth. Their heads are pillowed on travel packs and each other, limbs flung and folded haphazardly.

Sakura is still in civilian pajamas, a telltale redness to the corners of her eyes and her nose that says she’s been crying. As if in response to her vulnerability, Sasuke and Naruto are curled around her like barriers against an invisible threat, lying opposite directions like a symbol for balance. Like Yin and Yang.

These kids are something else.

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Naruto wakes when Sakura’s knee lodges particularly painfully in the small of his back, blinking his eyes open to grey predawn light. His stomach rumbles.

~Breakfast time, kit. Also, your sensei came by while you were snoozing and left something on the table.~ Kurama tells him absently, yawning widely.

“Kakashi-sensei was here?” He asks, rolling to his feet and extracting himself from the nest of limbs on the floor.

~About a half an hour ago.~ Kurama affirms. ~Sneaky little shit, that one. I almost didn’t notice him.~

Naruto wanders over to the kitchen table, and sure enough there’s a note and a plastic grocery bag resting there that definitely hadn’t been there before they’d passed out, and Naruto rubs his eyes, squinting down at the sharp scratchy writing.

*Meet me at the mission desk by 9:30. Your assignment is an escort mission across country borders, expected one week in length. Pack accordingly.*

*Naruto; pack lunches may not consist of instant ramen. I’m expecting down time during the journey, so don’t forget any study materials or jutsu you three may want to work on. Sasuke; remember the equipment for kenjutsu practice and check that Naruto does not pack any instant ramen. Sakura; the change of clothes is for you, make sure the boys don’t forget anything important and that everyone has their emergency supplies.*

The note is signed with a Henohenomoheji, an arrangement of hiragana characters made to look like the faces school kids put on scarecrows. The play on Kakashi’s name, *scarecrow*, makes
Naruto roll his eyes. He peeks into the bag, noting the dark clothing inside and then promptly leaving it alone– it’s for Sakura, he’s not going to dig through it.

He takes a quick shower and then starts breakfast, counting on the smell of rice and salmon to wake his teammates before too long. While he works he goes over supplies in his head, trying to remember if he has the scroll for that bone repair jutsu Sakura had been working on or if she took it home with her.

Sasuke is up first, and comes into the kitchen rubbing the skin over his hip. “She kicks in her sleep.” He mutters crossly.

“I noticed.” Naruto responds with a sympathetic wince. He goes back to the fish searing away in the pan, and Sasuke checks the rice and stirs the miso pot without being asked. They work in companionable silence for a while and Sakura must well and truly be out of it, because even when breakfast is finished and the smell is rich throughout the entire apartment, Sakura still doesn’t stir. Last night must have taken more out of her than he thought.

“Is there some kind of rule against ninja punching civilians?” he asks absently.

Sasuke hums as they sit down, taking a bite of his breakfast before he bothers answering. “The actual law is long and unnecessarily complicated, but it pretty much amounts to ‘don’t’.” he drawls, but the low-key frustration in his eyes tells him Sasuke understands where he’s coming from. That’s the thing about Sasuke– his eyes usually say what the rest of his face doesn’t give away.

~Hey kit.~ Kurama calls, when he’s most of the way through his meal. ~When you’re done, we need to talk.~

Naruto pauses with his chopsticks halfway to his mouth. Kurama’s tone is soft and serious and sets Naruto’s gut on rolling into knots. He has a feeling he knows what Kurama wants to talk about.

“Dobe?”

The insult-turned-nickname draws Naruto’s attention immediately up and out of his own head, and his eyes meet the confused borderline concern in Sasuke’s. It’s a dangerous look, that one. The last time Sasuke had looked at him like that, Naruto had turned around and straight up spilled his guts about Uzushio. He suddenly has to go, has to get out of this room before those eyes coax a far more dangerous secret out of him.

He clears his throat and breaks their gazes, making a show of rubbing at his eye as he sets down his chopsticks. “Sorry. Headache.” He hedges, pushing up from the table. “I think I’m gonna go see if I can meditate it off before we go. Come get me before 9:00?”

Sasuke blinks, bemused. “Of course.” he says automatically, and Naruto heads out the door before he can say anything else.

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When Sakura walks into the kitchen, rubbing at slightly swollen eyes, she finds Sasuke staring at the door, her blond idiot nowhere in sight.

“Where’s Naruto?” She asks, wandering into the kitchen to stand next to him.

Sasuke doesn’t take his eyes off the door. “He went to go meditate.” he says oddly.

That’s not exactly strange– Naruto meditates a lot, it’s a training habit he quickly passed to them,
and useful for sorting out chakra flow and analyzing physical or mental catches. “So?” she says, because judging from the look on Sasuke’s face, that’s not all that happened.

“He said he had a headache.” Sasuke says, again in that strangely intense tone.

“It’s happened before.” Sakura reasons.

“He lied.”

That does catch Sakura’s attention. Naruto by his very nature is the most honest person she knows. He’s a terrible liar, even with stupid little white lies, so he never bothers, especially not with his friends.

“Why would he lie to you?” Sakura asks, disbelieving.

Sasuke shakes his head, looking lost. “I don’t know.”

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When Naruto gets to the glade, he makes sure to re-energize the seals set into the trees along the space, something he hasn’t needed to do in a while, and sets a chakric proximity alarm too, just in case. He can’t risk someone finding him on accident.

He takes a deep breath and strips off his loose fitting overshirt, leaving him in his regular sleeveless undershirt. He takes off the wrapping on his shins and folds his pants up over his knees, slipping out of his sandals. The water of the basin is cool as he steps over it, the willow's branches sweeping past him as he makes his way to the waterfall. In a chakra enhanced leap he alights on an outcropping halfway up the cascade, clear and well worn by his presence and the presence of his friends. Here, the water crashes off the rock, sending its spray in all directions before it continues its downward journey. The stone is slick and smooth as a result, so he’s careful as he settles under the rush of the water.

The roar drowns out everything outside of him until the only sounds he’s aware of are the ones within— the thumping of his heart, the dull rumble of the minute movements of his muscles, and finally, the whisper of chakra through his cells. He steps back inside his head, and all other noises cut out but these.

The water of the seal space is abnormally chilly with Naruto’s unease, cold against his legs as he opens his eyes. Kurama is right in front of him, something that might have startled him if Naruto hadn’t sensed it already.

Kurama’s fur is bright and brilliant amber, soft looking in the sunshower light. His eyes look more and more gilded every day, a ring of rose hued gold around the edges of his irises. Even now, months and months from that terrifying rush to Uzushio, it’s a relief to see his bijuu so healthy. He looks even better now than when Naruto first met him, alive and brimming with energy and chakra. When Naruto had commented on it, Kurama had merely told him it was his fault, and hadn’t said anything else.

Kurama immediately tucks his nose into Naruto’s chest, and Naruto presses his head against the nine-tails’ muzzle for comfort. As another result of the shared seal space, the line between his emotions and Kurama's has become fuzzy and blurred, allowing them to draw and fold together when they become too strong. Kurama can sense his anxiety in the same way Naruto can sense the bijuu’s frustration or unrest, and sensing the cause of these things is even easier.
Kurama knows without him saying that he’s afraid, so afraid, of his friends finding out what he is. It’s not that he’s ashamed of Kurama in any way, or ashamed of what he is, but years and years of discrimination and hate doesn’t come from nowhere, and his friends mean so much to him that the thought of them hating him for being a jinchuuriki is something he can hardly stomach thinking of. But he can’t keep this secret forever, can’t hide what he is from Sasuke and Sakura. He doesn’t want to.

He tells Kurama as much, even though his bijuu already knows.

By the end of it he has tears in his eyes that he refuses to let fall, and the light has dimmed to a pale filter across the water. Kurama curls around him as he speaks, enclosing Naruto in a cavern made from his amber tails, forelegs looped around where he sits, nose settled past his knees.

~In my not-so-humble opinion, squirt, I don’t think you have anything to worry about.~ Kurama rumbles when he’s finished, lifting a claw to push some of Naruto’s hair out of his eyes. It’s been getting long enough so that he can push parts of it behind his ears.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he grumbles, angrily wiping the wetness from his eyes.

Kurama chuckles a little, a sound that moves through the spaces in Naruto’s chest, banishing some of the overcast. ~I never thought I’d say this, but I don’t think you’re giving them enough credit.~ Kurama ducks his head closer and pulls his forelegs tighter so that Naruto can feel the press of his fur, warm and supportive, against his back. ~And I do know this. If they do find out and suddenly decide to label you a monster for something you had no control over? Then they never deserved you in the first place. That’s fact.~

And goddammit Naruto just stopped feeling like he was going to cry, and now fresh salt water is welling up in his eyes.

~Not only that, but if they did hate you, and you decided to run from here, off into the unknown with no one at all beside you, then know this;~ Kurama’s words are iron with conviction and soft with affection, and Naruto’s still not sure what he did to deserve that, to deserve a friend, a parent like Kurama, and his last sentence makes the tears spill over in earnest. ~You will have me until the end of time. No matter what.~

Naruto lets himself cry for a minute or two, but now he’s laughing though the tears, and the stormy sunlight floods the seal space again in force. The water warms in a rush, swirling as if stirred by an ocean current, rushing to fill the air with warmth.

He wipes his eyes and looks up, speaking as soon as he finds his voice. “Hard to argue with that.”

~I’m usually right.~ Kurama boasts. ~You should listen to me more often.~

Naruto laughs again. “I always listen to you.” He counters.

Kurama smiles, fangless and soft. ~Then listen to me on this, kit. Don’t worry about what your friends will think if they know. If you need me, if you need my strength to protect what’s yours, promise me you won’t hesitate.~

Naruto nods, looking up into the amber eyes of his bijuu. “I promise.”

~Good.~ Kurama rumbles. ~On a less serious note, even if you did decide to run off into the sunset, I’m pretty sure your friends would drop what they’re doing to follow you anyway.~

Kurama huffs. ~Well maybe not your Shikamaru or your Inuzuka, they have too much binding them here, but the little Genesis and the baby Uchiha? Definitely.~

“How would you know that?” Naruto asks, suspicious that Kurama might just be telling him things to make him feel better.

Kurama snorts, and the breath rustles Naruto’s hair. ~Because you don’t give yourself enough credit either, brat. They can’t help it. It’s a matter of gravity.~

Naruto makes a face. “You’re talking in riddles again, Kurama.”

The bijuu chuckles at that. ~It’s alright kit. It’s probably best you don’t know, anyway.~

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Kurama kicks him out not long after that, ordering him to actually meditate before their mission so that he’s in top form. He opens his eyes, watching as the long seal lines on his arms and legs fade away again. After a long moment, he curls his hands together on his calves and slips into true mediation, focusing on systematically smoothing out his chakra flow.

The proximity alarm alerts him to Sasuke’s presence a full half hour before Naruto expects him, startling him out of his task. The alarm is a buzz of vibration against his arm over the anchor seal he’d set there, and he deactivates it as soon as he senses that the presence is Sasuke’s, clearing the chakra pattern from his skin with a swipe of his palm.

He feels instantly guilty for running off and hiding, and it occurs to him that Sasuke had probably seen through his headache ruse as soon as the lie had left his mouth. Naruto has always been a shitty liar, especially when it comes to his friends, and Sasuke knows him better than anyone.

He swallows as the Uchiha appears through the trees, making his way slowly across the grass to stand at the edge of the waterfall basin by Naruto’s discarded shirt and sandals. Naruto expects the question any minute, the accusation, and steels himself for it.

It never comes.

Instead, Sasuke casts a glance down at Naruto’s shirt and shoes and pulls off his own overshirt, stepping out of his sandals and onto the water, pausing to fold the hems of his pants neatly up his calves. He hops up into the outcropping and doesn’t say a word other than to tell Naruto to shove the hell over.

It’s weird and tense for about half a second, but then Naruto relaxes again, settling back into his head to resume his internal check-up. It’s even easier now with the Uchiha’s shoulder pressed lightly against his own– Sasuke’s presence has always been a calming one, an easy match to Naruto’s sometimes over-rampant energy.

When they both surface about twenty minutes later, ducking out of the falls to dry off, Naruto murmurs an apology under his breath.

Sasuke just nudges his shoulder with his own, a companionable shove that speaks volumes coming from the Uchiha. “Don’t be stupid.” he mutters, and they don’t talk about it for the rest of the day.

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In Sasuke’s less than charitable opinion, Tazuna the bridge builder is a cranky senile old civilian that doesn’t deserve their presence let alone their protection. He calls them children and brats and the only person in the universe that is allowed to call Sasuke a brat is Kakashi-sensei, because when he says it it’s more of a teasing nickname than anything else, and the very idea that this stupid civilian think’s he superior to them because of his age makes Sasuke’s skin crawl.

But this is their first C-rank mission so he keeps his mouth firmly shut, teeth grit around the biting insult that wants to roll off his tongue, glaring every time the old man’s eyes even drift his way.

Sakura is grumbling under her breath next to him about stupid civilian mannerisms, and an obvious twitch has started to set into her jaw every time Tazuna speaks. She looks murderous and they haven’t even left the Hokage’s office yet.

This is the first time he’s seen Sakura in true ninja dress and he has to say it suits her; her ensemble consists of a chakra laced mesh long-sleeve under a sleeveless top of thick black material ribbed with pouches along the sides for senbon and shuriken. The top pulls low over dark Kunoichi leggings with sewn in kunai pouches below each hip, ending tucked into matching sandals with reinforced ankle straps. Kakashi’s care package had also included a pair of fingerless gloves and a fitted field medic belt, lined with pouches and leather hoops meant to hold vials of medicine or poison.

But the most obvious change by far is her hair— that morning, after she’d showered and brushed out the rosy strands into a damp curtain, she’d given her long hair a lingering, calculated look, and asked Sasuke to get the scissors.

She’d had him sheer off a whole twenty centimeters.

Her hair, which now rests just past her shoulders when left free, is pulled up into a smart tail that no longer brushes her back. She’d parted it so that all her fringe fell to the right side of her face, and then braided the loose hair back in three thin plaits and tucked them into the rest of her ponytail.

Sasuke is both proud and slightly embarrassed to say that she looks more mature than both he and Naruto combined, and resolves to drag the Uzumaki equipment shopping as soon as they get back.

Speaking of Naruto, he’s been surprisingly quiet after the first round of defensive growling he’d snarled in old man Tazuna’s direction. As they escort the bridge builder out of the village, Naruto’s glare becomes more wary than affronted.

“What’s up?” Sasuke asks as they pass the outer village gate, eyeing the bridge builder to make sure they are far enough away that he can’t eavesdrop.

“The old-timer is hiding something.” Naruto murmurs, his nose scrunched up the way it gets when he’s genuinely confused. “Not sure what though.”

If Sasuke knows anything at all about Naruto it’s that his instincts are usually spot on, so if he thinks there’s something fishy happening, there’s a good chance he’s right.

Sakura slants a surreptitious glance Tazuna’s way. “Should we tell Kakashi-sensei?”

Naruto shakes his head. “Nah, he probably already knows.”

They spend the next few hours talking; taking turns exploring around the path and watching the
bridge builder suspiciously. About halfway through the day, not long before they plan to break for lunch, Naruto’s head snaps up suddenly and he casts his gaze around.

Just as Sasuke is about to ask what’s wrong, he catches movement out of the corner of his eye, a shadow out of place in the trees. Sakura blinks hard a couple times as she spots a patch of water in the path, and all three them know something’s wrong in under a minute.

“Kakashi-sensei.” Naruto calls.

“Good senses, Naruto.” Kakashi replies cheerily. “I feel a learning opportunity coming, I think. How about it? You three feel up to it?”

“Anything to break up the boredom.” Sasuke drawls, keeping his senses cast wide and listening for any more signs of enemy movement.

“We can handle it.” Sakura assures, stretching her arms above her head. To anyone watching it looks like an idle motion, but Sasuke knows better– the movement pulls at muscle fibers and tendons to ready them for sudden and explosive movement.

Kakashi hums idly. “I’ll leave it to you then.”

Old man Tazuna is staring at all four of them in obvious confusion, looking back and forth between Kakashi and the three Genin that have begun to bracket him in a subtle protective formation; Naruto and Sasuke slightly ahead on either side of him, Sakura trailing behind and making a show of skipping absently and studying passing flora.

Just because the old guy is a jerk doesn’t mean they won’t do their jobs.

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Tazuna is aware of the fact that when he contracted this mission, low as his funds were, that he wasn’t going to manage to secure very much in the way of protection.

But he’d been hoping, at least, for more than children.

Three twelve-year-old brats and their lazy sensei is what amounts to his escort, and Tazuna is going to need a lot more than luck if he’s going to make it all the way to Wave like this. He’s going to need a goddamn miracle.

Part way through the first day’s trek though, something shifts in their demeanor. It’s something Tazuna wouldn’t have noticed if he weren’t sandwiched right between the kids, a tension in the air and in their small forms that hadn’t been there before. He hears the blondie call out to his teacher, walking a few meters ahead of them, but can’t follow the conversation they’re having.

A few minutes later there’s a shift in the air, a rush of motion, and suddenly the two boys in front of him are nothing but blurs. He has just enough time to recognize two extra bodies, masked dark-eyed adults, before the tiny pink haired little girl behind him grabs ahold of him by the back of his shirt and yanks him backwards like he’s made nothing but of paper mache, tucking him behind her as the two boys, little more than gold and black smears in Tazuna’s eyes, slam two full grown men to the ground with relative ease.
One of the enemy ninja, and they are ninja, Tazuna can see that now, swings a whip-like chain weapon high as he goes down beneath the blonde brat, arcing it towards his dark haired companion. The razor edge of the weapon never gets close to its mark though—blondie swings his arm to the side, kunai in hand, and knocks the weapon off course at it’s base, pulling the end of the thing wide of the dark haired brat’s back. Said brat then twists around, uses his own Kunai to loop through one of the holes in the weapon’s links, and drives the bladed chain home to loop around his own assailant’s neck. The other one is pinned beneath the wicked sharp edge of blondie’s kunai, both arms pinned under the brats’ legs.

A slow clap and a low whistle come from their sensei, who ambles over lazily. “Good job, you two. Very quick work. Sakura, would you do the honors of making sure our friends here don’t go anywhere?”

Tazuna stares as the little pink haired girl chirps a happy “Sure thing, sensei!” and proceeds to pull a few lengths of rope from nowhere at all and tie two full grown and disoriented men up to a nearby tree. The dark haired boy and the blond slap palms with triumphant smirks.

Their sensei laughs. “Alright you three, settle down. Now, Naruto, you’re the one that sensed them first, what method did you use?”

The golden haired brat smiles sheepishly and rubs the back of his head. “I just sensed their chakra. They weren't being very subtle about throwing it around.”

Their sensei nods. “Very good. You’re getting better at developing your chakra sense. Sasuke?”

The dark haired boy shrugs. “I clocked their movements outside the path.”

The silver-haired Jounin hums approvingly. “Keen eyes, even though cloaking jutsu. Good. Sakura?”

“Puddle.” the little girl says blithely. The Jounin laughs and both boys groan.

“How the hell did we miss that?” The blonde mutters.

“It hasn’t rained in weeks.” the dark haired boy agrees darkly.

Maybe Tazuna’s not as down on his luck as he originally thought.

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When they manage to break for lunch the Jounin sensei, Hatake Kakashi is his name, corners him just outside the clearing they’ve settled down in.

“I believe you and I need to have a talk, Mr. Tazuna.” the man says lowly, and the intensity beneath the seemingly benign words tells Tazuna it’s not actually a request.

“Yes?” he responds, trying to keep his voice steady and inflectionless. He doesn’t have much experience dealing with ninja, never knew what all the fuss was about, but he’s starting to see the dangerous edge to the man before him that tells him any laziness he’s perceived has been a ruse.

“Those men back there were ninja from the Hidden Mist, Chunin in rank, and while I would normally be willing to give you the benefit of the doubt about whether those men were after you or not, I’m afraid in this case I must be frank.”

Suddenly all pretense of pleasantry has dropped right off the man’s face, his single grey eye
sharpening from it’s lazy curve into a gaze keen and pointed enough to cut.

“If you have willingly endangered my team by lying about the nature of this mission to the Hokage, and you continue to be silent about any dangers you are aware of, I will take my kids and leave you here in the wilderness to fend for yourself. Are we clear?”

Tazuna swallows hard, feeling sudden cold sweat bead on the back of his neck. “Y-yes.”

Hatake straightens out of his space then and the facade is back, the false cheer and ease returning to his posture and what Tazuna can see of his face. “Good. Now, do you have something to tell me Mr. Tazuna?”

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Team 7 spends the rest of the day playing the ninja version of capture the flag—with Kakashi as the referee and old man Tazuna as the flag. Naruto’s not sure how to feel about their seemingly benign C-rank suddenly jumping to a B-rank, but he’s never been one to do something halfway and the bridge builder’s cause seems just enough.

They take turns playing the attackers and the defenders, and play chakra-less as per Kakashi’s instructions. He wants them to save their strength in case they’re attacked again, and no one argues.

“Do you three always train like this?” Old man Tazuna asks him when it’s his turn to play protector, eyes and senses scanning the trees for any sign of his teammates.

“This is more like a game than actual training.” Naruto admits honestly. “I’m pretty sure Kakashi-sensei is just having us do it because we tend to get into trouble when we’re bored.”

Tazuna looks at him oddly, but Naruto is too busy watching the trees to dissect the expression with any real focus.

Naruto calls for a break a while later, when he and Sasuke are the attackers and Sakura is the guardian, after watching Sasuke rub at his eyes for the third time in as many minutes.

“What’s wrong, Jerk?” he asks as the settle to walk together, checking his friend’s eyes for signs of injury. They look fine on the outside, if a little red from rubbing. “Did one of those stupid demon brothers get sand in your eyes?”

Sasuke shakes his head, pressing the heel of his palm into the orbit of his left eye. “No, it’s… I think there might be something wrong with my sharingan.”

That catches Naruto’s full attention. “Wrong? Like how wrong?”

“Well I’ve been feeling it coming all week, right?”

Naruto nods; Sasuke had told him that much.

Sasuke sighs and blinks a couple times, hard. Now that Naruto looks closely his eyes do seem kind of off. Inside the normal shiny ebony of Sasuke’s irises Naruto can see strange striations and reflections, wine-red flickers of light out of place with the evening sunshine.

“Everything my clan has written on the activation of the sharingan says that it’s supposed to come
in stages, one or two tomoe at a time until it completes at six. But according to the writings, my first couple of tomoe should have surfaced already, at least.”

~What’s this about stages?~ Kurama cuts in suddenly in the back of his head. Naruto doesn’t answer because Sasuke starts to speak again.

“They also say that it’s supposed to burn to the surface, that the buildup is supposed to feel like fire, but all I feel is pressure.”

“Really?” Sakura asks, instantly concerned. “Does it hurt?”

Sasuke shakes his head again. “That’s the thing, it’s supposed to, but it doesn’t. It’s just pressure; uncomfortable, but not painful.”

“Can I see?” Sakura asks, skipping forward a few steps to walk closer beside him. “Just check if maybe it’s not something else?”

Sasuke hesitates for a second, but then nods, and Sakura reaches up to start the hand signs for a simple diagnostic jutsu.

“Kurama? Do you know what’s going on?”

~No, but from what I know of the sharingan, it’s not supposed to occur in stages and it’s definitely not supposed to cause pain.~

“So I don’t need to worry or I do need to worry?”

~I’m not sure.~

Naruto resists the urge to groan.

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As Zabuza peers down at the group of young ninja below him, he resists the urge to groan. Kids? Has Konoha’s Fire Shadow finally gone senile? This should be a Chunin level mission at least.

He’s about to drop down and get this over with, but he pauses when he catches sight of the Jounin sensei.

Oh he’d recognize that silver hair anywhere, with that masked face and that covered eye– this particular ninja has a place honor in his old Kiri Bingo Book, a monster in his own right, just like Zabuza himself.

As though summoned by the thought, the Jounin stops mid stride and looks up into the trees, eyes landing unerringly on Zabuza’s cloaked form.

“Sakura, Naruto, Sasuke.” the man says softly, “Defensive formation.”

To their credit the brats don’t hesitate, jumping into a triad around the bridge builder, kunai raised. Some part of Zabuza had hoped they’d be cowards– he really hates killing kids, Genin or otherwise.
Oh well, nothing he can do about it now. He’s a tool in another’s hands now, a monster on a leash. He needs the bridge builder dead—once he’s finished with the copy-nin, he can make the brat’s death quick.

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Midway through the fight, Zabuza is forced to reassess his position.

*Those are not Genin.*

They can’t be, not with the way they move. The dark haired one is fast enough to rival Haku, which is impressive for a ninja of any rank. The girl’s raw strength had taken him completely off guard when she’s not only countered his attack on the bridge builder, but also completely destroyed his footing with a chakra-enhanced strike to the ground beneath his feet.

And then there’s the golden haired little shit.

Zabuza is forced to leap back from their protective formation, rubbing his jaw from where the brat had struck him. His face is numb from where the kid’s fist had made contact, and the skin around the area is buzzing with some kind of chakra that keeps him from channeling any of his own energy to the skin there.

*What the hell did that little peon do to me?*

He doesn’t have much time to think about the answer, because he quickly learns that it was a bad idea to ignore the Jounin to go straight for his target, in an effort to lure the Copy-nin into making a mistake.

He feels the cold press of a kunai against his jaw almost as soon as he leaps back to the water he’d conjured to put the terrain on his side, the icy edge of metal resting just shy of his carotid. He’s already preparing for a substitution when Jounin says something he doesn’t expect.

The Konoha-nin’s voice drops low with dark genuine fury, so low that Zabuza himself barely hears the words even when he’s the one they’re directed at; “Try to touch my kids again, and I’ll tear your spine out through your throat.”

Zabuza knows threats. He’s familiar with threats. This is not a threat.

This is a promise.

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So.

Kakashi-sensei is a badass.

Naruto had known, sort of abstractly, that Kakashi was a Jounin and thus one of the top ranked ninja in the village as a result.

But knowing that and seeing his sensei match a powerful missing-nin move for move and then *beat said missing-nin at his own game,* is something else to see.

He watches as two jutsu roar to life at the same time, dragons formed out of roaring twisting water. But even though the hand signs had been identical and the activation perfectly mirrored, Kakashi-
sensei’s water dragon decimates Zabuza’s, crashing faster and harder and sending the Kiri-nin staggering back.

“How is he doing that?” He asks Kurama. “All the movements were the same, why is Kakashi-sensei’s stronger?”

~It’s the chakra.~ Kurama answers, watching keenly through Naruto’s eyes. ~I think your sensei might be a Paragon.~

“What does that mean?”

~It’s a phenomenon that occurs when someone resonates very powerfully with a particular type of elemental chakra. When this occurs, said element’s pathways can begin to spread to encroach on the pathways of the other elements, so that the paragon element bleeds into the whole of that person’s chakra. If you look closely, you can see elements of lightning even when your sensei is working with water– the flow is faster, the strikes harder.~

Naruto does as instructed and watches, and just like Kurama says he can see the subtle change in the chakrawork, can even see the occasional spark in the rippling water.

“Whoa.”

~Indeed. You father was a wind Paragon I think.~

“How’re your eyes?” Naruto asks Sasuke over the dinner Tsunami-san had graciously offered them, speaking lowly.

“Even closer to the surface than before.” Sasuke says, pressing a knuckle over the bridge of his nose. “And still no burning.”

“Maybe that’s a good thing.” Naruto says softly, trying to tread lightly on the sensitive subject that is Sasuke’s clan. Unfortunately for both of them, Naruto’s not exactly good at sensitive.

“And speaking of sharingan…”

“An entire legacy of clan elder teachings says otherwise.” Sasuke grumbles.
“Who says a bunch of old guys know everything?”

“Naruto.” Sasuke warns, and Naruto sighs.

“Look, all I’m saying as that you’re a hell of a lot stronger and smarter than a bunch of over privileged old geezers. Who’s to say they’re right about anything? Maybe they’ve been wrong for years and you’re the first person to get it right?”

Sasuke sits there frozen as Naruto finishes his mini-rant, expression unusually slack and eyes a little wider than usual. Then he seems to shake himself out of it, going back to his food with more zeal than before.

“Hurry and finish eating, idiot.” He says instead of responding to Naruto’s statement. “We’re sparing after this.”

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Tsunami watches the two ninja boys leave after they finish their food, blinking at them as they slide past her and make their way outside.

When she asks their young Kunoichi teammate about it, the girl gives her a carefree smile.

“Oh, don’t worry about them.” she says easily. “They tend to fight when they’re stressed.”

Tsunami casts a worried glance outside, but that just makes the young woman laugh. “Oh no, not like that. They just spar, train against one another, that sort of thing.” she assures.

Tsunami nods, and starts to clear the boys’ abandoned dishes. Ninja sure are strange.

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Zabuza wakes to Haku reapplying bandages and salve to the cuts on his arms and sides, working around the sling to get at the nastiest of the kunai slashes, courtesy of his own idiocy underestimating Sharingan Kakashi’s black haired brat. The bones in his forearm are mostly healed thanks to Haku’s attentive medical ninjutsu, so the bandaging of his other wounds is his apprentice’s version of restless busy work.

“We’re going after them again tomorrow.” Zabuza says without pretense.

Haku nods, ever obedient. “Of course. Can’t let the whip-master get impatient, can we?”

The passive aggressive jab causes Zabuza to tick up an eyebrow. “That’s enough, Haku.”

The boy purses his lips, which on him is a sign of extreme distaste. “Gatou is a common thug. We’ve been reduced to serving tyrants. Have we fallen so far?”

Zabuza says nothing for a while. Secretly he agrees with Haku’s stance, but this is the safest option for them right now. Gatou’s influence is enough to keep even the most irritating of Kiri hunter-nin at bay, and Zabuza plans on exhausting that protection for as long as possible. He remembers the look on the Copy-nin’s face, the controlled yet feral fury that rose to the surface when Zabuza had directly threatened the Genin, and can’t help but think of Haku.

He hadn’t expected that protective drive to strike him as deep as it did.
“It’s the best option we have right at the moment.” Zabuza insists, hoping he’s making the right choice. “Now, when we go after the bridge builder, I need you to be cautious. The Copy-nin’s brats are a lot stronger than they look, and you can’t afford to underestimate them.”

Haku snorts. “I think I can handle the Genin.”

“I’m dead serious, Haku.” Zabuza growls lowly.

His apprentice pauses at his tone. “I’ll bring my best paralytic then.” he concedes. “You’ll be careful against Hatake? It would be a shame if you died on me now.”

Despite the careless lilt to the words, Zabuza can sense Haku’s worry is real. It takes a powerful ninja to overwhelm one of Kiri’s seven swordsmen, and Zabuza plans on taking their next confrontation much more seriously.

“That’s a given.” He tells Haku. “Just make sure I can swing my sword with both hands.”

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When they head off to the bridge to defend the old man from the likely imminent attack, Naruto volunteers to stay behind and protect Tazuna’s family from Gatou’s thugs. Sasuke is far from happy about it, in fact he wants to grab Naruto by his stupid collar and drag him with them whether he likes it or not, but Naruto had bonded with the little twerp Inari sometime when Sasuke wasn’t looking and he cannot, in good conscience, leave Tazuna’s admittedly tolerable family to fend for themselves.

He and Naruto almost get into an argument about it anyway, but Sakura, always the reasonable one, grabs him by the back of his collar, and tells Naruto to be careful or he’ll regret it.

As soon as they get to the bridge, he instantly regrets not dragging Naruto with them by his ears. He feels abruptly and alarmingly exposed, like he’s suddenly been deprived of his hearing or his peripheral vision, like he’s missing a limb instead of missing a teammate.

By the look on Sakura’s face she feels the same way, nervous and antsy in a like she hasn’t been since they first started training as a team. She has a triad of senbon tucked between the knuckles on one hand and is flipping a shuriken with the other, a nervous habit she doesn’t normally indulge in.

Sasuke has been compulsively checking his weapons about once every five to ten minutes, trying not to look as paranoid as he feels. It only now occurs to him that Naruto is very much the center cog that their team dynamic hinges around, that while Sakura and Sasuke are capable of working well together, it’s nothing compared to the force they become when all three of them are present.

He just hopes the idiot gets here before that crazy swordsman Zabuza shows up.

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He is, of course, not that lucky.

Sakura is the best defender they have, so she stays with Tazuna while Kakashi deals with Zabuza
and Sasuke deals with a new player on the field— Haku, Zabuza’s apprentice. Things are going fine right up until Haku makes use of a strange and powerful Kekkei Genkai, that boxes him in away from where Sakura can get to him in an emergency.

The stupid Demon Mirrors are a pain. He’s only barely managed to avoid the masked ninja’s senbon so far because he’s faster than Haku, but Haku is capable of reforming the ice mirrors nearly as fast as Sasuke can melt them down with fire jutsu. If only he could activate his own Kekkei Genkai…

But his sharingan have been playing hide and seek with him since the fight began. One minute they’ll be so close to the surface of his eyes he can practically feel them bleeding into his irises, and the next the feeling will return to nothing but pressure, lurking behind his pupils. It’s like he’s missing something, some kind of catalyst to push his bloodline limit into existence.

He sends a wind jutsu at the masked ninja to knock him off course, but he just slips right into another mirror, vanishing before rematerializing at Sasuke’s 10:00, hurling another round of senbon too fast for him to dodge this time.

There’s a crash, a blur of motion, and Naruto is suddenly there, catching the senbon in the shoulder before flicking his hands through half a dozen signs.

“InTuTuon: Viioiaent Gaal!”

A curl of wind fashions itself into a whip and cracks hard against an entire row of Haku’s demon mirrors, sending them crashing apart and forcing the masked ninja to retreat temporarily.

“About goddamn time, idiot.” Sasuke huffs.

Naruto chuckles, grunting as he pulls the senbon out of his arm. “Sorry I’m late, jerk.”

Haku’s mirrors are already reforming from the blow, and Sasuke wonders how the hell that guy has any chakra left.

Then Naruto suddenly stumbles, swaying uncertainly, and Sasuke grabs his arm without hesitation. Naruto touches a hand to the wounds on his shoulder. “Shit.” He mutters. “Poison, fast-acting paralytic…”

Sasuke grabs Naruto around the middle and hauls him sideways, out of the way of another cascade of senbon. Sasuke can see it now that he cares to look, a thin film around the steel needles that shimmers in a rainbow spectrum like spilled oil.

Haku throws again and again Sasuke leaps sideways with Naruto pressed against his side, and he can’t let this happen, can’t let Naruto die for protecting him like the idiot he is—

And there. Right there. That’s the catalyst.

Chakra roars like a let dam in his blood, surging to fill the veins and arteries and nerves of his eyes, pressing, changing, spreading through the tissue and setting the cells alight with power. He can feel nerves realigning, new chakra pathways blooming out from his optic nerves, can feel a new complex in his eyes rotating with fervor, and can feel the hard dark formation of the tomoe.

Sasuke’s sharingan eyes surface fully formed, all six tomoe spinning in sync, and Sasuke can suddenly see absolutely everything. He can see the chakra radiating off the Demon Mirrors, cyan blue and pulsing like a heartbeat— can see that the pulse matches Haku’s heartbeat, and can see the ties of chakra linking into the masked ninja’s form. He can track Haku now no matter how fast he
tries to move, and everything slows down. Time crawls like it’s being dragged through mud, and as each second passes Sasuke can analyze the way Haku’s muscles tense and pull, can see each move before he even makes it.

Sasuke ducks forwards, back, and even as his body tires his mind remains as sharp as a guillotine, dodging senbon by inches. And when he’s no longer strong enough to dodge them completely, he catches them and throws them back, pulling them from the air like they’re moving through molasses.

But he slows, falters, his body failing him, and takes two senbon in the upper chest.

Naruto wasn’t kidding about it being fast acting.

It shoots through his system, forcing muscles to contract against his will, and he trips, stumbles, falls to his knees. Naruto hits the ground on his other side, and Sasuke can’t tell if he’s conscious or not, but he can see his heart beating and that’s something of a small comfort.

As Sasuke lists to the side, it takes him a minute to realize why the fall isn’t as jarring as he expects it to be.

Naruto’s arm catches him around the shoulders, tense and shaking but somehow still strong enough to hold his weight.

It’s only been a few seconds and Sasuke can’t even muster the energy to clench his hand into a fist, how the hell is Naruto moving?

Haku is saying something, about weapons and tools and how they’re all monsters in human skin anyway, why hate the leash?

Suddenly the tremors in Naruto’s arms vanish. Slowly, carefully, he lets Sasuke’s back rest against the ground, and though Naruto isn’t looking at him, Sasuke can see something in his face, in his eyes.

Something animal.

“You keep calling yourself a weapon.” Naruto says slowly. He’s disturbingly, unnaturally calm, a soft rumbling tremble in his voice that cloaks something dark and terrible. “You keep calling yourself a monster.” The word is spat with a disdain Sasuke didn’t think Naruto capable of, and then he’s suddenly standing, no trace of tremble or strain in his form as he plants himself firmly between Haku and Sasuke.

There’s something roiling underneath Naruto skin, something wrathful that starts to burn away the fabric of his shirt at his arms, rising like miasma to eat away at the fabric, burning through all but the reenforced undershirt as it rises over his torso.

Chakra.

So dense and darkly powerful that Sasuke doesn’t need his sharingan to see it.

As the power rises in intensity dark markings roll across Naruto’s now exposed arms, long lines framed by strange symbols that trace from the backs of Naruto’s hands all the way up to his neck. As he watches the power starts to literally change him– his nails elongate into curved and wicked looking claws, his eyes sharpen and become ringed with black, and the odd whisker marks on his cheeks draw clear back to his jaw.
“You want a monster?” Naruto says with supreme and deadly calm, his voice dipping to an octave so low it shouldn’t be obtainable with a human throat. “I’ll show you the meaning of the word.”
For those of you wondering over the fate of these lovably psycho missing-nin, well, now you know.
Another cliffhanger though, I wish I were sorrier.
I regret nothing.

This is impossible.

Haku has fought difficult odds before, gone up against stronger ninja than he and still come out on top. But this, this chakra, this boy, is unlike anything he’s ever seen— the paralytic in Haku’s senbon should have left the boy helpless for more than a day, but he’s standing as if there were no poison at all, as if the red lotus toxin Haku had slathered across his senbon couldn’t stop a charging bull elephant in it’s tracks.

Where the hell is all that chakra coming from?

A shining amber shroud of it drapes and curls around the boy’s shoulders like a cloak, twisting in rings and spirals down his limbs. It’s visible, impossibly visible, glimmering like blood stirred with molten gold. It radiates an angry potent pressure on the air itself, pressing in on Haku’s lungs and making it hard for him to draw a deep breath. Dread and primal fear pulse deep in his gut, and only years and years of conditioning keep him from succumbing to the desire to freeze or flee.

Haku isn’t stupid. He’d seen the power the dark haired boy had pulled from seemingly nowhere at all, sees now the dark determination that pulses through the golden-haired boy’s sharp and animal eyes. He knows this kind of strength, the kind you drag from the deepest darkest parts of you to protect what is yours. These boys are precious to each other, it’s painfully obvious now, and Haku had not counted on that, had not counted on the lengths they would go to protect each other, on the extent of their buried strength.

He had not anticipated what monsters they would release to defend their precious people.

Against this overwhelming power, against the uncaged animal in this strange boy, his shallow-sea eyes now dyed a gilded ruby; Haku knows his chances are slim. The chakra in the air alone tells him that.

But they’re not the only ones who have something to protect.

If he fails here, Zabuza will be overwhelmed, and he can never let that happen. He will not let his teacher die.

He dips his hand into the pouch at his hip, taking hold of the last of the pills resting there. He almost hadn’t brought them, hadn’t thought it necessary against Genin, but now it’s obvious that these Konoha-nin are far more than mere Genin, and without them Haku would have lost this fight already.

He pops the artificial chakra pills into his mouth, all four of them at once, and swallows hard.
Naruto hasn’t used Kurama’s chakra uncorrupted since before his mad rush to Uzushio, back before he’d shifted the seal and meshed their energies together in order to save him. Since then, most of Naruto’s chakra interaction with Kurama has been channeling his own to the bijuu to help him recover from the massive deficit the corruption had left him with. His friends aren’t stupid– any more and he would have exposed himself.

This is not what he remembers.

Before, it had been a burning rush through chakra vessels half empty, the pull of ancient and wild chakra tearing through his system in familiar torrents.

Now, instead of burning through his chakra vessels like acid through blood, it saturates his every cell, the burn radiating through him until that’s all he feels– the intense and feral energy twisting through his own chakra in sync. Instead of drawing from bijuu’s power like pulling the plunger on a syringe, he feels Kurama rise up through him, using his body as a medium to bring his chakra to the surface. His fury is Kurama’s fury; their anger and their strength are one and the same.

~We need to make this quick, Kit.~ Kurama warns, his consciousness so close to Naruto’s that he feels the words more than he hears them, Kurama’s voice almost indistinguishable from his own thoughts. ~The little Uchiha’s heart is still beating, but given the strength of the poison, it might not stay that way for long.~

“Sakura. She has a cleansing serum in her pack. He won’t die, not a chance.”

Naruto feels Kurama’s animal grin, all fangs and no humor. ~No need to hold back then.~

The entire exchange takes place in less than a second, a flow of thoughts so fast it’s over with in the space between his breaths. He looks to the mirrors, to the plethora or reflections of Haku’s form in their depths. Only one of them is real, and if he want’s to break up this jutsu, it’s the original he needs to tear apart.

His eyes will only hinder him here, so he slips them shut, gives himself over to the strange sixth sense Kurama’s energy allows him, and feels instead.

The chakra pulses around him, interlocked and uniform; the mirrors are identical, carbon copies of each other. Naruto rolls his muscles from shoulders to fingertips, lets the animal override the human being, and waits.

Sure enough Haku makes the first move– he hears the whistle of senbon fly through the air from four different sources, and raises an arm.

No hand sign needed, Naruto slashes a clawed hand through the air and chakra follows, racing along in its wake to create a whirlwind strong enough to make the mirrors groan. The senbon scatter as their momentum is inverted, clattering to the ground gracelessly or embedding themselves in the ice of the mirrors.

A rush, a charge, a flash of presence, and Haku is fast but with Kurama’s chakra searing through him Naruto is faster still, and when Naruto spins, hand wide and claws spread, he makes contact.

Naruto’s strike hits Haku in the lower chest, right under his sternum, claws digging five bloody points into flesh even through layers of cloth and body armor. The Kiri-nin reels back towards his mirrors with the force of the blow, but Naruto follows after almost as soon as he’s finished the strike, leaping to run him down before the missing-nin can get his breath back.
To Haku’s credit, he rights himself fast.

But not fast enough.

In the soupy grey mist created by Zabuza’s signature jutsu, Kakashi lets his senses stretch, listening for any tiny sound in the fog that will give the swordsman’s presence away.

“You doing alright, Sakura?”

A snort sounds from somewhere in the soup behind him. “I got this. Go kick his ass, sensei.”

Kakashi can’t help the huff of laughter that escapes him. He’s not sure what he expected her to say, but who is he to turn down good advice?

So he straightens, dips a hand into his pouch to ready a string of shuriken, and dives into the mist.

Zabuza is a sneaky bastard, he’ll give him that, but Kakashi has more than one trick up his sleeve when it comes to a hunt. Besides he prides himself on being the sneakiest bastard around. He’s not about to let a washed up Shichinintai steal his title.

But he’s stalled mid step by a ringing in the air, the roar of a chakra signature that even now, after all these years, makes his stomach drop through his sandals. It’s been more than twelve years since Kakashi last felt the angry ancient power of the Nine-Tailed Fox, but it’s radiation in the air is unmistakable– nothing else could be this potent, this dense.

His stomach instantly rebounds, hurtling from his feet all the way up into his throat.

Naruto.

Purpose momentarily forgotten, Kakashi takes an instinctive step in the wrong direction, towards the release of chakra, ready to abandon Zabuza to go to his Genin’s aid and leave the bridge builder to his fate. But he stops again when the energy hits him full on, and forces himself to rein in his first instinct to rush to Naruto’s defense.

He remembers that night as if it were a day ago instead of a decade; the lash of chakra had lit the night sky a bloody red, fury had permeated the air like deep-sea pressure, and the hate in the atmosphere has been so sharp and thick it choked.

This power is the Fox’s, no doubt about it, but it’s not the same as it was in Kakashi’s memory, and his memory is flawless. All the jagged edges have been smoothed out, it flows instead of rages, and the emotion that rings in the air, while furious and intense, is not hate.

The Nine-Tailed Fox in Kakashi’s memory had been nothing but hate.

This power is just as potent, but it’s curled tight, controlled somehow, not the unstoppable tide it would be had the seal been stretched or broken. Whatever this is, whatever strength of the Kyuubi’s that has come unleashed, Naruto is in command of it.

Pulling his mind back to the fight at hand, Kakashi pulls a well-loved scroll from his belt. He hadn’t planned on using his trump card so soon, but if things are this bad, he needs to move up his timetable. Tucking the scroll into the fold of his vest for quicker access, Kakashi flicks his fingers into a sequence of hand signs.
“Katon: Lotus Pyre.”

Haunting blue light bursts to life and scatters, casting dancing shadows into the smoky darkness created by the mist jutsu. The cast shadows swirl and spin like playing children dancing to the tune of an unheard nursery rhyme, half ninjutsu, half genjutsu. Kakashi watches through the ashy fog, searching for the shadow out of place amongst its fellows.

A low chuckle resonates around him. “Very clever, Hatake.” Zabuza mocks, voice echoing in the cover of the ashy fog. “That’s a Kumo scout special, if I remember right. Do you even have a single technique you can call your own?”

“Not many, no.” Kakashi remarks cheerily, deliberately raising his voice, and dives to the side when Zabuza flashes forward from behind him, spinning his sword down hard. Kakashi uses his momentum to swing sideways, slipping his fingers through curled strands of ninja wire, and arcs his rigged shuriken net wide like a deadly spider’s web. It wraps around Zabuza’s non-dominant arm, pulling tight and cutting deep lacerations from wrist to bicep.

Zabuza snarls, heaving his sword from the valley it had cleaved in the earth. But Kakashi twists to unravel the wires before Zabuza can fully slice through them, pulling a few of the bloodied shuriken back to him as he leaps into the cover of the mist again. That much scent is plenty.

Kakashi’s hounds have tracked on less.

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How anti-climactic. Haku can’t help but think to himself. A monster indeed.

The golden haired boy had kept his word.

A shame that Haku hadn’t managed to keep his own.

Zabuza will die now, because he was weak. Useless. Pointless.

A clawed hand curls around Haku’s throat, talon-like fingernails only centimeters from digging into his veins and ending his life. Haku can’t bring himself to care; he’s dead already, dead to Zabuza, and dead to himself as well by default. So he closes his eyes and waits for this golden-haired amber-eyed animal to tear out his throat.

He doesn’t.

For a long moment Haku doesn’t open his eyes, doesn’t dare to breathe. But then something shifts around his neck, and Haku’s flutters his eyelids up reflexively.

The eyes looking back at him are blue now, the same shallow-sea tone that Haku had seen before his change. This isn’t the monster, this is the human being; the amber hue still lurks around the edges of his irises, but it’s held at bay by pure, powerful cobalt.

“Why?” the boy asks, eyes bizarrely curious.

“What?” Haku chokes. There’s blood welling in the back of his throat from where he’s bitten his tongue, but he gets the word out, of only barely.

“You want me to kill you now.” The Genin accuses. “Why?”

Haku snorts at the question. “I am of no use to Zabuza now. Broken tools should be discarded.” he
rasps.

The words draw a reflexive tension to the muscles of the boy’s arm and confused anger flits across his young face. For a second Haku is sure he’s about to do it, about to kill him for his response, but how the boy reacts is unfathomable.

He lets go.

The golden-haired Genin releases him and draws back, rising to his feet in a single fluid movement to glare down at him.

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.” The boy says frankly, remorselessly and with conviction.

It startles a mad laugh out of Haku that cuts off into a choking splutter. He turns, tips his head to the side and spits dark blood across the grey stone. “What would you know about it?”

“I’m not sure about this whole tool bullshit,” The boy growls, “But that Zabuza guy is precious to you, isn’t he?”

Haku freezes. He doesn’t ask how the boy knows that, because he can’t know— it’s something Zabuza himself isn’t really aware of, something Haku has kept close to his chest all his life as not to let his attachment appear as weakness. But there’s no point in trying to hide it now, he supposes, not when this golden-haired boy so obviously does know, somehow.

“What of it?” he asks.

“If he’s precious to you, who the fuck cares about useful? If you love something, protect it. Period. End of story. This whole tool and monster nonsense you’re spouting sounds a hell of a lot like an excuse.”

Haku’s eyes widen and snap up to the boy, but the golden-haired Genin is already turning away from him.

Haku tries to sit up, coughing as the blood goes the wrong way down his throat. He has broken ribs, at least four, but he pushes through the pain anyways, because the brat can’t just say that, can’t drop words like that down Haku’s throat and walk away.

“What? Where the hell are you going?” Haku coughs, struggling to sit upright.

“Screw you.” the boy snaps over his shoulder. “I have more important things to protect than your messed up sense of honor. And you know what? So do you.”

And just like that he’s gone, at his friend’s side in an instant, leaving Haku sitting on the hewn stone reeling over those last three words.

So do you.

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Tazuna startles from behind Sakura when the jutsu mirrors shatter, practically leaping into the air. “What the hell was that?”

“Shut up.” Sakura snaps at him. “I need to hear.”

Foreboding crawls around in her chest like a restless nest of hornets, worry making her temper
sting-sharp as she closes her eyes and attempts to discern what’s going on through sound and sense alone. She may not have Naruto’s gift for chakra sensing but she knows her idiots; she has the chakra compositions and signatures of her teammates memorized down to the molecule by now, and could pick them out of any crowd no matter how much stupid water chakra is hanging around in the air like smog.

Tazuna is still jumping at shadows, even though Sakura has told him multiple times not to worry about Zabuza—Kakashi-sensei can more than handle the Kiri-nin with compensation issues. Even if Zabuza does try the same tactic he had on the path and attempts to attack her and Tazuna from under Kakashi’s nose— which Sakura doubts, Zabuza strikes her as many things, but stupid isn’t one of them—Sakura will see him coming long before Tazuna could hope to.

Sakura isn’t scared, not remotely. She is, however, pissed. The next time someone suggests she take civilian babysitting duty, she’ll punch them in the throat.

She straightens when she senses movement nearby, but relaxes again immediately when she registers it’s Naruto. The mist parts around him strangely, clearing away like morning fog burnt off by rising sunlight. His chakra is behaving oddly, Sakura can see that now that he’s close, and there's another signature wound in with it that Sakura doesn’t recognize.

To her relief he looks relatively unharmed, though his overshirt is gone and parts of his shinobi pants are burned and scuffed in places. Her relief is short lived however, because she spots Sasuke unconscious on Naruto’s back, and her mind starts whirling into diagnostic mode.

“What happened?” she demands.

“Paralytic poison.” Naruto says immediately, dropping down to a crouch to lay Sasuke between them.

Sakura makes a mental note to buy Ikari-sensei a new coffee machine with the money from this mission as she digs into her pack for one of the vials he had given her, a cleansing serum he’d developed from the secretions of some of the Aburame clan’s insects, and an extremely potent antitoxin.

“Sit him up and expose his arm.” She commands as she preps an emergency syringe with careful practiced hands. Naruto obeys without a word, expression disarmingly solemn. Naruto leans Sasuke up against his chest with an arm looped beneath his shoulders and pulls his sleeve up, uncoiling the limb wrap from his wrist so that Sakura can work unhindered.

“Stupid jerks, the both of you.” Sakura mutters under her breath as she presses the end of the needle slowly into Sasuke’s arm. “Taking on stupid missing-nin by your stupid selves, leaving me to watch the stupid civilian while you go off to be morons.”

Tazuna opens his mouth like he wants to be offended by that, but then he seems to remember that she can lift his body weight with her pinky finger and shuts his mouth again.

She’s tucking the syringe away when the sound of the clash between the two jounin in the mist meets an unseen climax; in a rush of cold wind the mist around them is dispersed, along with the phantom fires that had been dancing in it’s depths. Before them their teacher and Zabuza become visible again through the dissipating gloom, and it’s pretty clear which one of them turned out to be top dog.

No pun intended.
Zabuza is pinned down by the collective teeth and claws of eight ninja dogs, ranging in size from loaf-of-bread to full-grown-man.

“You’re right, Zabuza.” Kakashi-sensei is saying. “I don’t have many jutsu of my own making, and really only one I ever use. But since you asked and all, it would be rude of me not to show it to you.”

Kakashi-sensei shifts, a dangerous sway as he lifts his left hand high.

Suddenly the air is filled by the eerie hum of what sounds like thousands of chirping finches. Light, blindingly white, streams and cracks from Kakashi’s fingers like he’s clutching an angry star, energy flitting out between his knuckles as the atmosphere begins to crackle like the inside of a thundercloud.

Zabuza’s eyes widen and he attempts to struggle harder, but the hard clamp of the jaws around his extremities and shoulders keeps him almost entirely immobile as Kakashi readies for the killing blow.

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The feel of Kakashi’s Chidori in his hand is an unwelcome familiarity. It’s resonance with his body and chakra is a grim one, a preparation for loss, for pain. The technique has only ever had one purpose, and to this day it has performed that purpose flawlessly.

To kill. To end a life.

He doesn’t have to worry about hitting his dogs, he never does– they can sense the electricity in their fur and know exactly when to drop.

They do, but as his ninken pull away from Zabuza a second, faster presence jumps forward, and Momochi’s apprentice, the dark-haired, pale-skinned Haku, materializes between them.

The shift of emotions across Zabuza’s face happens so fast that if Kakashi’s sharingan hadn’t been trained on him so closely, he’d have missed it entirely. The man’s expression shifts very briefly to confusion and then jumps head-first right into blind instinctive panic– the kind that registers so fast there’s no way to conceal it, the kind that comes from the overwhelming dread that you are about to lose something close to you.

Kakashi is very familiar with that dread, and when Zabuza moves his wounded arm as if to shove Haku aside, he recognizes the protective instinct for what it is. Kakashi too, upon seeing his own desire to protect reflected back at him through Zabuza’s eyes, acts on instinct.

He pulls his weight to the side last moment so that instead of driving his hand through Haku’s chest, it goes right through the flesh of Zabuza’s left shoulder.
These Hands, These Hearts

Chapter Notes

Another long one, this. 
More fereeeeeeelings, also I love writing the pack, not gonna lie. 
Not another cliffhanger this time I promise. 
I regret nothing

By the time Sasuke’s eyes flicker open, all the mist and ice on the battlefield has cleared. He’s 
leaning between his teammates, back pressed against Sakura’s side and Naruto crouched beside 
him, both their eyes cast riveted on the scene before them.

Silence permeates the area, thick and cloying, heavy with a meaning Sasuke has yet to grasp. 
Kakashi stands several meters back from Zabuza, who is heavily injured and bleeding profusely 
from the top of one shoulder, his sword crossed protectively in front of Haku.

“I have a question, Zabuza.” Kakashi asks lowly. “Since it seems the two of us aren’t so different 
after all.”

Zabuza barks a humorless laugh. “Shoot.”

“Why are you working for a common thug like Gatou?”

Zabuza flexes his hand around the hilt of his sword, eyes narrowing like the question surprises him.

“Easy money.” Zabuza snaps reflexively.


Zabuza’s eyes flit to Naruto, and then back to Kakashi.

“It’s for protection, isn’t it?” Kakashi states, deceptively mild. “From Kiri hunter-nin.”

Zabuza huffs, and beneath the bandages Sasuke can almost swear he makes out a smile. “Well I 
don’t suppose someone with your reputation got all this way by being an idiot.” he allows. “Yes. 
Gatou may be a Class-A prick, but he has connections even the good old Bloody Mist wouldn’t 
touch with a twelve story pole.”

They continue talking, oddly sedate, something about a coup maybe, but Sasuke stops listening. He 
shifts, attempting to right himself and grunting with the effort. As soon as he does two sets of 
worried eyes flash immediately to him, one seafoam green, the other cerulean.

“There you are.” Sakura sighs. “You scared us, you ass.”

Sasuke gives her forearm a hard squeeze to reassure her, but his eyes immediately lock on Naruto. 
The Uzumaki flashes him a weak smile, but doesn’t move towards him, keeping a careful meter of 
distance between them.

There’s something depreciating and scared lingering behind Naruto’s eyes that is unacceptable.
“Naruto–”

“Uh-oh, looks like the cavalry has arrived.” Naruto chirps, so obviously false it’s painful. It’s also the shittiest deflection Sasuke has heard in his entire life, even if Gatou’s band of thugs has managed to appear in the battlefield.

Sasuke only catches the tail end of the conversation that occurs between the Jounin and the Tycoon, since he’s too busy trying to convince himself that shaking Naruto by the shoulders is not something that will help matters, but he does manage to make out the words you’re fired.

That’s probably one of the stupidest things he’s heard come out of someone’s mouth, and he lives with an idiot.

And if that isn’t civilian ignorance in a nutshell— trying to fire a ninja like they’re some kind of underachieving employee. Sasuke’s not even the one being insulted and it rubs him the wrong way, and it’s saying something that he can actually see Kakashi-sensei’s hackles go up.

Kakashi and Zabuza immediately straighten out of their defensive postures. Zabuza turns and gives Gatou and his thugs a look so dry it seems to sap the excess water from the air.

The grim atmosphere breaks open when Haku honest-to-god giggles, a hand over his mouth and an arm around his chest to support his ribs as laughter spills out from between his fingers. A snort and Sakura joins in from behind him, snickering in Sasuke’s ear. From there is spreads like wildfire, even breaking through Naruto’s dark mood and coaxing a few low chuckles from Kakashi-sensei himself, which he presses against the backs of his knuckles.

“Funny you should say that.” Zabuza drawls, taking in the threatening posture of Gatou’s goons with the disdain it deserves. Even half dead, any shinobi is still worth more than a handful of poorly trained civilians.

Gatou hesitates, fat face flushing with indignation at the still rolling snickers. Sasuke sees Haku cast a long glance at Naruto, and the dynamic between them changes immediately.

“Need any help?” Kakashi offers.

Zabuza seems only mildly surprised by the offer. Without conflicting interests resting over their heads, the two Jounin are much more amicable, and seem to share some kind of unspoken understanding.

“If you’ve got nothing else going on.” Zabuza remarks easily, lifting his sword with his mostly uninjured arm. He casts his gaze between his apprentice and team seven as Sasuke starts to stand, Naruto and Sakura rising with him. “What do you think, Haku?”

The young man is still looking at Naruto, whose stance in front of Sasuke is still slightly defensive. But Naruto shoulders seem to relax after a moment, and he flashes Haku a sharp grin.

“I think it’s been a long time coming, personally.” The teenager says sweetly, and ducks under Zabuza’s raised arm when the Jounin turns around to face Gatou full on.

Needless to say, Gatou’s men don’t last very long.

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Haku turns out to be all right, in Naruto’s book.
Tazuna calls them all batshit that night when they camp together on the bridge, watching over the builders as they work into the night with renewed vigor, aided by heavy strobe lights. He seems to find the shift from hardened enemies to neutral parties—maybe even tentative allies—completely baffling.

Naruto wonders aloud why they should hate each other for simply trying to do their jobs, and Tazuna doesn’t seem to have a response for that. He merely grumbles something that sounds like shinobi madness and goes back to work.

Haku gives Sakura the actual counter serum for his poison, which helps give Sasuke more of the feeling back in his legs, and to everyone’s surprise Haku and Sakura strike up an instant and intense conversation consisting of at least sixty percent medical ninjutsu jargon. Kakashi and Zabuza hold a sedated conversation on the edges of the camp in hushed tones, leaving Naruto mostly alone with Sasuke.

There’s an uncomfortable silence as neither of them speak, one that stretches long and unwelcome between them.

Naruto jumps when Sasuke reaches over without preamble and takes hold of his wrist, pulling it closer to himself so he can look over the skin on the back of Naruto’s hand. He watches as Sasuke drags his thumb over his forearm, tracing the now invisible lines of his seal. “Not a Kekkei Genkai, then.” Sasuke says softly, not meeting Naruto’s gaze.

Naruto swallows and takes a heavy breath to steady his nerves. “No.” he agrees. “I did inherit it from my mother, though.”

Sasuke does look up at that, his dark eyes searching. Naruto wonders if they can sense his vulnerability, if they can see just how much of Naruto’s fragile hope rests on how this conversation ends.

There’s more silence as Sasuke returns his gaze to the back of Naruto’s arm, absently tracing the symbols of Naruto’s seal with his thumbnail from his now perfect memory.

“I told you those old men didn’t know what they were talking about.” Naruto murmurs quietly. “Did those old writings tell you how many Uchiha activated their whole sharingan all at once?”

“No one.” Sasuke says, almost disbelievingly. “Not even my brother.”

“Can you activate them any time you want now?” Naruto asks, eager to keep the topic of conversation off himself as long as he can, but also genuinely curious about Sasuke’s new ability.

Sasuke’s eyes swirl alive with colour in answer. The three sharply hooked tomoe are a stark black against a deep and fluctuating wine red. The irises swirl with fractal curls of sunset purple, blooming with yin chakra. Another blink and the dojutsu deactivates, and the look in his friend’s eyes tells him he’s not about to let Naruto change the subject. He grips Naruto’s forearm like an anchor.

“What aren’t you telling me, Naruto?”

Naruto sighs heavily, his pulse banging away in his throat. Oh well. Now or never.

“Do you know when my birthday is, Sasuke?”

Sasuke blinks, taken aback by the question. “October. You never told me the exact date.”
There’s a reason for that.

“It’s October tenth.” Naruto continues, before he can lose his nerve. “Do you know what else happened on that day?”

“The fourth Hokage died.” Sasuke recites. It’s a history lesson they all know, the day the fourth Hokage was killed defending the village from a monster.

“Doing what?” Naruto prompts, even though he doesn’t really need to. Judging by the look on Sasuke’s face understanding is already dawning, his eyes widening and his mouth dropping open around a sharp exhale.

“I was born on the day of my parents’ death.” Naruto states before Sasuke can speak, “My mother was the second Jinchuuriki of the Nine-Tailed fox, and he was released when her seal broke as I was born. She was killed protecting me, her and my father both, and as they died they sealed the Kyuubi inside me, making me the third Jinchuuriki of the Nine-tails.” Naruto smiles grimly, little humor in the gesture, and keeps his eyes on his knees. “I started talking to him when I was around seven. We were friends by the time I was nine. Turns out he’s not the monster everyone makes him out to be, at least not to me.” Naruto shrugs, casting his gaze off to the side, further away from Sasuke. He doesn’t yet have the courage to look at him. “That power you saw was his– well, ours.”

Dead silence. Other than his breathing, Sasuke makes no sound, not even to shift.


“This is why, isn’t it?” Sasuke says lowly. There’s unmistakable fury in his voice, and it takes all of Naruto’s willpower not to cringe. “This is why they all… that’s it?”

There’s a strange new tone to Sasuke’s voice that draws Naruto’s attention up, but Sasuke isn’t even looking at him– he’s staring into the dead space between Naruto’s knee and the bridge, anger drawing the lines of his shoulders and the tendons in his knuckles taught. Suddenly Sasuke’s voice bursts out of him all at once. “This is why that idiot shinobi at the supply store tries to give you defective shuriken? Why that old woman we pulled weeds for ‘accidentally’ dumped fertilizer over your head? Why your only friend besides Iruka-sensei until two years ago was the goddamned ramen vendor?”

Sasuke’s face is turning a rather alarming shade of red very fast, his sharingan active and swirling with his rage. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Naruto hears Kurama’s laughing bark of ~I told you so.~

“Uh…” Is Naruto’s predictably intelligent response.

Sasuke’s eyes snap up to his, tomoe spinning angrily, new sparks of purple firing off in the red. Naruto leans back instinctively, even though he knows now that Sasuke’s fury isn’t really directed at him.

Except maybe it is, because suddenly Sasuke’s sharingan eyes narrow dangerously. “Why, exactly, am I only learning of all this now?”

Naruto flounders, at a loss for words as Sasuke leans threateningly into his personal space. “I-I don’t know, I just thought…”

“You thought what? That I was going to think any less you just because you had a twenty story chakra demon stuffed inside you at birth?”
And yeah, okay, it does sound pretty stupid when he puts it like that, but old habits die hard, and until recently Naruto had no reason to think that people wouldn’t care. He shrugs nervously, which is obviously the wrong response because, judging from Sasuke’s expression and the spin in his eyes, he goes from dangerously upset to absolutely livid and lunges at Naruto with a snarl. “Fucking idiot!”

They dissolve into a wrestling match as Sasuke attempts to put him in a chokehold, rolling away from the camp. Something heavy and warm lodges under Naruto’s ribs, and the truth hits him squarely in the gut. He doesn’t care. He thinks with no small amount of astonishment. I was raised by the demon living in my chest cavity and he couldn’t care less.

He can’t help it. He starts to laugh.

It’s warm, and bright, and bubbles up his throat like a cloudburst, clear strong and unexpected, and Sasuke freezes over him, staring down with wide, startled eyes. His arm is still barred across Naruto’s collar and his other hand is still pinning down his bicep, but Naruto makes no move to get up and Sasuke makes no move to let him go.

Naruto looks up at Sasuke and sees the tomoe in his eyes spin almost in confusion. “Sorry for being an idiot.” Naruto tells him, with all the honesty he can muster, his tone too soft with the meaning. Something vulnerable crosses Sasuke’s eyes, evaporating the anger there and draining away the red until there’s nothing left but the original ebony.

“Well.” Sasuke says, voice a hair too rough to be steady. “Try not to make a habit out of it.”

Naruto grins. Yeah right. Like he’s ever going to doubt Sasuke again after this. “I can do that.”

“You sure you’re not going to get in trouble for this?” Zabuza asks, drawing Kakashi’s attention away from Sasuke and Naruto, who have just started to stand. Zabuza’s not so bad, Kakashi’s found, when one isn’t threatening what’s his. The man has an air about him that Kakashi recognizes, a man hardened by a life on the run, a man that will do just about anything if it means he and his will survive just a little bit longer.

Kakashi used to have that drive. Still does maybe, somewhere. He’d once thought that particular instinct dead and buried, like so many parts of him stuffed into the poorly tended graves around his heart. But these three brats are starting to prove alarmingly proficient at raising the dead.

“Kiri and Konoha may not be at war right now, but that doesn’t mean that they’re friends by any stretch of the imagination.” Kakashi responds. “Besides, I’ve gotten away with stupider things. So long as the mission was complete, my Kage won’t care.”

“Strange how different they can be, Kages.” Zabuza murmurs, but doesn’t elaborate.

“Mhm.” he hums back. “You should get that taken care of.” he adds, gesturing to the chuck he’d taken off the top of Zabuza’s shoulder.

Zabuza shakes his head. “I’ll have to wait. Haku took too many chakra pills fighting your brats. He’ll be too drained for any kind of jutsu for a while.”

Kakashi tilts his head, considering the wound. The one good thing about his Chidori is that it tends to cauterize the wounds it leaves, which means Zabuza hadn’t lost too much blood. But the chance of infection is still high, and given the placement of the wound, there’s a chance of permanent damage if it goes untreated.
He turns towards his third Genin, still deep in conversation with Haku, surrounded by a good majority of Kakashi’s ninken. Shiba in particular seems to have taken a particular liking to Haku, and is lying at his side with his head in the young ninja’s lap. Bisuke, the spoiled pup, is tucked entirely into Sakura’s arms, enjoying a very thorough head scratch.

“Sakura, how are your chakra reserves?” He asks.

The kunoichi turns and glares at him. “You’re joking, right? Come on sensei, I watched a civilian the entire fight, you jerk, I practically have chakra coming out of my ears.”

That startles a sharp laugh out of Zabuza. “Where did you get these kids, Hatake?”

Kakashi doesn’t answer, but he does allow himself an indulgent smile, carefully hidden behind his mask.

“Enough to give the murderous missing-nin a hand?” Kakashi asks Sakura.

Zabuza snorts. “Pot and kettle, Copy-nin.”

“Only the first part.” Kakashi says back cheerily.

Sakura hops to her feet, stepping carefully over Akino, and tells Haku to sit the hell down and rest when he starts to get up, making her way over through the maze of canine bodies curled around her. “Sure thing, sensei.” she chirps, depositing Bisuke on Kakashi’s lap as she passes.

The brown-blond ninken looks up at him through solemn hooded eyes. “She gives great scratches, boss.” Bisuke informs him gravely. “Can we keep her?”

Kakashi balks at the question. “She comes in a set, you realize.”

Bisuke looks over towards Sasuke and Naruto, who are having a conversation about summons with Uhei while Urushi and Guruko nap on a Genin apiece, Bull curled around them both. “That’s acceptable.” Bisuke says, accompanied by a tail wag that tells Kakashi it’s more than just acceptable.

Bisuke then looks at up at Zabuza, looking over the various bite marks on his person as Sakura works without fear on Zabuza’s shoulder, at ease enough you wouldn’t guess that only hours ago they had been bitter enemies. It’s such a shinobi-like sensibility that Kakashi wonders how she came from civilian parents.

“Sorry we had to bite you.” Bisuke says, only mildly apologetic.

“I did start it.” Zabuza rumbles, and then looks up to Sakura, who’s prepping parts of Zabuza’s wound for stitching, carefully stripping away the charred flesh with a low-acidity chakra flare. “You’re pretty good at that for your age, Hellcat.” he says. Kakashi wonders if he’s talking about the medical attention or the chakra control, because both are impressive.

Sakura grins at the praise. “Thanks. I know I am.” She responds easily. “Keep still please, I’m about to start stitching.”

Zabuza grunts in affirmation, looking over to where Haku has migrated to sit next to Naruto. “This Konoha of yours must not be a total hellhole.” he remarks to Kakashi, and he hums again, giving Bisuke a scratch behind the ears.

“Every village has its problems.” Kakashi admits. “And these three know that better than most.”
Zabuza’s gaze turns grudgingly curious. “Orphans?”

“Naruto and Sasuke, yeah. Sakura has civilian parents she’s currently not on speaking terms with.”

The kunoichi growls at that. “And I won’t be until my dad pulls his head out of his ass.”

“You’re going to stay with Naruto until then?” Kakashi asks. “That apartment is too small for all three of you.”

“We’ll work it out, sensei.” Sakura assures, pulling tight another stitch. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Right, like any guardian stopped worrying about something because they were told to.” Zabuza remarks sarcastically.

Sakura huffs indignantly and pulls harder than necessary on her next stitch, making the Jounin wince slightly. “Well what would you suggest?”

Bisuke digs his claws into Kakashi’s thigh to draw his attention and looks up at him with big pleading puppy eyes. Kakashi feels a bad idea coming on.

Naruto really likes Kakashi-sensei’s summons. They’re intelligent and cool and fun to talk to, like awesome friendly ninja that have the added benefit of being fluffy. Bull is huge, so big that he doesn’t even mind letting the three of them ride on his back, so long as it’s only one at a time. Akino is the coolest—he wears sunglasses, so cool—and Uhei is the smartest. Guruko is sedate and easygoing, Urushi is pleasantly funny and vicious, and Shiba has some adorably intense attention span issues and goes from being perfectly calm to running in spastic circles around the whole pack. Bisuke, who hasn’t left Sakura’s arms in over an hour, is a sweetheart that looks sad and serious but is actually nicer than almost every human he knows. They’ve all seen Pakkun before—he’s Kakashi-sensei’s primary errand summons, and has been sent to fetch the three of them on several occasions before this one. He sits lazily on Bull’s head, dozing absently as they walk.

They’d parted ways with Zabuza and Haku that morning. Naruto gets the distinct feeling this won’t be the last time they meet, not by a long shot.

Naruto told Sakura what he’d told Sasuke, with less dramatics and hesitation, and gotten another smack upside the head for even entertaining the idea that she was going anywhere you moron.

Telling Kakashi-sensei is different.

They settle down away from the others on their first break of the day, and Kakashi asks him quietly just how long he’s known about being a Jinchuuriki.

He doesn’t speak while Naruto tells his story, he just listens intently, face unreadable. But even so Naruto can read the subtle fluxes in his emotional state. Guilt is fairly precedent, for the most part. Pain too. The old, half-healed kind. Naruto has known for a while that Kakashi knew his parents and that he, for some reason, wasn’t allowed to talk about them—Naruto had recognized him, even decades older, from the picture of his parents the first day he’d walked into the academy and introduced himself.

He goes very still when Naruto talks about the fact that Kurama hadn’t been aware of what he was doing when he’d attacked the village, and freezes up even more when Naruto admits that he’d left the village for Uzushio in order to protect Kurama.
“So how much trouble am I in, exactly?” Naruto asks when he’s finished, eyes downcast, because Kakashi may not have been their teacher for all that long, but Naruto has respect for him that matches his respect for Iruka-sensei, and counts him among one of his precious people without a doubt.

Kakashi breaks from his silent stasis with a headshake. “You’re hardly in any trouble, Naruto. At least not with me. But I think it’s best you don’t mention anything of what you just told me to the Hokage.”

Naruto nods. He loves Jiji, he does, but the Sandaime’s responsibility is to the village before all else, and he’s not sure the old man will understand.

He starts a little when Kakashi’s hand comes down on his head, ruffling his blond hair affectionately. “Don’t worry too much about it, Naruto. Let Iruka and I figure out what to tell Sarutobi. Is it alright if I tell him what you told me? I assume he doesn’t know.”

“Yeah.” Naruto assents, and then winces. “But if you could play down the whole ‘ran off to an island over interim break without saying anything’ part, that’d be awesome.”

Kakashi chuckles softly, and Naruto can make out the smile beneath his mask. “I’ll see what I can do, but prepare for a lecture anyway.”

Naruto nods and beams. He hadn’t expected Kakashi-sensei to be quite so understanding, and senses that it might have something to do with the guilt and subdued anger Naruto can feel mixing with the genuine relief and affection.

His teacher hums, contemplative. “I do have a question though, Naruto. About the Kyuubi.”

“Yes? What is it?”

“Do you trust him?”

Naruto swallows down his first and immediate answer of obviously. His sensei is obviously looking for a thought out response, so he mulls it over. “With my life, absolutely.” Naruto decides. “But probably not with anyone else’s.”

~Accurate.~ Kurama quips. ~Though your little trio has grown on me.~

Kakashi stares at him for a long time, satisfied with his answer, if unsure what to make of it. “That’s good enough for me.”

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The rest of the way home, he’s barraged with questions about his bijuu. He tells Sasuke and Sakura about the promise he made, about Kurama’s siblings and what he knows of their abilities.

“How does it feel though?” Sakura asks, walking backwards to face him, Bisuke still hanging in her arms. Sasuke walks beside him, hands in his pockets, Akino on his other side and Uhei striding carefully between them. “I mean, it’s gotta be strange having another living thing inside you, even if it is made of chakra.”

Naruto shrugs. “I wouldn’t really know. It’s been this way for as long as I can remember. I don’t know what it feels like not to be a Jinchuuriki.”

“The steam.” Sasuke asks. “The healing. That’s the Kyuubi’s chakra?”
Naruto nods. “Yeah. Kurama’s. All bijuu have a method they use to protect their Jinchuuriki, his is regeneration.”

“Kurama? That’s his name?”

“Mhm.”

“What about the lines I saw?” Sasuke wonders, tapping his knuckles against Naruto’s still bare shoulder.

“Oh, you mean the Lines of Transgression? They’re extensions of my seal.” Naruto lets a bit of Kurama’s chakra flow through his system in demonstration, holding out his arm as black floods along his limbs.

“So that’s what those were!” Sakura marvels, grabbing his arm by the wrist and pulling it closer to her face. “How come you can’t always see them?”

“Because they only show up when he’s actively channeling Kurama’s chakra.” Sasuke speculates. “Natural passive chakra flow doesn’t set them off, or I would have seen them before now.”

“They’re so intricate…” Sakura muses, surveying the lines of scripted symbols that frame the bold rivers of black. “I didn’t know seals could be so pretty.”

Naruto flushes, half with pride and half with embarrassment. “I don’t know about pretty. I mean, my handwriting has never been that good and I was kind of sleep deprived–”

“Wait, what? You put these here? These aren’t part of your original seal?” Sakura squawks, looking back and forth between him and the lines on his arms.

Naruto blinks. “Uh… no. I had to add them when Kurama started going through a chakra crisis—something he calls the Sin of Regret? I don’t know what it was really, all I know it that he lost almost a full third of his chakra to corruption, and I needed to figure out how the hell I was going to feed him chakra when the original seal laws wouldn’t allow it. It’s the real reason I went to Uzushio in the first place.”

“Where is the original?” Sasuke asks, his head tilting curiously.

Naruto lifts his shirt briefly to show him, revealing the jagged swirling pattern of the center seal in stark black across his abdomen.

“Whoa now.” Akino rumbles, ducking his head around Sasuke’s legs to look. “That’s some real complicated chakrawork.”

“Indeed.” Uhei remarks, lifting his head to sniff at the swirling center of the seal. “As powerful as it is complex.”

“It’d have to be to seal a bijuu.” Bisuke drawls, tail wagging when Sakura strokes her hand down his back.

“Seals,” Sasuke wonders. “Can they be used in combat?”

Naruto tucks his undershirt back into his pants. “Oh hell ya. I haven’t worked out all the theory yet, but the uses for seals are just as varied as the uses for ninjutsu, and probably have more applications.”
Sasuke blinks, bemused, and then smirks. “Careful, Naruto. You almost sounded smart for a minute there.”

Sakura laughs and Naruto punches him in the arm. “Whatever, jerk. Just don’t be surprised when I use my cool new seals to wipe the floor with you.”

“You and what army, dead last?”

“Boys!” Sakura snaps. “We’re technically still on mission, morons. Spar when we get home.”

The two of them grumble, but don’t protest. Even though Sakura’s arms are still full of dog, it’s not worth the risk.

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When they arrive mid morning back in Konoha, Kakashi leaves them to go report to the mission desk and tells them they have the next two days off. After they’ve bathed and changed, Sakura sticks her head out of the bathroom, expression despondent.

“Uh, guys?”

Sasuke and Naruto look up from where they’re putting equipment away. “What is it?” Sasuke asks.

“I um, don’t have a change of clothes.”

Now that Sasuke looks, he sees that she’s thrown her leggings and ribbed top back on, which are both still marred with road grime.

“Naruto and I have to go shopping anyway. There’s nothing left in the fridge.” Sasuke admits.

Naruto nods. “We’ll go get your stuff for you.” he assures. “Or we can just get you new stuff. It’s your choice.”

Sakura looks floored by the offer. “You sure you guys are okay with that?”

Sasuke sends her a dry look. “Between my inheritance and the entire Uzushio treasury, I think we can splurge and get you some new clothes.”

She beams at them. “I’ll make a list. Could you run to the apothecary for me too? I was going to go today, but I think I’d rather nap.”

She’d had last watch, so Sasuke doesn’t blame her. “I don’t see why not, but we get to pick what’s for dinner then.”

“Deal.”

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Sealing scrolls are a gift from the universe, Sasuke believes this wholeheartedly. There’s nothing more annoying than lugging around a dozen bags from half a dozen stores when you have a lot of shopping to do, and Sasuke is grateful that Naruto had thought to draw up a low mass transport seal on one of their blank scrolls.

They’re getting all the chores out of the way now, because once they get back, Sasuke plans on passing out for at least 24 hours and not moving for anything other than food and possibly another shower. They’ve hit the grocery store, the weaponsmith and the rather dinky sealing supply store...
behind it, the open market, and the general market. That leaves the kunoichi and shinobi equipment stores, the civilian clothing shop, the apothecary, and Sakura’s house.

Sasuke isn’t really looking forward to that last one.

“I haaaate shopping.” Naruto grumbles as they duck into Mantis – one of three kunoichi oriented equipment shops in the village. It stocks things meant for Kunoichi that specialize in ninjutsu; the other two, Viper and Tigress, are for those who specialize in genjutsu and taijutsu respectively.

“Suck it up Dobe, we’re barely halfway through. And once we go home I’m not going out again until our off days are over.”

Naruto huffs but doesn’t protest any further, looking up when he spots Aburame Shino in the corner of the shop surveying some ballistic jackets. “Hey Shino!” he calls amicably.

Shino looks up, noting Naruto first, then Sasuke. “Hello.” he replies, voice its usual unreadable tenor. “I would say good morning, but it is nearly noon. Are you two here for Sakura?”

“Yeah. You?” Naruto asks, making his way over. Sasuke follows reluctantly, looking around for whatever he could imagine Sakura wearing. Just because Naruto is friends with just about everyone doesn’t mean Sasuke is by default – he and Shino have never really interacted do their shared hatred of menial small talk.

Shino doesn’t seem to mind talking to Naruto at all though – but then again Naruto has always been an exception to the rule.

“I’m here for a teammate as well.” Shino says, his tone almost pleasant. “Hinata’s birthday isn’t far off and I’m searching for a suitable gift.”

Naruto blinks, “Is it December already?” His confusion is valid – Konoha, given where it’s located in the heart of Fire country, doesn’t have winter and summer so much as it has a wet season and a dry season.

“Not quite. But I thought I’d get it out of the way before things get too hectic.” Shino turns his gaze from Naruto to Sasuke. “Did you just come from a mission?”

“Yeah. Our first C-rank.” Sasuke says mildly, eyes still scanning for things that would suit Sakura’s fighting style. He has several prospects for inspection.

“Already?” Shino asks, though he doesn’t seem very surprised. “I’ll have to ask Kurenai-sensei about stepping up our missions.”

“What’s Kiba getting Hinata?” Naruto asks. “Do you know?”

“A new calligraphy set, I believe, though I will no doubt have to remind him several times to actually purchase it. I hoped to get her something more practical, although I am starting to wonder if Tigress would not be a better place to find something.”

Sasuke taps Naruto’s arm and leaves him to talk with Shino, and Naruto nods minutely before continuing his end of the conversation. Shino watches the exchange oddly, but makes no comment on it.

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Their time in Mantis reminds Sasuke that he and Naruto also need new equipment, and he doesn’t
even have to drag Naruto at that point– the blond is out of overshirts and what mission pants he
does have are practically in threads.

He opts for a reinforced variety of limb wrap for his arms that won’t dissolve so easily in Kurama’s
chakra, and forgoes looking for overshirts entirely, instead focusing on finding decent chakra mesh
shirts and shinobi pants of the right length. Sasuke finds a few of the male equivalent of Sakura’s
ribbed sleeveless shirt and decides he wants ten, but Naruto, ever frugal, argues him down to three
and buys a few for himself. They get themselves new thigh pouches and belts, Naruto gets a few
harnesses designed for carrying scrolls of varying sizes, and Sasuke gets an array of armored
gloves in different lengths meant to conceal anything from senbon to whole kunai.

The regular clothing shop is a pain, if only because it’s run by civilians and Naruto has to keep him
from murdering every one of them that sends Naruto a hateful glance. At least the fucking shinobi
know better than to make it obvious.

In the end, the hardest part of getting their civilian clothes is finding someone crazy enough to
check them out while Sasuke’s stands there breathing fire. Figuratively, unfortunately. He’d love to
burn the whole stupid place to the ground and every blind ignorant civilian in the area with it.

He’s so pissed off he doesn’t notice Naruto smiling the entire time.

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“You sure this is the place?”

Naruto double checks the address and rough map scrawled on the back of Sakura’s list. “Pretty
damn sure, jerk.”

The ‘apothecary’ Sakura had been talking about looks more like a witch doctor’s hut, a tilted
wooden building located closer to the forest of death than Naruto is entirely comfortable with. The
place is painted with a reddish brown and a dark purple that reminds him of barely healed scabs
and poison, dangling with charms and strange artifacts and wind chimes that look to be made of
bone.

“I’m not going in there.”

“Yes we are. You’re out of conditioner.”

“Shit.”

Naruto steps forward first, lifting up the curtain that falls over the doorway. “It’s supposed to be
the best herbiary in the village.”

“It’s also where half the Jounin in Konoha get their cigarettes.” Sasuke shoots back, eyeing the
interior of the shop warily.

The inside of the apothecary is dim and Naruto wrinkles his nose at the strong smell of incense,
smoky and thick and tangling in wisps against the ceiling. It’s obviously a poor attempt to cover up
the musk of tobacco ash that seems to have seeped into every crevice of the place, mixed in with
the perfumes from the dried herbs and fragrant oils.

Naruto takes one step inside and steps right back out, his hand over his nose and mouth. “On
second thought, fuck it. Let’s go.”

Sasuke shoulders him inside anyway, pushing him into the gloom of the shop despite his protests.
The atmosphere is notably creepier once inside, the normally bright Konoha sunshine dimmed by heavy curtains and old yellowed windows. “Oi! Anybody home?” He calls, tucked mostly behind Naruto’s back, the coward.

“Whaddya want?” The words come muffled from behind the counter at the back of the room, and Naruto makes out somebody leaning in a chair behind it, a thin book draped over their face.

Before either of them can answer, there's a rustle and a pounding and a voice sounds from somewhere in the back. “Go back to sleep you old coot. And stop being rude to the customers!”

“I’m twenty nine you little prat!”

A girl bursts through the back curtain with a rattle of beads, a younger than the two of them by a couple of years at least. Her hair is dark violet and chopped short, styled into a bob with the exception of a couple of long thin braids that drape over her shoulder. Her eyes are big and bright and butter-yellow, and she smiles up at them sweetly. “Hello. Ignore Gin, please. He gets a little cranky this early in the morning.”

“It’s 2:30.” Sasuke states.

“Try telling him that. I’m Ayame. If you’re looking for something specific, I can help you.”

Naruto pulls the folded piece of notepaper from his pocket and hands it to her. She looks it over, scanning the complicated list of herbs, extracts, and concoctions. She reaches the bottom and her eyes go wide.

“Oh, I recognize this handwriting, you must be Sakura-chan’s brothers!” She chirps.

Naruto and Sasuke share a glance, and Sasuke shrugs.

“Um, yeah.” Naruto replies. “She’s sleeping off a mission.”

“Kin of the firecracker, huh?” The man behind the counter rumbles suspiciously, lifting up the book over his eyes. He has a tall, thin frame and platinum blonde hair, his pale red eyes rimmed with dark circles and angry lines. “Tell her that her poisons permit went through, but she needs to pass the Chunin exam before I even think about clearing her for neurotoxins.”

Sasuke inclines his head in affirmation. “Noted.”

“I think I have most of these in stock.” Ayame hums thoughtfully. “Let me check. Feel free to look around in the meantime, burn salves are half off today!” She disappears around the corner and Gin puts the book back over his face.

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“That was easily the most awkward twenty minutes in my entire life.”

“And you walked in on Asuma and Kurenai-sensei playing tonsil hockey by the standby station.”

“I thought we agreed never to talk about that.”

“I remember you ordering me not to talk about it and I remember not listening.” Naruto quips, pausing on the end of the street. “At least her dad wasn’t home.”

“Small mercies.” Sasuke grumbles, a bundle of clothes tucked under his arm. “You could cut the tension in there with a kunai.”
“Well if they can’t get over themselves then they don’t deserve her. She can stay with us, period.” Naruto defends in his very Naruto-like fashion.

“Shit, we forgot to pick up another futon.” Sasuke remembers.

Naruto shrugs, readjusting his own armload of Sakura’s stuff so he can get out his sealing scroll. “We’ll figure it out.”

They’d taken more out of Sakura’s room than her mother may have been strictly aware of—she’d been under the impression that they had only come to get things for a few nights at most.

Too tired to bother to use chakra, they walk together down the streets of the civilian district. The afternoon sun slants through the trees, casting soft edges of shadow across the buildings and the cobblestones. In this light Naruto’s hair shines like a ten ryo coin, catching sun like it’s been spun from pyrite. Sasuke reaches out to tug absently on a strand of it, which has grown almost down to his jaw.

“You need a haircut.” He observes.

Naruto blinks at him, eyes catching in the strange light and flaring sapphire. “Huh? Oh, yeah.” He reaches up to pull a hand through the strands. The length is choppy at the ends, evidence of Naruto’s previous attempts to cut it himself. “Maybe I’ll ask Sakura when we’re done sleeping for a week.”

Despite the words Naruto doesn’t look all that tired, no more than Sasuke feels anyway. They don’t need sleep so much as they need rest, a few hours to spend doing nothing at all.

As if reading his mind, something that’s becoming more and more common these days, Naruto asks him if he wants to sit for a while. He nods and they find a hill off training ground five that’s flooded with sunlight, gilding the grass and the edges of the trees. Sasuke sits and Naruto stretches out next to him, folding his arms behind his head, and they spend a few long moments just soaking up the warmth and enjoying the rare bliss of doing nothing for more than a few minutes at a time.

“You haven’t talked about being Hokage for a while.” Sasuke comments, watching the shadows shift with the swaying of the trees. “Is that still your dream? To wear the hat?”

He half expects Naruto to answer with a disgruntled ‘of course it is’, but Naruto is quiet, contemplative, and gives real thought to his answer.

“Being Hokage would be awesome.” He says eventually, eyes fixed on the horizon despite the harsh shine of the sun. “Kages are amazing. The great shadows that protect whole villages and all that; the strongest shinobi of their kind. I respect them a hell of a lot for what they do.”

Sasuke senses deeper reasoning behind the statements, senses that Naruto is saying one thing and yet another all at once. “But?” He queries, catching the soft uncertainty in the Uzumaki’s voice.

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“But… It’s not enough.” He says softly. “Not anymore.” Naruto turns and looks right at Sasuke, expression intense. “It’s not enough to follow in other people’s footsteps anymore.” he says as he sits up, leaning back on his hands. “I want to be something more than all of it, I want power enough to protect what’s precious to me from anything, even the Kages and the villages.” He casts his gaze back to the horizon. “Villages can go bad, like Kiri. They can fall, like Uzushio. I want to protect what I love from all that, my friends, my comrades,” he glances to Sasuke again, his eyes on fire. “My family. Even if I have to protect them from the village itself. So in that case I don’t really think I could ever be Hokage. I’ll always put my precious people above the village. Always.”
Sasuke’s eyes go wide. He feels like a hole has been punched somewhere in his chest, opening up a barrier that has long walled up some deep part of him. It tears awake a sudden awareness, and despite his weariness Sasuke’s perception of the world is suddenly blindingly clear. He remembers Naruto’s words from Tazuna’s house, his disregard for Sasuke’s clan legacy and his powerful regard for Sasuke himself, all that trust and faith in him as an entity separate from his clan and his legacy and his pain.

He could be anything.

Right now, with Naruto right here, rules and legacies and clan names mean nothing, are just shackles that can be broken and moved beyond, if only they can be strong enough.

Here, with Naruto at his side, Sakura as a grounding force and Kakashi as a guiding hand, not only does he feel strong enough, he feels the potential to be even stronger.

Something shatters somewhere in the back of Sasuke’s mind, echoes of a trauma now old and frail with neglect breaking apart like so much glass. The presence and pressure of Itachi’s cold hateful eyes crumbles like collapsing walls. The house of hate he’d made so long ago, now fragile from abandonment, disintegrates entirely, and for the first time since before the massacre, he feels like he can see the sky.

“Sasuke?”

Naruto is looking at him with worried cobalt eyes, entirely too close, his head tilted in that animal confusion and curiosity.

Sasuke laughs once, short and disbelieving.

What did I do to deserve this idiot?

“It’s just like you to want that, Dobe.” Sasuke says, his voice low in attempt to conceal the warmth in it. But it’s true; it’s just so like him, all of it, and so Sasuke holds tight Naruto’s belief in him, his convictions, and comes forward with a little faith of his own. He leans forward, keeping their eyes locked, and lightly touches their foreheads.

He’s not one to be outdone, after all.

“Like none before, then.” he says quietly, a promise and a challenge all wrapped up together, and Naruto’s answering smile is blinding. He leans forward even more, pressing their brows together more firmly.

“Like none before.” He swears.

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When Sakura finds them, hours later, the sun has nearly set. They’re lying side-by-side, practically asleep in the last dredges of evening light, and her expression goes straight from irritated to terribly fond.

“Come on idiots.” She murmurs quietly, holding both her arms out for them take hold of, helping hand and anchor all at once. “Let’s go home.”
So, bit of a plot heavy chapter but whatever, twas necessary. There will be fluffy animals next chapter so.
I feel a little bad for Ibiki... mostly feel bad for Kiba next time he tries to go anywhere near T&I...
I regret nothing.

(Also, I do have a tumblr now? A friend of mine ranted at me for like a full thirty minutes when I told her I didn't have one so now I do... anyway it's sablescribe if you care, and it's just got stuff for Naruto and this fic so far. I might start posting my headcanon randomness. We'll see.)

“You want to what?”

“I know you heard me Shiranui. I’m not repeating myself.” Kakashi replies, unimpressed.

Genma looks him up and down. He doesn’t look like he’s sustained significant head trauma, but with Kakashi it’s sometimes hard to tell. He is acting… jumpy though, or as jumpy as an ex-Anbu captain is capable of acting.

“But why?”

Kakashi looks away tellingly. “My pack needs more space to run around in.” He hedges.

“Bullshit. You run them outside the village at least twice a day, and even if they were complaining, that’s still not enough of a reason for you to crack open this particular can of worms.” Genma pauses mid thought, reanalyzing Kakashi’s wording, and another idea slots into place, painting a clearer picture. “Unless you’re not talking about your dogs.”

The copy-nin looks distinctly uncomfortable at that, detectable even underneath the mask.

Bingo.

“You haven’t told Iruka yet, have you?” Genma guesses.

“I don’t think I could handle the ‘I told you so’ right now.” he admits.

“It’s been like, what, four months? Did they really worm their way into your life that fast?”

Kakashi raises an eyebrow. “You haven’t met them, have you?”

Genma shrugs. “I met blondie for like thirty minutes.”

“So, no.”

He waves off Kakashi’s dry response. “Still, this isn’t something I ever thought you would even consider after… well, everything.”
A slight pinch of pain creases the corner of Kakashi’s visible eye, an old tender wound that never fully healed over. “I’ve been running from that particular demon for long enough, I think.”

Genma huffs. “Well hell, Kakashi, did you honestly expect me to say no? Your clan lands are yours and always will be, so far as I’m concerned. I’ll have to ask Rai where I put the damned paperwork, since I never thought I’d need it again, but after that it’s all yours.”

Genma sees relief smooth out the tension in Kakashi’s shoulders. “Thank you.” he says softly.

The Tokujo snorts. “Don’t thank me yet, I may have the land part but Iruka still has the assets. You’re gonna need to talk to him at some point.”

Kakashi laughs wryly and scratches at his masked chin with one finger. “I’m still not really sure how I’m going to start that kind of conversation.”

Genma shrugs. “My advice? Rip it off like a bandage. Waiting around will only make it worse, and you’ve got a lot of work ahead of you if you want to get that place up and running, so the sooner the better.”

The copy-nin nods. “True.”

Genma jostles the Jounin’s shoulder with his own, grinning wide around the senbon between his teeth. “Get going then! I have to go get Rai from the standby station. I’ll bring the papers by Iruka’s tonight, so go!”

“Pushy pushy.” Kakashi complains, but he complies, taking a few long strides before hopping out the third floor window of the Hokage tower with a lazy wave.

*Those kids are good for him.* Genma muses, and heads for the standby station.

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“The what now?”

“You heard me Kiba, I’m not gonna say it twice.”

Team seven plus one Inuzuka and one Nara sit circled in the glade, the high midday sun streaming down and warming the long grass. They’d spent most of the last day and a half sleeping on and off, piled together on the only futon. Naruto doesn’t mind so much. He’s gotten so used to sharing space with his teammates that sometimes they don’t even feel like separate people— especially early in the morning when none of them are fully awake, navigating around spaces and each other with barely open eyes. They’re still not all the way coherent— Naruto is the only one supporting his own weight, since he can generally operate the best on little to no sleep. Sakura is leaning with her whole back against Naruto’s side, and Sasuke is half asleep with his head pillowed on Naruto’s opposite knee.


Naruto blinks at him, tilting his head in case he heard wrong. “It doesn’t bother you?”

Shikamaru has the gall to actually look confused by the question. “Why would it bother me?”

“No one who actually knows you gives a shit, Dobe.” Sasuke growls, his eyes still closed.

Sakura laughs at that. “See? Even Kiba knows better than to judge you for something stupid like that.”

“Speaking of secrets though…” Shikamaru interrupts. “There is a reason I dragged you three out of bed.”

Taking that as the cue it is, Naruto gives Sasuke’s shoulder a gentle shake. “Hey, jerk. You’re gonna want to be awake for this.”

Sasuke’s eyes flicker open all the way, ebony gaze narrowed in confusion. “Me? Why?”

“Do you remember when I told you I went through the black ops part of the archives looking for something to help Kurama?”


“Well I found something else. Something I didn’t want to tell you about until I was sure it was accurate, in case I dug up skeletons for no reason. I asked Shika to see if he could validate it.”

Sasuke blinks the sleepy daze out of his eyes and sits up quickly. “Skeletons… my clan?”

Naruto shakes his head. “Your brother.”

To Naruto’s surprise, Sasuke only freezes at the statement for about half a second before he takes a deep breath, obviously calming himself. “What about him?”

Before Naruto can respond, Sakura leans over. “If this stuff is dirty laundry you'd rather not air in front of us, Kiba and I can go.”

Sasuke shakes his head. “Don’t be stupid. You’re team 7, and dog breath can keep a secret if he has to.”

Kiba holds up both hands. “Hey, I know all about stupid siblings, even if none of mine are homicidal. My lips are sealed.”

Shika smirks. “I figured it would end up being a bit of an open secret anyway.” He pulls the file Naruto had given him out of the pocket of his shirt, notably thicker now than it had been when Naruto had handed it over. He flicks it open with his thumb, drawing out a small folio and handing it to Sasuke. “This is the original file copy Naruto gave me. Just looking at the front sends up all kinds of black op red flags already.”

“What kind of red flags?” Sasuke asks as he reads through the folio, eyes widening as he goes to open the file.

“Its got Root literally stamped on the cover. for one. By the looks of it, this ‘operation’ was carried out just before Root’s supposed disbanding.”

“Root?”

“A specific set of Anbu squads run solely by Danzo Shimura. My dad complains about the asshole a lot.”

Kiba nods. “I’ve heard my mom talk about him, but I’ve never met the guy in person. He
apparently fancies himself as some kind of ‘Shadow Hokage’ and spent a lot of time trying to run the village under Sarutobi’s nose. The old man let it slide for a while since he and Danzo were old war buddies or something, but recently the Sandaime has had a lot less tolerance for his shit. At least openly.”

“They were trying to… recruit my brother? After the massacre?” Sasuke speculates.

Shikamaru shakes his head. “It’s not very clear in there, so I dug around a little. The problem with black op and old Root operations is that there’s never any evidence of them left over. So instead of looking for what was there, I looked for what wasn’t. Daily reports with timestamps missing, patrols that never checked in, messages that went out and never came back with responses. Everything points to some kind of deep dark operation, and it corresponds with the date and time of the Uchiha massacre.”

“So what do you think happened?” Sasuke asks. “Besides the obvious mass murder?”

Naruto is a little surprised about how level headed Sasuke is being about it all, but his friend seems to be able to separate himself from the event now in a way he couldn’t before. Naruto leans closer for support anyway, just in case. Sasuke presses their shoulders together gratefully.

“I’ve gone through a lot of possibilities, and I have three that seem the most likely.” Shikamaru states, setting the folder between them. “First, there’s always the distinct chance that there was some event or circumstance that drove your brother mad— a loss or a defeat or something of the like. Second, there’s also a high probability that the entire thing was… orchestrated somehow, that your brother was only a tool used to commit the atrocity.”

“You think someone planned it?” Naruto snarls. “Who could do that?”

“It’s a short list for sure, but that’s just inside the village, ruling out an outside influence. Danzo is one, but that doesn’t rule out anyone on the council. Also, it’s unlikely that anyone, even someone as skilled as your brother, could take out an entire two-line clan without some kind of help.”

“The Uchiha clan was two-lined?” Kiba asks, surprised.

Sasuke nods. “There were two main groups of descendants. I’m the kin of Izuna, who became the ruling line and the clan heads. Those of the other line were descendants of Kagami, who became the clan protectors. Itachi had a designated protector as the next clan head, like my father before him, and my grandmother before that.”

“You said three possibilities.” Naruto interjects at Shikamaru. “What was the third?”

Shikamaru takes a deep breath before he speaks. “The third and mostly likely is a combination of the two. The more I think about it, the more likely it seems to me that Itachi was… manipulated somehow. With Kiba’s help—” Shikamaru jerks a thumb in the dog-nin’s direction. “I managed to get a peek at Itachi’s old personnel files.”

“Is that why you asked me to pants Ibiki over by T&I? Because I wouldn’t have complained so hard if I knew this was what it was for.” Kiba admits.

Sakura’s eyes go wide and she dissolves into snickers. “How the hell are you not dead?”

“Akamaru and I are very fast when properly motivated.” The nin-dog in nestled in Kiba’s jacket yips at the sound of his name. “Some half dressed purple-haired Tokujo came by the next day with a fruit basket too.” Kiba continues. “It was all really weird.”
“Did you take the basket?”

“Of course I took the basket. I don’t have a death wish.”

“Anyway,” Shikamaru says pointedly, and Kiba and Sakura both shut up. “From what I saw, Itachi was a shining example of a loyal shinobi. Not even minor marks for any kind of insubordination. He followed orders to the letter, all except for one instance.” Shikamaru pulls out a sheaf of papers that look like handwritten notes; Shika’s given the handwriting, and flips them so that they’re facing Naruto and Sasuke. He points to a section halfway down the last page. “Here, there was in incident just before the massacre where Itachi doubled back from what was supposed to be a team oriented mission. The only reason his CO could state for the sudden withdrawal was that Itachi ‘felt something was wrong.’ I don’t think it’s a coincidence that the two occurrences were so close together, and it’s possible that this is the event that triggered his spiral.”

Sasuke sits back and runs an agitated hand through his hair. “It can’t all be a coincidence. But why the hell would someone inside the village want to destroy one of its strongest clans? That doesn’t make any sense…”

~I think I have something to say about all this.~ Kurama comments from the back of Naruto’s psyche. ~Mind if I cut in?~

“Let me check.”

“Guys?” Naruto interjects Shikamaru and Sasuke’s intense conversation. “Kurama has some input on this whole thing. You mind if I let him say his piece?”

Sasuke stops short and blinks at him. “You can do that?”

Naruto nods. “Sure can.”

“Hell yeah, I say go for it.” is Kiba’s input.

“I don’t care, obviously.” Sakura states. “He’s free to talk when he likes so far as I’m concerned.”

“Of course.” Sasuke agrees.

Shikamaru nods. “I’m all ears. Anything an immortal chakra being has to say is probably worth listening to.”

Naruto nods and closes his eyes, letting Kurama push up through him.

The shade materializes in wisps of gilded red chakra, winding and folding together into a solid shape. It’s a lot smaller than the shades Kurama usually prefers, only about the size of a small dog instead of a large horse, but it also looks much more concentrated— barely even see-through. Kurama drapes over his shoulders like a furry chakra shawl, stretching lazily like a contented cat.

~Ahh It’s good to see outside again.~ the fox rumbles, curling his tails over Naruto’s shoulder.

~Nice to meet you all in person, I suppose, even if you are humans.~

“Be nice.” Naruto chastises, giving Kurama’s mostly solid snout a scratch.

~I am being nice. These little humans are yours after all.~ Kurama rumbles.

Shikamaru blinks at the bijuu, the only sign of surprise on his face. “Somehow not what I’d expected.” He drawls.
“So you’re the Nine-tailed fox, huh?” Sasuke mutters. “I thought you’d be taller.”

Kurama puts his head in a clawed paw and stares over at him. ~Very funny Uchiha. You’re lucky you’re precious to my kit or I’d swallow whole, sharingan or no.~

“You don’t seem very capable of following through with that threat.”

“Hey.” Naruto interjects. “Let’s not get off topic here. You said you had a thought on this whole Uchiha massacre mess, right Kurama?”

The fox nods easily and turns back to Shikamaru. ~I believe the Nara is mostly correct, but you’re missing one key element.~

Shika ticks up an eyebrow at that. “And what might that be?”

~When you’ve lived as long as I have, you become adept at sniffing out all the telltale signs of human deception. And this entire Uchiha mess stinks of a conspiracy.~

“What do you mean conspiracy?” Sasuke asks.

~You have the tip of the iceberg, which by itself is...impressive I must admit.~ Shika allows himself a small smirk at that. ~But you are not looking far enough back. From what I remember through Kushina’s eyes, tension between the Uchiha clan and the rest of the village had begun to grow steadily after the end of the third shinobi war. I recall the fear being thick in both the clan and the outside village.~

“Tension? What the hell kind of tension?” Kiba asks.

“Wait, fear?” Naruto interjects. “Of the Uchiha as a whole?”

Kurama nods. ~It started with the segregation of the Uchiha to a special district, I believe.~

“Segregation?” Sasuke mutters, shaking his head. “That’s not how I heard it.”

“‘For the protection of the village’ I would guess.” Naruto theorizes. “Haku said that’s how the persecution of Kekkei Genkai started in Kiri. People were afraid of them and they were eventually hunted down and killed.”

“Haku?” Shikamaru asks.

“A missing-nin we met on our mission.” Sakura explains. “It’s a long story.”

Shikamaru tilts his head in acknowledgement and doesn’t press any further.

“My brother… he always claimed to love the village more than the clan.” Sasuke says softly. “But still that’s no reason for him to murder them all!” Sasuke’s voice rises in volume as emotion begins to leak into his voice. “An entire host of people, dozens of families!” He stops short when Naruto grips his forearm briefly, giving at a soft squeeze. Sasuke's voice lowers and he takes a deep breath. “It’s not forgivable.”

~No one is saying that it is, little firebrand.~ Kurama soothes. ~You are well within your rights to hate him for everything he’s done. But hating him gives the act power, and makes you a slave to your emotions. Do not let it rule you.~

Sasuke breathes deep again. “Don’t worry about that.” he assures. “He has no power over me. Not anymore.”
Kurama makes a pleased and contemplative rumble. ~Your kind have always felt more deeply than most humans are capable of. It is… refreshing to see an Uchiha that does not let fear or hatred rule him.~ Kurama then turns back to Naruto. ~I take back what I said, kit. He’s alright for an Uchiha.~

Sasuke scowls. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Naruto shrugs. “Kurama had a bad experience with a broken-eyed Uchiha. One of them manipulated him into attacking the village and killing my parents on the day I was born.”

“Manipulated?” Shikamaru asks. “How?”

“Under certain conditions, fully evolved sharingan are capable of controlling tailed beasts. Not indefinitely, at least not in Kurama’s case, but long enough to wreak havoc.” Naruto elaborates.

“Broken sharingan? How can a sharingan be broken?” Sasuke demands, leaning forwards to rest his elbows on his knees so he can more easily see Kurama.

~Quite easily apparently, if the entire Uchiha line is anything to go by.~ Kurama quips. ~In fact, you're the only Uchiha I know of that hasn’t screwed theirs up yet.~

“You mean since Indra.”

~I mean at all.~ the fox stresses.

“Can you two argue about this sharingan crap later? I thought we were talking about a conspiracy.” Kiba barks, obviously confused with all the dojutsu and bijuu jargon flying around.

“Kurama is trying to say that he thinks someone backed the Uchiha into a corner on purpose.” Naruto explains, stroking a soothing hand down Kurama’s chakra in an attempt to calm him back down.

“If someone wanted a powerful clan out of the picture, it wouldn’t be difficult to stir up unrest against them, especially after the war.” Shikamaru agrees.

Sakura nods, humming thoughtfully. “The more they were persecuted, the angrier they got, and the easier it was to convince people they were a threat. Not only did someone probably orchestrate the massacre itself, but the events leading up to it.”

~This is likely correct, little genesis.~ Kurama agrees.

“There are still some things that don’t add up though.” Shikamaru interjects. “Even if unrest started inside the village, that doesn’t rule out the interference of an outside party. We also don’t know Root’s role in all of this.”

“This Danzo guy has some shit to answer for, that’s for damned sure.” Sakura growls.

Kiba shakes his head. “Unfortunately for everyone involved, the asshole is untouchable. Accusing him would actually be harder than accusing the Hokage— not only is the dude an ex-council member, but status notwithstanding he’s still so entrenched in political red tape there’s no way to get at him.”

“I knew that, but how did you?” Shika asks. “I know your mother talks to your sister about a lot of things, but not about anything classified.”
“Yeah well, she rants to Kuromaru in the yard too. Akamaru gets some of the juiciest gossip, don’t you boy?”

The ninken yips in affirmation from the depths of Kiba’s sweatshirt.

“If he did do it, and the evidence is pretty damning, we can’t just let him get away with it.” Naruto growls.

“Exactly.” Sasuke grits out. “If he’s behind all of it, then his hands are just as bloody as my brother’s, if not more.”

“And that’s if the massacre was all he was behind.” Kiba adds. “Who knows what other kinds of crap he’s pulled under Sarutobi’s nose? The village could be rotting away under our feet and we wouldn’t even know it. That is assuming the third doesn’t actually know about it. He may have covered it up to prevent a civil war or something. The other clans wouldn’t have stood for it.”

“I think we’re jumping to conclusions here.” Shikamaru interjects.

“You think he didn’t do it?” Sakura asks.

Shika shakes his head. “I didn’t say that, but I think we need more information. A lot of this is all theory, speculation. We need evidence.”

Naruto blinks, and Sasuke stills. “Shikamaru?” Sasuke asks, disbelieving. “What exactly are you saying?”

Shika sighs. “If Danzo Shimura is responsible for the massacre, this proves he’s a master of the long game. If you want to back him into a corner and prove him guilty, we’ll need to beat him on his own board, with his own pieces.”

“You’re offering to help us go after this guy?” Sasuke questions.

Shikamaru smiles, soft and wry. “Obviously. If I don’t help you, you three will run into this blind and deaf and then where will you be?”

Naruto chuckles nervously, mostly because he may or may not have been thinking just that.

“Oh hell, I’m in.” Kiba crows. “They won’t even see us coming. Who suspects a bunch of Genin, anyway?”

“We have your back.” Sakura assures, reaching over to grasp Sasuke’s shoulder.

“Are you sure we can’t just go beat the crap out of him?” Naruto asks, and Sakura elbows him in the ribs.

“Don’t be stupid.”

Sasuke looks more than a little stunned. “Wait a second– you’re serious.”

~Of course they’re serious.~ Kurama rumbles, flipping a tail to swat as Sasuke’s hair in mild admonishment. ~Did you honestly think you were alone in this? I thought you smarter than that.~

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Shikamaru has a battle plan in the works. This conspiracy with Danzo can cause nothing but long-term trouble for Konoha, and he has a lot to protect here. The plan has stages– the first of which
involves a lot of waiting and watching. There isn’t a lot the five of them can do as they are right now, but while they wait, Shikamaru can set a strong foundation and contemplate the thousands of moves and angles in the meantime.

They migrate back to Naruto’s apartment for a long overdue lunch. Shikamaru takes a needed nap while food is made, which is helpful for further mapping out moves, counter-moves, and contingency plans.

Sakura wakes him up gently to press a bowl of curry into his hands, a familiar and calming food nowadays. Naruto and Sakura had no doubt made it with Sasuke in mind.

Shikamaru rolls his shoulders and takes a pair of chopsticks from her gratefully.

“Extra helping.” Sakura says warmly. “Choji says you need it when you’ve been thinking too much.”

“Thank you.”

She hops up next to him on Naruto’s bed while he eats, watching Sasuke play tug-of-war with Akamaru while Naruto goes through some of his Uzushio scrolls. They seemed to have opted to let him sleep instead of waking him as soon as the food was done, which Shikamaru appreciates more than he can say. All the talking and organizing and strategizing had taken more out of him than he thought.

“Did you know there was a time when you couldn’t even mention Itachi or the Uchiha clan to Sasuke without him getting defensive and angry?” Sakura says, her spring-water eyes soft as she tucks her chin against her knees. Shikamaru doesn’t answer; Sakura doesn’t seem to be expecting him to. “Did you know that Naruto used to flinch every time someone touched him,” she continues. “Even on accident?”

Shikamaru does know these things, has seen the evidence of Sakura’s words in thousands of interactions and small gestures. He is adept at seeing all the little things his friends do to hide their pain, and all the little things that give that pain away.

“You know I do.” He says eventually, and takes another bite of his curry. Odd, how the flavors never seem to be the same. There is no recipe for team 7’s curry, no guidelines and no measured rules, but it somehow always manages to taste fantastic.

“They’re good for each other.” Sakura says, almost sadly.

“You’re as good for them as they are for each other.” Shikamaru counters, wiping a bit of sauce off his lip with his thumb. “When they go too far outside themselves, it’s you they trust to draw them back to earth again.”

Sakura laughs like it’s been startled out of her, a flush drawing across her cheeks at the compliment. “You really do know just what to say to people, don’t you Shika?”


Sakura beams and slings an arm around his shoulders, jostling his chopsticks. “You’re such a good friend it’s scary, you know that? Be it chakra demons or crazy conspiracies, nothing scares you off, does it?”

“Please don’t let that get around.” Shikamaru grumbles.
She laughs again, bright and carefree. “Kiba’s the same way, but for him it’s all instinct—
protecting the pack and all that. The blind loyalty is something else, but you? You know
everything that’s going on, every catch and hardship, and still here you are.” She leans in, rests her
head on his shoulder. “Don’t ever let anybody take you for granted, okay?”

A soft ache blooms somewhere under Shikamaru's ribs, and he swallows hard. “Okay.”

She pulls him close in a one armed hug, a little too tight to be comfortable, but Shikamaru finds he
doesn’t mind. “Good,” she chirps.

“Speaking of being taken advantage of,” Shikamaru digresses, suddenly eager to change the
subject. “Naruto mentioned in passing that you had a fight with your parents? What was it about, if
you don’t mind my asking?”

“Oh, that.” Sakura says darkly, pulling back a little. “It’s okay, it’s not like it a secret or anything.
My parents are civilians right? When they entered me into the academy, they did it because I had
shown chakra talent and that was village policy. I don’t really think they ever expected me to want
to be a ninja the way I do now. We’d been arguing about it for a while before it actually blew up—
my dad wants me to quit being a ninja and do something ‘safe’ and ‘suitable’ for a living.” She
spits the two words out like they leave a bad taste in her mouth, her face twisting with frustration
and disgust. “It really only got heated when they found out I was going on my first C-rank mission.
They tried to stop me from going, we argued, and I stormed out. When my dad tried to stop me
from leaving, I almost accidentally broke his wrist.” She flexes her hand, as if remembering the
moment. “The thing that sucks is that I know they care, but they think they know what’s best for
me and they are so wrong. I love this life, I love being part of a team, I love being a ninja, and no
matter how much they wish differently, I won’t give it up. Not even for them.”

“A wise choice, in my opinion.” Shikamaru murmurs. “Parents should help lift you up, not hold
you back. And if they do love you, they’ll come around in the end.”

“I hope so.” Sakura muses. “They’re still my parents, even if they can be idiots.” she jostles him
playfully in the side. “Thanks for letting me rant. Sometimes it helps to talk to someone I’m not
already attached to at the hip.”

“OH CRAP.”

They both jolt when Naruto’s voice interjects loudly from the other end of the room as the
Uzumaki tears into his pack of scrolls. Akamaru yips and dives under Kiba’s knee and the dog-nin
rubs at his ears. “Geez, dude, warn somebody.” he grumbles.

“I forgot about the summoning scrolls!” Naruto exclaims as he digs through the pile of brown
library scrolls stacked by the window.

“What summoning scrolls?” Sasuke demands.

“The Tsubasa clan Treasure jutsu!” Naruto explains. “Gotcha!” he shouts as he pulls out one of his
black scrolls, the one lined in platinum. He sets it in his lap, flicking open the clasps and unrolling
it. “I remembered them when we were talking with Uhei about summons and contracts. Kurama
promised to teach us about them when we got back, but it completely slipped my mind.” Naruto
runs a finger along the intricate silver patterns of the seals, obviously searching for one in
particular. He stops when he comes across a seal marked with a curled feather. “Here it is.”

“Wait, I thought everything in that scroll was kinjutsu.” Kiba reminds him.
“Some of it is yeah.” Naruto agrees. “But the Tsubasa clan’s Treasure Jutsu has two sets of summoning scrolls. I think only one set is actually forbidden.” Naruto places a hand on the seal, and after a moment of concentration and a hum of chakra, he pulls from its depths a glittering decorative scroll as long as the Uzumaki’s torso from hip to shoulder. “Make some room, will you?” he asks. “I’ve got eleven more of these.”
SO SORRY YOU GUYS THIS IS SUPER LATE.
Spring break plans and time zones fucked with my available writing times more than anticipated, and I didn't want to post this chapter until it met my expectations. Please enjoy the fluffy creatures galore. Credit to blackkat for the initial idea to give Naruto fox summons— it was too good an idea to pass up. I sorta took the whole summoning thing and ran with it, and many creative liberties were taken, as per usual. I should be back to my regular schedule now of Tuesday night/Wednesday morning updates, but don't be surprised if the next chapter is posted a dayish late while I get back into my groove.

I regret nothing

True to word, Naruto produces eleven more long and ornate scrolls from the depths of the Tsubasa clan treasure seal. The Nine-tails, or Kurama, Shikamaru recalls, materializes again as he sets the last one down across the floor, stretching into existence out of Naruto’s body in a swirl of chakra. This shade is larger, about the size of Kuromaru, and he tucks in a crescent around Naruto, resting his vulpine head on the Uzumaki’s thigh.

“That’s still so cool.” Kiba comments. “It’s gonna take me a bit to get used to the fact that there’s an actual god-demon thing that lives in your chest and sasses you regularly.”

“It’s like having an angry, overprotective, built-in parent.” Sasuke muses.

~I’ll show you angry you little twerp.~ Kurama snarls, and actually seems to grow in size for about half a second before Naruto smooths a hand down the shade’s back, much like he did in the glade, and the bijuu’s hackles drop visibly.

It is, quite frankly, incredible to watch. The Nine-tailed fox, arguably the most dangerous and wrathful being ever to walk the earth, ceding to the wishes and influence of a twelve-year-old Konoha Genin with a too bright smile and his heart in his eyes.

“You’re doing that on purpose, jerk.” Naruto accuses, calling out Sasuke’s poorly hidden smirk.

“Maybe.” the Uchiha admits.

“They’re all so pretty. They don’t look much like Kakashi-sensei’s pack scroll, that’s for sure.” Sakura comments as she peers down at the line of colorful scrolls. Each one is decorated in different arrays of colours and patterns, some cast in vibrant jewel tones and rimmed with gold or silver, some rendered in more subdued hues and trimmed tastefully in black or grey. One particular scroll catches Shikamaru’s eye, a scroll decorated with dark leafy patterns like the forest at night, ringed with metallic grey and edged with gold filigree.

“They don’t have seams.” Sasuke notices, reaching for the scroll closest to him and turning it back and forth. He’s right; Shikamaru can’t see a place on any of the scrolls where they can be opened.
That’s because they’re locked shut. Kurama explains, reaching forward to trail a chakra claw over the metallic rings on either end of the scroll in Sasuke’s hands. These are sage animal scrolls, locked with live-linked blood seals.

“What the hell is supposed to mean?” Kiba asks.

Naruto rubs the back of his head. “How to explain it… they check for resonance, I guess, is the best way to put it. It analyzes blood and chakra composition, and if you’re ‘suited’ to the summons the scroll is linked to, the lock pops open and allows you an initial contract summon.” Naruto sounds oddly like he’s quoting parts of his response from somewhere, like he’s reading from an imaginary book.

“So the scrolls may or may not open depending on if we’re compatible or not.” Sasuke clarifies.

Exactly. Kurama affirms. But be warned, bonding with sage summons is not something to be taken lightly. They can be finicky, proud, and they will not necessarily obey you immediately. Whereas normal summons are contracted to be loyal to their summoner, a sage contract only guarantees that you can call the beasts, not that you can control them. To command larger or more powerful summons, you need to earn their respect first, and that is not always an easy task.

Kiba huffs, grinning. “Well, what the hell is worth having that isn’t hard to get? I don’t think I’d have it any other way, to be honest.”

“How do we start?” Sakura asks, shifting with energy and leaning forward precariously over the edge of her bed. Shikamaru resists the urge to anchor her shoulder with an arm like he would with Ino. “I’m so excited! I hope one picks me.”

Kurama laughs. I don’t think that will be a problem, little Genesis. If anything, you should be worried about having to choose.

“Do we need to take this outside though, that’s the question.” Naruto says. “Is summoning gonna break my apartment?”

Doubtful. Kurama assures. Initial contracting summons are usually pretty small and force you to work your way up. Best go one at a time though, just in case.

“Naruto should go first.” Shikamaru states. They are his scrolls after all.

Naruto shrugs and starts to reach for a scroll, but Kurama stops his hand with a nudge of his snout. Actually kit, I has something else in mind for you. Let the little Uchiha go first; he’s had a bit of a hard day.

Sasuke glares at the bijuu, but scans the line up of scrolls with a considering eye. Pick a few that appeal to you, and we’ll go from there. Kurama suggests when he doesn’t immediately make a decision.

Finally, he selects first a dark blue scroll decorated with patterns resembling feathers and trimmed with bright silver. Then almost as an afterthought, he also picks up a scroll with a winding pattern of indigo and aquamarine, bracketed in black.

Shikamaru can see the reservoir for the blood seal now that he cares to look, a subtle thumb-shaped indent on the upper ring of the scrolls. Sasuke brings his thumb to his mouth and bites down, letting blood well up along the digit before pressing it into the groove of the second scroll.

After a long moment there’s a soft hum of chakra, like the scroll itself is contemplating the
offering, before it lets out a set of ringing chimes like small bells or wind chimes. Nothing else happens.

Kurama stretches over and gives the scroll an exploratory sniff. ~Hmm. That’s a no, if a reluctant one. Pass this one to the Genesis, I’d like to test a theory.~

Sasuke looks mildly disappointed but passes the shimmering blue spiral scroll to Kiba, who in turn passes it to Sakura. The kunoichi takes it happily. “I was actually going to pick this one when it was my turn,” she marvels, turning the beautiful scroll back and forth to observe it from all angles. “It looks like an ocean, don’t you think?”

Sasuke actually looks a little concerned at that. “If you wanted it, you should have said. I only grabbed it out of curiosity.”

Sakura waves him off. “We’ll it worked out, didn’t it? Now check the other one!”

Sasuke shrugs, and places his still bloody thumb into the reservoir of his first choice. Again, the scroll begins to hum, but this time it only takes half as long for the scroll to emit a sound. It’s low like someone’s pulled the longest string on a harp, and with a snap the rings on the outer edge of the scroll flick open, pulling up the outer seam of the scroll with them so that it can be unraveled. Sasuke unrolls it, revealing a painted mural-like interior depicting several species of birds of prey. In the center is a blank space, left white and unblemished.

“Whoa.” Naruto murmurs. “Raptors, huh?” he muses as he looks over the colorful renderings of hawks and falcons and eagles. “That actually really suits you.”

Unless he’s seeing things, Sasuke actually goes a little red at that, something that Shikamaru doesn’t ever recall him having done before.

“What now?” Sasuke asks Kurama, after clearing his throat.

~Dip each finger in blood and fingerprint the blank space, then sketch the kanji for your name above it. The scroll should perform the initial summon for you, and after that you should be able to summon at will with the proper hand sign sequence.~

Sasuke does as instructed and everyone in the room watches intently as he touches each finger to his bleeding thumb and then presses his fingertips to the scroll’s open space. He then uses the inside edge of his thumbnail to write the kanji for Uchiha Sasuke above it.

The paper absorbs the imprint as if drinking in the blood, and as the red disappears the blank space floods black. With a crack reminiscent of a firecracker going off, the air in front of Sasuke floods with a cloud of glittering sand-like smoke. A rush of wind and the sound of beating wings follows, tips of a creature’s feathers just visible through the cloud before another wingbeat sends the veil scattering like dust as the summon alights on the scroll.

It’s a sleek bird about the size of a falcon, mostly white with golden brown accents and a sharp hooked beak. It looks like a normal enough at first, even if its plumage does seem a little reflective, but when it tips its head to the side, the light catches on a round pale blue gemstone set into its forehead, and when the creature hops a bit to shake out its primaries, a second set of wings becomes visible tucked beneath the first.

The raptor peers at Sasuke curiously, readily ignoring the rest of the room in favor of its summoner. Its eyes are keen and golden and ringed with soft black markings, making them shine even brighter in the soft light of the room. “Greetings.” The creature says politely. “I am Kikri, of
The Roc? Like the mythical bird kings? I didn’t think those actually existed.

Shikamaru resists the urge to say so out loud, not wanting to disturb what is likely a critical moment between summons and summoner.

“Uchiha Sasuke.” The ninja replies, a little bemused, but he inclines his head in greeting anyway. The summons seems to appreciate the gesture greatly, the subtle show of respect, and bows back, fanning its four wings behind it.

“Pleasure to meet you Sasuke-sama.” The Roc says genuinely, rocking forwards to hop up onto Sasuke’s knee, eyeing his shoulder almost hopefully. It seems reluctant to try and take flight in such a confined space, but unhappy so close to the ground. Seeming to sense this, Sasuke offers Kikri an arm. The raptor steps carefully onto his forearm, mindful of its sharp claws on the Uchiha’s unprotected skin, and hops to his shoulder when Sasuke raises his arm. The bird nestles comfortably there, tucking its head beneath its first set of wings to preen a few secondary feathers on the second. The wings are staggered slightly, the second set positioned slightly more ventrally than the larger first set, which is a bit farther back towards the spine than it would be on a normal bird. It means the creature can likely beat both sets of wings entirely independently, making it far more fast and agile than any regular bird.

“Do you have any questions, Sasuke-sama?” Kikri asks eagerly, tilting its head expectantly.

Sasuke contemplates this for a second. “If you would tell me about yourself and your kind, I would appreciate anything you can share.”

The polite, somewhat formal tone Sasuke is using seems to be scoring him some serious points with the creature, and Kikri flutters excitedly. “Of course, of course. I am Kikri of the Roc, as I said. I am three years old, nearly four, and will be fully mature when I am twelve. I am a female Gildedwing, one of three clans of the Roc, Council of Wings messenger second class, first hatching of my clutch.” The summons puffs her chest up proudly at that last part. “We Roc are the Lords of the Sky, Queens and Kings of all predatory birds. We have three Elders, the representatives of each clan, the largest and oldest of their kind. We are not clan restrictive in our summoning, you may call from any of the three.”

Are all the summons in these scrolls of a similar level? Shikamaru wonders. Because it’s no small advantage to have creature like those aid you in a fight.

As Kikri finishes her description of herself and her kind, she looks up at Sasuke hopefully, hopping a little closer on Sasuke’s shoulder. “Would you be so kind as to tell me about yourself, Sasuke-sama? It has been a rather long time since the Roc have had a contractor. I admit to being quite curious.”

Sasuke blinks, surprised. “I suppose that’s fair.” He admits.

While Sasuke talks lowly with his new summons, Sakura nudges Shikamaru in the side.

“Come on Shika, your turn.” Sakura chirps, still holding her scroll with both hands. “I think I want to save mine for last.”

Shikamaru nods in acceptance and bends over, reaching for the scroll that had caught his eye earlier. He expects the metal and lacquer to be cold in his hands, but it’s actually quite the opposite, warming his palms with some kind of inner heat from tips of his fingers to the middle of
his arm. He slips to the floor so he can set the scroll on a flat surface, and Kiba swaps spots with him to make room, nestling next to Sakura with Akamaru in his arms. Sakura gives the ninken’s chin a scratch, and he flops over into her lap for a belly rub.

Shikamaru bites into his thumb and presses a bloody print into the receptacle. It reacts the same way Sasuke’s second attempt had, with a few seconds of chakric humming and then a low sound of approval as the locking rings snap open. He bloodies his fingertips as he unrolls the scroll, and realizes as he gazes at the painting within why this particular scroll had drawn him in.

The design that surrounds the blank contracting space bears in eerie similarity to the paintings on the fusuma panels all throughout the Nara main house, traditional depictions of forest trees and running stags. Only the deer depicted in this painting appear to be trailing wisps of light and fog like phantoms.

He fingerprints the summoning space and sketches the kanji for his name above the marks, watching as the space floods back.

The sound that accompanies the summoning is haunting, like a long draw on a single string of a violin, which precedes a burst of silvery mist that swirls across the space before him. As it dissipates it reveals a young fawn, a little bigger than the ones Shikamaru has tended to in the forests, lying across the scroll with its legs tucked beneath it. It’s a male judging by the horns that are just beginning to sprout behind it’s wide expressive ears– assuming that the does of this species of summons do not also possess horns. The fawn’s fur is weapon-metal grey and speckled with glowing white spots that flicker all along the length of its back. The wisps of grey and white smoke that trail off its fur seem to be permanent and give the creature a blurred, ghostlike appearance.

The fawn blinks its entirely pale and eerie white eyes at him, ears flicking curiously, and without a word begins to stand. It’s legs are still a little unsteady if the way it wobbles on the way up is any indication, and once the creature is on it’s feet it practically falls into his lap, gangly legs everywhere, its head on Shikamaru’s knee. As it falls the wisps coming off of it’s fur flare upwards, tickling Shikamaru’s arms even though his shirt.

“Hello.” the creature says blithely, like it hadn’t just tripped on top of him. “I am Veylan.”

“Shikamaru,” he introduces dryly.

“I’ve always wanted to meet a Nara,” it comments easily, and Shikamaru feels his eyebrows touch his hairline.

“You know my clan?”

The fawn lifts its shoulder blades in the deer equivalent of a shrug. “Kind of. Our last contractor was a Nara, though that was a really long time ago.” With a twist of a long neck Veylan turns to look at Shikamaru properly. “I am a Wraith Hart, in case you were wondering. Our kind are pretty capable. We can manipulate chakra into both elemental forms and illusions, we are very fast, and we can even run on water,” the fawn informs him. “Oh, and my horns will be sharp when they grow in all the way,” Veylan tells him, like that’s the most important part.

Shikamaru can’t help but laugh a little, leaning down to rub the spot between the budding horns like he would do for the adolescent bucks of his clan’s herd.

The touch of the fawn’s fur on his bare skin tingles a little, but Veylan gives a pleased hum at the attention, setting his head back down on Shikamaru’s knee. “I am hungry,” the fawn announces after a moment. “Do you have any flowers?”
“Ugh…” Shikamaru hedges, looking over towards Naruto.

The Uzumaki shrugs. “We have kale in the fridge?”

Vaylan hums thoughtfully. “I have never had that before. Is that a kind of grass?”

“It’s a long leafy vegetable.” Shikamaru explains.

“That sounds filling,” the fawn says agreeably. “Yes please.”

“I got it.” Kiba volunteers, hopping up off the bed and darting into the kitchen, coming back with a bag of dark green leaves for Vaylan to munch on. The summons nibbles experimentally, and then begins to methodically devour the entire bag.

“My turn then!” Kiba yips

Sasuke stands to switch places with him, taking his refurled summoning scroll with him, moving careful to avoid jostling the summons still perched on his shoulder. Naruto seems reluctant to move, though as entrenched by Kurama’s shade as he is Shikamaru doesn’t blame him.

“You pick one, Akamaru,” Kiba tells his ninen, and the pup barks in affirmation, leaping out of his arms to sniff his way along the remaining nine scrolls. He stops at several, giving each one a long thorough inspection, until he reaches a black scroll speckled and spattered with dark reds and golds, trimmed in ivory white. Akamaru barks and grabs the end of the scroll with his teeth, dragging the heavy thing towards his ninja partner. “Good pick, bud! I like that one too,” Kiba chuckles, reaching forward to relieve his friend of the heavy burden.

The scroll opens for Kiba immediately, and Shikamaru wonders if maybe the scrolls themselves have a specific draw towards certain types of ninja, because so far all of their first picks have been compatible.

The painting on the inside of Kiba’s scroll depicts several dark furred canines running across a dry plain with a scattering of tall trees, chasing some kind of invisible prey. After he prints his fingers and sketches his name, the summon tumbles into existence with a pop of red smoke and a sound like crashing symbols, rolling head-over-hindquarters right into Kiba’s chest with a smack.

Akamaru barks indignantly when the dark mass of fur almost lands on top of him, leaping up into Kiba’s jacket to avoid any further collision.

“Sorry, sorry!” the summons yelps wriggling around to right itself in Kiba’s lap. “I didn’t mean it or anything, I wasn’t watching where I was going!”

The creature closely resembles a wolf or a coyote, with short soft-looking black fur spattered with dark red and golden-tan patches. “Hi!” The cub says excitedly, tucking in a hyper circle in Kiba’s lap. “I’m Shasa!”

“Whoa.” Kiba marvels, reaching down to stroke the pup’s ears. “I’m Kiba. Your fur is really cool.”

The summons preens. “Thanks! I’m a Blood Jackal, so I can charge it with electricity or even set it on fire if I want. It’s also chrakraproof!”

“Super cool.” Kiba agrees.

Akamaru barks, and he must be asking some sort of question because the summons responds.
“Well, I can see even in pitch back, and I’m pretty fast and agile too. My sisters are bigger than me, so they’re better at one on one combat than my brothers and I. My mama is the biggest. She’s really scary.”

“Moms are pretty scary.” Kiba affirms with a laugh. “Good to meet you Shasa.”

When Sakura’s scroll pops easily open, she honest to god giggles. She’s been watching the boys go through their scrolls with ill concealed envy, each one unveiling a sage creature with unique abilities and personalities that becomes more apparent as the apartment fills with more of them.

Kikri is now fluttering around the small room inquisitively, apparently confused as to how Sasuke can live in a space so small, and indignant that her summoner doesn’t live in some kind of palace. Shasa is playing with Akamaru in the small amount of space available in the main room, having a three-way conversation with both Kiba and his ninken. Vaylan seems a little bit wary of all the predators in the room, and hasn’t left Shikamaru’s lap.

They’ve all been practically perfect for their summoners so far, Shikamaru even got his literal clan animal, and Sakura can’t help but wonder what kind of creature has chosen her.

A sting of pain as she bites into her thumb, the rolling wetness of blood as she sketches her name and fingerprints the space beneath, and she finds out.

With a burst of mist-like steam the room is filled with the smell of tropical rain and sea salt, misting Sakura’s face with tiny dewdrops of water as the cloud parts. Wound in the center of the scroll is a small shining serpent, long and lithe, scales shining like hundreds of glittering sapphires. It’s sleek rounded head rises up above it’s coils, large emerald eyes peering at Sakura curiously; eyes that match the frills of feathers that adorn either side of the serpent's neck. The feathers don’t stop there– about a third of the way down the summons’s body is a set of furled emerald wings, it’s feathers as bright and reflective as it’s scales.

~Ah, that explains it.~ Kurama rumbles across from her as the summons continues to examine her unblinkingly through its slitted gem-like eyes. ~The Zotl are matriarchal vassalistic. They will only respond to female summoners.~

“Hello.” The serpent murmurs softly, in a voice that sounds like water moving over rapids. “You are my mistress?”

Sakura smiles. “I’m Haruno Sakura. Pleased to meet you.”

The serpent ducks its head and fans out its sparkling wings in a bow. “I am Ravia, of the Ocean tribe of the Zotl.” it says quietly, again lifting its head and flutters its wings a little, swaying forward a little as if to touch her arm. “May I?”

“Oh, sure.” Sakura says, lifting her arm in invitation. Ravia tucks their wings and slides up Sakura’s arm, the creature’s smooth scales surprisingly warm against her skin. The summon slithers over her shoulder and then winds a little ways down her other arm, and Sakura feels a soft and subtle tone of chakra buzz against the creature’s scales.

Ravia hums, forked tongue flitting in and out. “You are very strong, Mistress Sakura. Is it a clan trait?”

Sakura shakes her head, surprised the summons would think that. “No, my parents are civilians.”
The summons blinks, eyes going even wider and more curious than before. “You mean to say that you are a Genesis? The first of charka talent in your line?”

“Mhm.” She hums. “My parents are plain old civilian merchants, and I don’t have any siblings unless you count those that aren’t blood related.”

“All the more impressive.” Ravia states. “I am honored to be your summons, mistress.”

Sakura’s chest swells with pride. “Well I’m honored to have you.” She responds. “Can you tell me about yourself Ravia?”

“Of course.” The snake trills, feathers fanning on either side of its head. “I am male, one of two main tribes of the Zotl. Though there are a few other tribes that do exist within your summoning range, the Ocean and Mountain tribes contain the bulk of our kind. As a Zotl of the Ocean Tribe, my specialty is in my venom and my chakra augmentation. I am admittedly young for a summons, but I expect to grow a great deal under your care.”

Sakura preens, rubbing the back of her fingers down Ravia’s scales. “That’s sweet of you to say.”

The creature hums, indulging in her body warmth, and fans his wings across her shoulders. “May I stay a while?” he asks. “Your thermal energy is pleasant.”

Sakura laughs. “Stay as long as you like.”

Kiba snickers from the other side of Shikamaru. “This is becoming quite the party isn’t it? Hey Naruto, do we need to keep these guys on the DL for a while? My mom might ask where I got summons more awesome than my sister’s pack.”

Naruto turns from where he’s letting Sasuke’s summons eat some raw flank steak out of his hand. He shakes his head. “Nah. Kakashi-sensei will have told Jiji what he could about me going to Uzushio already, so you don’t have to worry about keeping the secret anymore.”

“I doubt he told him everything.” Sasuke counters. “But probably enough that telling your parents about a few summoning scrolls shouldn’t raise any red flags.”

“That’s good.” Shikamaru murmurs, rubbing the backs of his knuckles over the space between Vaylan’s small horns. “It would be pretty hard to keep something like this from my father.”

“Kakashi-sensei is a little overprotective.” Sakura says in response to Sasuke’s statement. She doesn’t say ‘of us’ or ‘of Naruto especially,’ because Sasuke knows that already, even if Naruto himself probably doesn’t. Kakashi-sensei is loyal to the village, of course, but he’s also not above fibbing to the Hokage to keep Naruto from getting into trouble. Sakura is sure of that.

~Alright Kit.~ Kurama yawns with no pretense. ~You’re up on the summoning front.~

Naruto grins his sunbeam grin and leans back, planted his palms behind Kurama’s chakra flank to that the bijuu’s shade is tucked between his back and his arms. “Okay then, you old grump, what did you have in mind?”

Kurama snorts haughtily. ~As my jinchuuriki, it’s only right that you get my summons, obviously.~

“You, have summons?” Naruto asks, bewildered.

~In a sense. Are you aware that the each of the tailed beasts were created in the image of the nine strongest Youkai?~
“Youkai? You mean like spirits?” Shikamaru asks.

~Spirits. Demons. It’s all semantics really, but yes.~ Kurama agrees, dipping his head in Shikamaru’s direction in acknowledgement. ~We were made to represent the greatest of the old spirits; the Tanuki, Nekomata, Kappa, Saru, Irukauma, Namekuji, Kabutomushi, Ushioni, and Kitsune respectively.~

Naruto ticks off his fingers one by one as he recites them. “So, Shukaku the raccoon dog, Matatabi the magic cat, Isobu the turtle spirit, Son Goku the monkey king, Kokuo the water horse, Saiken the sacred slug, Chomei the armored insect, Gyuuuki the bull demon, and you the spirit fox. Are you saying these spirits are linked to you guys somehow?”

~We are highly respected by our own kind, even seen as gods I would guess. I am unsure if that regard holds though, since I have not had much contact with the outside world in the last century. I can still, however, create a contract between you and the Kitsune, as could any bijuu with their respective spirits.~

“So you want my summons to be spirit foxes?” Naruto clarifies.

Kurama nods, tucking his head closer to Naruto’s stomach. It’s an oddly sedate motion, soft and just the tiniest bit vulnerable, and it sort of… hits Sakura right then, the gravity of it all.

When Naruto had told her he’d made friends with a giant angry chakra demon that had once almost destroyed the entire village, the first thing she’d thought was well, that’s a very Naruto thing to do.

But it’s more than that, so much more, it has to be. Because the way history talks about the Nine-tailed Fox is like a scary story you tell kids to keep them from being bad, like the whole ‘don’t play outside after dark or the fox will get you’ kind of deal. Except this story terrifies grown and battle hardened ninja instead of children, a cautionary tale even Kage take to heart. The tailed beasts can destroy whole villages, the stories would say. They can burn countries to the ground, tear apart everything you know, and the Kyuubi no Kitsune is the worst of them all.

But it’s almost impossible to equate that hateful creature, that monster she’s only ever heard about in stories, to this docile being, lying here across Naruto’s lap, that so obviously cares about Naruto that it’s almost painful to watch.

But then she remembers.

She remembers how Sasuke slowly started disappearing after class and would come back the next mornings with actual life in his eyes instead of that dead, concentrated stare. Remembers how he stopped hunching his shoulders and seemed less and less pale, how he stopped snapping at the people around him when they tried to talk with him. And she remembers when she’d confronted Naruto about it, how Naruto’s first and most powerful reaction was to jump to Sasuke’s defense even though Sasuke had never acknowledged him before that.

She also remembers how he’d made space for her over time, in his home and in his heart, leaving the door unlocked when he knew she’d be over, making extra portions of dinner for her when it was his turn to cook until Sasuke started doing the same. She remembers how the both of them had carved a space between them for her when she’d fled her house, angry and hurting, and gone to the only other place in the world she’d ever felt safe. She remembers most of all the quiet but powerful acceptance, the creamy coffee he’d left at her elbow and the arm he’d pulled around her side and squeezed when she’d sat down between them.

When she remembers that, the idea that Naruto had managed to gain the friendship and acceptance
and adoration of a creature that was supposed to be made of anger and hate, well.

That doesn’t seem so strange to her at all.

~I would feel better if you had my own kind at your back.~ Kurama admits. ~Kitsune are stubborn and proud and sometimes obstinate, but once you’ve won their allegiance it’s yours for life.~

Even Sakura can sense the double meaning in Kurama’s words, as light as he’s trying to make them sound, and by the look on Naruto’s face he understands as well.

He grins, soft genuine, and it creases his eyes. “Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Kurama grins back, fangs just barely visible, eyes soft like he expected that answer, like he keeps testing a theory and it keeps proving correct. ~Alright kit. Youkai aren’t like sage animals, once you summon a spirit, they are bound to you and your chakra. From that point on they will grow as you do, and the stronger you get the more spirits you will be able to summon. Got it?~

“Got it.” Naruto affirms. “What do I need to do?”

~Blood your fingers like you would to sign a regular contract, and I’ll do the rest. Any flat surface will do for the summoning, and you won’t need to sign your name.~

Naruto does as told, biting into his thumb and coating each finger with blood. Kurama closes his eyes and seems to be concentrating, his chakra rippling strangely, and then he opens his eyes again.

~Alright kit, when you’re ready.~

Naruto pushes some of the scrolls in front of him out of the way, exposing a decent sized chunk of the floor, and presses his hand to the surface.

Spidery lines of runes and symbols rush out from the space in a spiral, curling to touch in a perfect circle before erupting into the air in a cloud of glittering black smoke and a rush of heat.

Suddenly the room is filled with the sound of snarling and screeching, and out of the smoke roll two fighting balls of fur, one dark blue and the other solid black, tumbling over each other in a blur of raised hackles and ivory teeth. Shasa leaps into Kiba’s lap next to Akamaru to avoid the conflict, and Ravia look up with his feathered ruff raised to observe the proceedings with interest.

The growling blurs of fluff are startled out of their fight when Kikri caws indignantly after they almost ram into Sasuke’s shins, and the single furry mass separates to become two separate creatures. The foxes are still snarling at each other, hackles raised and teeth bared viciously. One is dark evening blue like the sky at sunset, it’s feet socked in dark grey and the ends of its fur tipped in metallic silver. The other is solid inky black but for a diamond of vivid indigo right in the middle of its forehead.

“Take it back Kuran.” The blue one snarls, fur bristled to such a point that the metallic ends of the little fox’s fur look like hundreds of tiny senbon.

“Make me, princeling.” The black one growls back, and the little blue ball of fury looks ready to do just that when Kurama stands fluidly behind the little fox, leans down, and snatches the kit up by its scruff.

~That’s enough of that.~ He declares around his mouthful.

“What do I need to do?” The fox screeches, its twin tails thrashing angrily side to side as it
claws at the air. The black one stiffens, eyes going wide as they fasten on Kurama.

“Renge!” The black fox snaps. “You need to calm down!”

“Don’t tell me to calm down!” The little thing shrieks, but then seems to notice the look on his companion’s face when Kurama clears his throat pointedly. The blue fox freezes, and Sakura has to put her hand to her mouth to stifle a giggle. The fox turns to look at its captor, and Sakura can’t imagine the creature gets a view much wider than the Kyuubi’s white fangs and sharp eyes. Kurama raises an eyebrow.

~You sure have a lot of energy, considering you’re not even old enough to spit foxfire.~

The fox chuckles nervously. “Sorry?” he says uncertainly, baring his tiny needlelike white teeth in something that could be a smile but is probably something closer to a grimace.

~Can you be calm now?~ Kurama asks dryly. ~Or are you two going to go at each other’s throats again when I set you down?~

“Yes sir. I-I mean, no sir. We won’t fight, sir.” The kit babbles, and Kurama sets him down slowly. The fox scrambles away as soon as he’s free, scampering over to sit next to his dark-furred companion. True to his word, the kit doesn’t attempt to start another fight.

~Hm.~ Kurama rumbles, striding back over to curl himself around Naruto once more. Said Uzumaki is laughing, and only now do the two foxes seem to notice the humans in the room, sitting in a circle around them.

~I didn’t honestly expect you to summon two at once, but I have a feeling this involves extenuating circumstances.~ Kurama drawls to Naruto and then turns to address the two foxes again. ~Do you know who I am, and why you are here?~ he asks.

“You’re Kurama of the bijuu.” the blue one says immediately. “You’re the Nine-Tailed Fox.”

~That answers the first part of my question. Now can you answer the second?~

“We’ve been summoned.” the black one answers. “But not by you?” he looks up at Naruto, glancing back and forth between him and Kurama’s shade.

Naruto laughs, planting an elbow on the knee Kurama’s head isn’t occupying and setting his cheek in his hand. “They don’t miss much, do they.” Naruto chuckles, not unkindly.

“I don’t understand.” The black fox says, shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot, tails curling around lean legs. “Where are we? What’s with the humans?”

~This is my human.~ Kurama declares, nudging Naruto’s chest with his head in indication, as if the way he’s draped protectively around the Uzumaki wasn’t indication enough. ~He summoned you through me.~

“If you’re the real Nine-Tailed Fox, why are you the size of a four-tails?” The black one asks, and the blue one whirls on him, growling.

“Don’t you know anything? Kurama-sama was sealed away a whole century ago. All the tailed beasts were!”

The black fox bares his teeth. “Not all of us have fancy lessons all day, princeling. Some of us
actually have to hunt for our food instead of having it brought up on a silver tray.” The kit then gets up and walks over towards Naruto, eyeing him quizzically. The blue fox stares after him like he’s crazy, skirting over towards Kurama’s shade and as far away from the humans in the room as possible.

The black fox doesn’t seem to share the blue one’s fear though, because he puts his paws right up on Naruto’s shins. The two spirit creatures are only about the size of a loaf of bread, and the only difference Sakura can see between them and actual foxes are the multiple tails and the slightly ethereal quality of their fur.

“I am Kuran-kha.” the black kit informs Naruto. “If you are Kurama-sama’s human, does that mean you’re a jinchuuriki?”

“Mhm.” Naruto affirms. “Since I was born. I’m Naruto, Naruto Uzumaki.”

“What are you doing, Kuran? He could be dangerous!” The blue fox hisses, earning him a wry look from Kurama.

The black fox rolls his eyes. “Ignore him.” He tells Naruto. “He’s never been outside the Sacred Forest so he’s never seen a human before.”

“Oh what, and you have?” The blue one snaps.

“Of course I have, where do you think the hunting grounds are? There are humans all over outside the Far Trees.” the black fox informs his companion haughtily. He then turns back to Naruto again. “Although none of the ones I’ve seen could use chakra. Can you use chakra?”

Naruto nods. “Everyone in this room can use chakra.” He tilts his head curiously. “The Sacred Forest? Is that where you’re from?”

Kuran-kha hops up onto Naruto’s legs, treading carefully to avoid Kurama’s resting space on Naruto’s thigh. “Yes. It’s pretty deep in the sage lands, on the other side of the Bone Marshes at the foot of one of the Sacred Mountains.”

“Don’t tell him that!” The blue fox snarls.

Kuran-kha flicks his tails imperiously. “And why not? He’s our summoner now.”

“I’m a Celestial Fox.” the blue kit snarls. “We don’t get summoned.”

~Evidence speaks to the contrary.~ Kurama mutters boredly with a flick of one ear.

Kuran-kha wiggles a little and then leaps up lithely onto Naruto’s shoulder, sniffing experimentally at his hair, and then sits down on his precarious perch, looping his tails around Naruto’s neck for stability and looking around curiously at the room. He spots Sasuke sitting off to Naruto’s right, who is watching the whole ordeal with amusement and a little curiosity.

“Who are you?” Kuran-kha asks.

“Sasuke.” He introduces.

The fox turns back to Naruto, ears spread wide in curiosity. “You are close, but he is not your blood sibling. Is he a part of your Earth?”

Naruto blinks. “My what?”
Kitsune have many words for family. Those who hunt together are members of a skulk, those born together are members of a clan. Earth in this case means ‘those close in bond over blood’, chosen family.

“Oh, then yeah.” Naruto says easily.

“I want an Earth of my own someday.” Kuran-kha admits softly, and then seems to remember the blue fox still hiding over by the flank of Kurama’s shade. “Now you’re just being rude, Renge.” he accuses.

The blue fox snorts aggressively, but he does nose out from underneath Kurama’s shadow.

“I don’t bite.” Naruto promises with a smile, and the fox’s ears go up a bit.

“I am Renge-kai.” the kit admits hesitantly. “If you did summon me, then it is my intention to uphold the contract.” He ducks his head, tails swishing to curl around him. “It is an honor to meet you.”

“Such a princeling.” Kuran-kha mumbles.

Renge-kai bristles immediately. “Stop calling me that!”

Iruka stares for a long moment at the emotionally stunted mess of a Jounin in front of him, perched so precariously on the edge of his bed he’s practically being held up by willpower and sheer force of awkwardness.

“The asset papers.” Iruka states. “For your clan inheritance. The ones you made me sign after a three week long argument in April four years ago, the only argument with me you’ve ever won, and you expect me to believe you want them back ‘just because’?

Kakashi winces. “…there may be a bit more to it.” He admits.

“To put it mildly.” Iruka states. “What brought this on, Kakashi? It’s not like you to poke at old wounds without a damn good reason.”

The Jounin folds his fingers together and lets them hang between his knees, staring intently at the lines on his palms. He doesn’t answer, but Iruka senses that Kakashi’s lack of response is due more to an inability to name what’s on his mind than any kind of refusal.

Iruka sighs, bending down to undo the wrappings on his thighs and ankles in preparation for changing into his civs. He feels this is going to be a long conversation, and Kakashi had caught him right after his last shift at the mission desk. When he’s finished stripping off the most hazardous and uncomfortable parts of his equipment, he sits down next to Kakashi at the foot of his bed.

“My Genin are all living in Naruto’s apartment.” Kakashi says out of nowhere. “Three of them all packed into that tiny space.”

“Sakura too? I thought only Sasuke was staying there?”

Kakashi shakes his head. “She hasn’t been back to her parent’s house since before the mission.
And even if she did reconcile soon, I doubt she’d be content going back to live there. She’s too independent now, and after living with her teammates something like that would be suffocating.”

“Three Genin with strong personalities living together in that small of a space?” Iruka remarks with confusion. “I’m surprised they haven’t killed each other already.”

“They work very well with what little they have.” Kakashi states, an emotion strong in Kakashi’s voice that Iruka can’t quite pinpoint until he realizes that it’s admiration. “You should have seen them on the mission.” he continues. “It’s like they’d been working together for years instead of months, and they rolled with every punch and shift circumstances threw at them. It should have been a B-rank mission–with Zabuza’s involvement maybe even an A-rank assist– and they worked together flawlessly. Imagine what they could do if they spread out, had more room to grow than a tiny apartment on the bad end of the shinobi district?”

He’s rambling, and Kakashi doesn’t ramble. He’s always been the epitome of cool under pressure, aloof and set-apart, but these words are tumbling uncensored through his throat from right out of his heart and Iruka hadn’t thought he’d had enough of a heart still beating to speak through.

“Kakashi,” Iruka asks slowly. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

The Jounin looks to the side, finally casting his silvery eyes up to meet Iruka’s chocolate ones. “The pack is wondering why they don’t see the cubs outside of training. They don’t seem to understand that my apartment is hardly large enough for them, let alone three Genin, and that they might not even want to—”

Iruka cuts him off soundly. “Kakashi. You’re offering to open up your old clan lands, your ancestral home, that old bloody trauma, so that your Genin can have a safe place to rest and grow?”

Kakashi flexes his hands, like he’s itching to grip a kunai or a scroll or something else of comfort. “It’s not like it’s being used for anything. I… I would feel better having them closer; it would be easier to protect them. It’s just an offer, anyway. They’re adults, they can chose for themselves of course.”

Iruka beams, shaking his head in disbelief, and stands up. “Don’t move.” He orders. “I think I left the paperwork under a stack of Konohamaru’s drawings. It may take me a few minutes for me to find it.”
Late again, but I did warn you guys it might take me some time to get back into my groove :p
Enjoy Kakashi’s flailing, I know I did.
I Regret Nothing

(Edit: Sorry, no update next week, RL exploded on me so damage control takes precedence. Next update will be 4/4/2017)

“Summons?” Kakashi-sensei drawls, an eyebrow raised at his three impossible little Genin. “I leave you alone for two days and you manage to acquire *summons*?”

“Well technically we had the scrolls the whole time, we just chose to *use* them now.” Sakura reasons.

“Semantics, cub.” Kakashi counters. “Summons are no joke, you three. Holding a contract is a defining part of a shinobi’s life. You need to take it seriously.”

“Yes, sensei,” the three of them echo.

They sit in the heart of training ground three, taking a break from morning exercises. They’re all progressing fantastically on their basic skill sets, the bread and butter of shinobi fighting techniques. “Don’t practice until you get it right,” Gai always says “Practice until you can’t get it wrong!” It’s good advice despite its source, and Kakashi has always put a high value on being able to react to any situation, to adapt to any variable.

He’s found the best way to get them to focus, to get the most out of every minute of training, is to make it all a game. So he takes some of his most advanced team training techniques, (originally designed for those of Chunin rank or higher, since anything less wouldn’t be a challenge) and dresses them up with competition and rivalry and reward. It’s been working so well that he’s started doing it with as many techniques and training regimens as he can, all molded after their first morning training sessions. The tradition had held, and almost all their mornings now start with what is essentially ninja tag. They play until the cubs get exhausted and give in, but they get closer and closer to catching him each time.

It’s good for keeping Kakashi on his toes, if nothing else.

It’s clear living together has resulted in a few notable changes, even after only a few days with all three of them crammed together. They’re getting better and better at communicating without words, and Sakura has become more thoroughly entrenched in their team dynamic. All that’s really left is smoothing out the kinks and teaching new techniques and formations.

There are also the changes that are more obvious at first glance– like how Sakura regularly and obviously steals Naruto’s dark orange sweatpants and how some of the shirts Sasuke comes to training wearing have a little orange spiral stitched on the back somewhere. The opposite is true as well if the Uchiha crest Kakashi can see sticking out of Naruto’s collar is any indication.
Kakashi shoves a hand into his pocket and flicks his Icha-Icha closed, tucking it back into his pouch. “Alright then, change of plans. We’re playing Three Monkeys, and then we’re going to start training with your new summons.”

“What rotation?” Sasuke asks, already moving to stand. They’ve been questioning him less and less lately, and the lack of backtalk is starting to freak Kakashi out a little. Sure, they still sass him about everything from morning exercises to what they order for lunch, but they listen to him— all the time in combat and most of the time outside it.

He wasn’t sure it was a good or a bad thing, that these kids and their strong personalities and drives have started following his orders and instructions almost unconditionally, by when he’d mentioned it to Iruka he’d just laughed and told him that he’s already in way over his head.

He’s afraid what Genma would have to say on the matter, or worse, Gai, so he’s kept the questions to himself.

“What weaknesses, today.” Kakashi answers.

There’s a unanimous groan.

“Now now, don’t give me that.” He chastises. “It will get you into the mindset of adapting to uncomfortable situations. Summons are a big part of combat and you need to be adaptable with them to form unique fighting bonds and formations. Now come on, handicaps.”

This particular game is one Kakashi developed using ideas from the Anbu sensory deprivation training he remembers from his younger days, a combination defensive and adaptive training.

Each of the three brats are deprived of either speech, hearing, or sight for the duration of the game. The goal it to get from point A to point B without getting ‘killed’ or tagged by Kakashi. They have two main rotations of the game, playing to ‘strengths’ and playing to ‘weaknesses’. Weaknesses deprives them of their greatest asset, and strengths deprives them of superfluous senses to hone those assets.

“This version always stresses me out.” Naruto whines, going through the minor hands signs for the shinobi equivalent of earplugs.

“Ugh.” Sasuke agrees, but finishes his hand signs and closes his eyes, allowing the jutsu to seal them shut.

Sakura doesn’t respond, but when she’s finished her hand signs she taps her throat to let Kakashi know her own jutsu is in place.

Hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil. Jiraiya would be proud of the allegory.

He begins to count down, both out loud and on his fingers, and the three of them spring into motion. There are three places that the brats are allowed to use as their goal safe zones; Iruka’s apartment, Iruka’s academy classroom, and Ichiraku Ramen. The three form a near equilateral triangle just shy of the Hokage tower and administrative buildings, and each one has a different set of advantages— Ichiraku is almost always filled with people and it’s easier for the brats to lose him in the crowds or the marketplace at certain times of the day, Iruka’s apartment has open roofs and close-cornered alleys to cut and dodge around, and the academy has both crowds and close hallways that make tracking difficult. The last is the obvious choice, but it also happens to be the farthest away.

He tucks his final finger back into his palm and cracks his knuckles. He wonders who’ll win this
particular match for a moment, but then figures it doesn’t really matter. He wins either way.

“Oh come on, Shikamaru. We’ve only been at it for a few hours!”

“Leave him alone, Ino. We can take a break, can’t we?” Choji groans, casting pleading puppy eyes over towards Asuma.

Their teacher sighs around his cigarette, eyes tracing between the angry blonde, the hungry brunet, and the Nara napping under the tree. “I suppose.” he allows.

“But sensei, how are we going to get better if we don’t train?”

“‘How am I going to catch up to Sakura’ you mean.” Shikamaru mumbles.

Ino flushes. “That is not what this is about.”

“Good, because you don’t need to compare yourself to her anyway,” Shikamaru mutters under his breath, and then by all appearances rolls over on the grass and goes back to sleep.

Ino freezes for a second, momentarily stunned, but then she shakes the surprise off like a bird shaking out its feathers and with a bewildered half-smile she sends a playful glare at his back. “Do you always have to make your compliments sound like insults?” she grouses.

“I’m not complimenting you,” he says drowsily, interrupting himself with a yawn. “I’m just stating fact.”

Before Ino can come up with an appropriate response to that, there’s a rustling behind her in the trees, just a few soft steps that crunch the undergrowth enough to announce a presence. Asuma looks up and raises an eyebrow at the intruder.

“Shiranui? What are you doing clear out here?” Asuma asks, and Ino turns around to see a tall Tokujo standing in the shade of an elm, light shining in his copper hair and glinting off the senbon tucked between his teeth.

“Recruiting.” The man says without preamble. “You up to anything pressing at the moment?”

Asuma gestures to Shika Ino and Choji as his answer.

“You can bring your brats. In fact I’d prefer if you did.” The Tokuo admits, ticking the senbon in his mouth up and down so that it flashes in the light. “The more hands we have the better.”

Asuma narrows his eyes and stands. “What’s this about exactly?”

“Iruka will explain once we have enough people, but let’s just say it has something to do with everyone’s favorite emotionally stunted Jounin.”

Asuma huffs, amused. “I know about half a dozen people who fit that description, but I’m going to assume you’re talking about Kakashi.”

The Tokuo nods, grinning widely. “So, are you in or not? We have to get this done while he’s distracted by his kids or we’ll never pull it off.”

Asuma looks down at his three Genin. “Your training session, your choice.”
Shikamaru sits up and sways to his feet, all trace of laziness gone. “I’m in, sounds more interesting than training anyway.”

“Will there be snacks?” Choji asks hopefully. “I’m starving.”

“One more time Konohamaru, you’ve almost got it.”

The little brunet nods, shaking out his hands and flicking his long blue scarf back over his shoulder. He makes the hand signs again; still a little clumsy for his young fingers, but this time the clone that puffs into existence looks virtually identical Konohamaru, if a little pale.

“Much better.” he praises, giving Konohamaru’s messy brown hair a pat. “We’ll work on the timing and the chakra moulding speed, but for now, well done.”

Konohamaru beams and whoops, punching the air in victory, and Iruka tolerates the display with a patient smile and nudges the boy back towards his peers.

He’s about to beckon his next student forward when the window across the room bursts open and three bodies fall through it, sprawling over each other and the floor with groans of pain and relief in equal measure. Every eight-year-old head in the room swivels at the intrusion, fixing on the pile that is team seven, rolling around and extracting limbs from under torsos and other limbs.

Iruka only breathes out a put upon sigh and raises an eyebrow. “Is this going to become a regular thing with you three?”

Naruto rolls to his feet, shoulder to shoulder with Sasuke as they both haul Sakura up after them. He flicks his fingers through a few hand signs and then scrapes his fingers over his ears, undoing a deafening jutsu. “Sorry sensei, what was that?”

“Our apologies, Iruka-sensei.” Sasuke says as he rubs a similar sensory deprivation jutsu out of his eyes.

“I just don’t know why you three insist on using my home and workplace as safe zones for training.” Iruka mutters.

“Isn’t it obvious, sensei?” Sakura chirps. “You scare all the Jounin, even Kakashi-sensei!”

“Especially Kakashi-sensei.” Naruto corrects.

The squad of kids at Iruka’s feet all turn and look at him with some kind of surprised awe, and Iruka grimaces.

“Well, while you three are here, you might as well make yourselves useful. Class, this is Haruno Sakura, Uchiha Sasuke, and Uzumaki Naruto. They graduated from the academy last year.”

Naruto and Sakura chirp hellos, but Sasuke just leans against Naruto and gives a lazy wave of his hand.

The kids are instantly captivated. They start peppering them with questions, about training and graduation and missions. Naruto and Sakura answer most of their questions, with Sasuke throwing quips in every now and then. The girls in his class seem to be equally captivated with both Sasuke and Sakura, for very different reasons, but all the boys are eagerly eating up Naruto’s abridged story about their mission to Wave. Iruka lets it go on for a few minutes before he calls the class.
back to attention, to the boos and whining of many.

As he does he senses a presence at the window again, and when he looks up, he catches sight of Kakashi sitting on the sill, chin in his hand, watching the proceedings. Iruka allows himself a small smile at Kakashi’s obvious attachment to his kids, but doesn’t announce his presence.

“Alright, alright, settle down now. We’re going over clones today. Would any of you three care to give a demonstration? I think they’re tired of seeing the plain old version of it from me.”

He says the words to the three of them but he looks right at Naruto, and the blond boy smiles and leaps forward.

“Sure! Just one clone?”

“As many as you can make without breaking my classroom.” Iruka allows. According to Kakashi, Naruto’s multi-shadow clone jutsu is something to see these days. Iruka is inordinately proud of him, since it was the plain illusion version of the same jutsu that had forced Iruka to fail Naruto the first time he’d applied to graduate.

The kids watch in awe as Naruto channels his chakra and Sasuke and Sakura step pointedly backwards. In a burst of smoke the room is full of a dozen Naruto look-alikes, perched on the ceiling and the walls and some of the desks. The original smirks as the kids look around in awe and immediately start jabbering at him, pestering him with more questions.

He’s nearly attacked by a swarm of little fans when he sheepishly explains that it’s only about a fifth of his normal clone capacity, and Sasuke is forced to snag Konohamaru by the back of his shirt when he starts trying to climb Naruto’s arm.

The third’s grandson glares hard at the Uchiha for separating him from his idol, and Sasuke glares right back, igniting a crackle of animosity.

Kakashi’s laughter from the window turns the heads of all three Genin and by default the rest of the class, and Kakashi sways to his feet.

“Sorry Iruka-sensei. I hope they haven’t disturbed your routine too much,” He says blithely.

Iruka huffs. “What’s a shinobi’s life without a little of the unexpected?”

There’s a peppering of more whispered questions from his class.

“Who’s that?”

“Is that their sensei?”

“Like a real-life Jounin?”

Iruka hushes them again as Kakashi gets closer. “It’s rude to whisper.”

“We won, so can we do our summons training now?” Sakura asks.

“That was the deal, cub,” Kakashi agrees. “But that’s something best done outside your dear teacher’s classroom, I think. Training ground 18 now. Off with you.”

The three Genin take off with hardly a word of assent, and Iruka watches them go with an indulgent smile.
“Alright, class dismissed!” He calls. “Don’t forget to practice your taijutsu for tomorrow’s spar.”

The kids scatter in a flurry of papers, dulled shuriken, and raw energy, leaving the room empty in moments.

“I can tell them to pick a new safe zone, if they’re too disruptive,” Kakashi assures him.

“I honestly don’t mind,” Iruka says easily, moving behind his desk to shuffle his papers together. “Besides, it’s good to break up the monotony, keep the kids on their toes. Have you told them?”

Kakashi shuffles from his right foot to his left. “Told them what?”

“Don’t play dumb with me Kakashi.”

“But I’m so good at it.” The Jounin jokes.

Iruka sighs. “The paperwork went through this morning, you know. The lands are officially open again.”

“That doesn’t mean it’s ready to move into,” Kakashi reasons. “It still needs to be cleaned and the rooms sorted out… and they still might not…”

“They could help you with that, you know. They would be glad to.”

Kakashi looks doubtful.

Iruka puts a hand to his forehead, patience running thin. “Oh my god you’re such a moron,” he mutters under his breath. “Look, Hatake. Those three brats are some of the most stubborn, obstinate, and independent kids I’ve ever taught. They’re opinionated, intelligent, curious, and pretty much impossible to control on a good day.”

“Yes?” Kakashi says uncertainly. “What’s your point?”

“Do you know why they listen to you?”

“They have to?” Kakashi guesses, and Iruka wants to take his glass paperweight to the side of his stupid head.

“They respect you, you moron.”

“Well, ya, a little,” Kakashi admits.

“No, not a little,” Iruka counters. “They respect me, to some extent, because I taught them for years. You’ve only been their sensei a few months and they respect you more than anyone. Probably even the Hokage.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“No, it’s terrifying.” Iruka states, but then sighs. “Look I’m not going to give you a lecture. I just want you to know that you’re freaked out about something you really shouldn’t be worried about. Just tell them.”

Kakashi shifts again and meets his eyes, but Iruka clearly hasn’t gotten through his thick head just yet because the doubt in his eyes is still prevalent.

“I’ll let them know that it’s an… option. Soon.” He hedges, backing up towards the window. “I
should make sure they didn’t break anything on their way across the village. See ya.”

Iruka smirks to himself as the Jounin disappears out the window. He’d expected Kakashi’s emotional stall, counted on it actually, but it had been worth a shot to try and talk some sense into him. Oh well. Genma should be done acquiring enough help by now; he should go check on his progress now that class is out.

*Poor Kakashi. He thinks. He’s not going to know what hit him.*

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“Oh my god, are our senseis dating?”

“I believe they are attempting to be subtle about it. Perhaps you should keep from screaming it from the hilltops.”

“Come on you two, please don’t start a fight.”

Kiba casts Hinata an apologetic glance. “Sorry Hina. We’ll behave, promise.”

“I will endeavor to be… less antagonistic. Apologies,” Shino adds.

“Seriously though,” Kiba asks Shikamaru, who’s nestled into the shade of a tree like he’s about to melt into it. “How long has that been going on?”

“Two months, give or take a week,” the Nara mutters, eyeballing the two Jounin on the other side of the small path, leaning just a hair too close together to be considered polite for company. Asuma has his arm braced high on the tree trunk he’s leaning against and Kurenai has her shoulder propped just beneath it, her arms across over her chest and her hair tucked back. Definitely not platonic body language. “How much longer are we going to be sitting here? Because if it’s much longer I’m going back to my nap,” Shikamaru complains.

“Genma-san said he’d be back in twenty minutes. It’s been sixteen,” Choji informs him helpfully.

“I’m back you guys!” Ino calls, jogging up the rough-hewn path, ducking under hickory branches to keep from snagging her fine hair on any of the leaves. She has a takeaway bag tucked under her arm that she cradles close as she leaps up the steep incline.

The path is an overgrown one, so reclaimed by nature that it can hardly be considered a path at all, the shallow groove carved into the earth is overgrown and covered with mossy stones, shoots of new trees sprouting up along the edges. No one’s walked this path in a long time. Decades at least.

Kiba takes a deep breath through his nose, cataloging all the scents. Cedarwood, undergrowth, a bit of the fog that found sanctuary from the fire country sun beneath the thick canopy of branches overhead. More potent are the smells of his friends so close by; Shino’s clean and earthy smell, the scent of Hinata’s jasmine shampoo, Choji’s constant aura of fried food. As usual, Shikamaru smells of deer and sandalwood, and Ino’s normally floral scent is overpowered by the smell of the barbecue she’d volunteered to go get for Choji, and the Akimichi stares at her like she’s some kind of messiah.

“You’re the best Ino,” He babbles, making grabby hands at the food. Ino laughs and hands him a to-go box, then fishes out a folded paper bag.

“I brought some wontons, too, in case anyone else was hungry.”
Nothing brings people together quite like food, and within a few seconds Ino has passed her goodies out into eager hands until she has only two of the crunchy snacks to her name. She then sits down and lies back against Shikamaru’s legs, handing him a wonton before she begins to tear hers delicately into fourths. Kiba watches as Shikamaru tears his apart into fourths as well, and then starts to hand them one at a time back to Ino, keeping only one for himself and smiling a little when Ino happily scarfs them down.

Shiranui Genma treks up the path a few minutes later, laughing at their little camp, Iruka-sensei behind him.

“You ready to get this show in the road?” he asks the eight of them at large, finally drawing Asuma and Kurenai’s eyes away from each other.

“I don’t even know what we’re doing,” Kiba complains, feeding Akamaru the crunchy ends of his wontons.

“Let’s consider it a mission for now,” Iruka says, brushing leaf matter off his flak jacket. “Top secret. Are you six up to a little espionage?”

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“A few more drills and we can call it a day, I think.” Kakashi looks down at Pakkun, who is giving his three cubs his usual bored stare as they flit through the trees above their heads, flashes of fire and cuts of wind and water glinting off scales and fur and feathers. “How do you think they’re doing so far?”

“Difficult to say this early.” The pug admits. “They’re still clumsy, but that’s to be expected adding new factors like summons into combat dynamics. The summons suit them well, though, and they’re already fostering respect for one another, so it’s off to a healthy start.”

“I agree. Sage summons are problematic to master, but not impossible, especially when you have the initial presence of mind to treat them as equals. Turns out I worried for nothing.”

“Boss.”

“Hmm?”

“Are pups supposed to be this strong this young?” He asks, watching as Sasuke’s young Roc wrestles with Sakura’s Zotl, and Naruto’s fox summons wrestle with each other.

“It’s not unprecedented.” Kakashi reasons. He himself was a prodigy, and while the word could apply to his brats, he also feels like the truth is somewhat more complex.

“You sure? Because I’m not.” Pakkun grumbles, and then suddenly cuts himself off to bark up at the kids. “Stop messing around up there! Next formation, come on now!” There’s a slightly embarrassed laugh and a vaguely irritated huff, but then training is back in full swing.

“You’re not just talking about strength or skill are you?” Kakashi guesses.

Pakkun huffs through his short nose. “That too,” he admits. “But usually skill like this comes at a mental or social cost— isolation, mental health problems or ticks, personality issues, even god complexes if we look at some of the crazier ones. But other than being stubborn little shits and possibly some codependency issues, the pups are almost alarmingly healthy in that regard.”

“And I’m glad for it.” Kakashi say firmly. With the hurdles the three of them have been forced to
overcome, he isn’t surprised that they found that extra needed strength in each other. And if that stability comes at the cost of them being a little too dependent on each other, then Kakashi has no problem with it. He has a feeling they’ll grow out of it with a little nudging, and even if they don’t, there are worse weaknesses to have.

Their conversation is interrupted when Naruto’s summons dissolve into a fight again, Kuran-kha and Renge-kai if he remembers their names correctly.

“And we’ve lost them again.” Pakkun grumbles. Kakashi just laughs.

“Alright alright. How about a lunch break?” Kakashi calls.

“Can we shower first?” Sasuke complains, alighting on an oak branch and eyeing the bluish toxin on his clothes with distaste. “Ravia spat venom everywhere.”

Ravia flutters from Sakura’s shoulders. “You are lucky I did not aim for your eyes.”

“I’ll meet you three at Ichiraku in an hour then.” He agrees.

“Come on you two, break it up.” Naruto grumbles, prying Kuran and Renge off each other by their scruffs.

“He started it!” Renge snarls, diving into Naruto’s arms for shelter. After a few hours of training the little fox had finally decided that Naruto wasn’t half bad and had grown rapidly attached. He seems a bit pampered for a summons, in Kakashi’s opinion, and he tends to tuck himself into Naruto shirt or the crooks of his limbs when he’s upset.

The dark-furred Kuran leaps into his favorite spot curled around Naruto’s shoulders. “Liar.” He counters, but calms down when Naruto gives him a scratch behind the ear.

“Give it a rest will ya?” Naruto grumbles at them both, and they grudgingly settle back down.

“That was very bracing.” Kikri chirps. “I quite enjoyed it.”

Kakashi grins behind the safety of his mask and Icha Icha when they part ways on the street outside the training ground, watching as a couple of Chunin stall on the sidewalk across from them to gawk at the three Genin and their summons.

He gives the memorial stone a quick visit on his way home, talks with Obito’s memory for a while about the cubs and their progress.

“You’ve turned into such a sap.” he can imagine Obito telling him. “What happened to that aloof little asshole I knew?”

He died when you did. Kakashi thinks sadly. I won’t make the same mistake I made with you. I will never again take something I love for granted.

He wonders what Obito might think of him now, a Jounin-sensei, guiding his own brats through the motions of shinobi life the way Minato had guided them. He likes to imagine that Minato-sensei would be proud of him, that Kushina would ruffle his hair too hard like she had when he was young, when she was still alive.

He wonders if they would forgive him for leaving Naruto alone for as long as he did, Hokage’s
orders or no.

He’s not sure, but he’s still a long way from forgiving himself.

He’s practically at his doorstep when he senses Sasuke, Naruto, and Sakura leap over the rooftop behind him at full speed, and when he turns he sees they’re still in their old clothes.

“What’s the matter? Did something happen?” he asks when they land out of breath on his porch.

“All our stuff is gone!” Sakura declares wrathfully.

“We’ve been freaking robbed!” Naruto affirms. “Someone took all our things out of the apartment, my Uzushio scrolls were in my bag!”

“What?” Kakashi growls, wondering who could be stupid enough to steal from his cubs, and then feels a sudden sense of foreboding and turns to his own apartment. He disarms his chakra alarms and opens the door.

Sure enough, even from the entryway Kakashi can see that all his things are gone. The pack is missing, even Pakkun, who’d been dismissed a mere half-hour ago. His weapons are gone from the shelves in the living room, his dresser drawers are open and empty of their contents, and Mr. Uki is missing from his place on the windowsill. He suddenly knows exactly what’s happened.

“Goddammit Iruka.” he mutters.

“Sensei? What’s going on?” Sakura asks, leaning sideways to peer past him into the apartment. “Is there a serial burglar around?”

A burglar wouldn’t know the key sequence to the traps in my flat.

“No.” he answers. “Just a sneaky academy teacher.” he closes his apartment door with a fatalistic smack. “Come on, you three. I think I know where your things are.”

The path Kakashi-sensei leads them to runs up through the hills deep into the woods at the edge of the village proper, a steep overgrown incline that looks like it hasn’t seen foot traffic in years. In their panicked rush, the three of them had yet to actually dismiss their summons, so Renge-kai is still tucked into Naruto’s arm, and Kuran-kha remains draped over his shoulders.

Renge pokes his head up from where it had been tucked into Naruto’s elbow, giving the air a cautious sniff. “This place smells like wolves.”

Kuran nods, tipping his head to glance up at his summoner. “Are you sure it’s okay for us to be here? This whole place screams direwolf territory, even if I can’t sense any around.”

“Kakashi-sensei wouldn’t lead us somewhere dangerous without telling us.” Naruto assures them.

Kikri looks around from her perch on Sasuke’s shoulder, hopping sideways so that she’s teetering almost on the edge of his bicep. “This is exciting. Is this the way the thieves went?

“More like pranksters, probably.” Sasuke reasons. “But yes.”

Ravia hisses. “Pranksters or not, that was incredibly rude.”
“I’m sure it was harmless fun.” Sakura soothes.

“Sorry about this cubs.” Kakashi says as they reach the end of the incline. “Here we are.”

As they exit the forest the trees part around a field of thick grass, tall enough to brush Naruto’s knees. It’s split here and there with tall rocks before it gives way to a set of sprawling buildings, old and overgrown with vines and other greenery. They’re beautifully crafted underneath their cloak of plant life, old traditional architecture with carved doorways guarded by statues of wolves.

“What are we?” Sasuke asks.

“These are my old clan lands.” Kakashi explains, and in his tone Naruto can sense a trace of sadness followed by the bitter earth-and-rust smell of old pain. “They haven’t been in use for a long time, since I don’t need the space.”

“This whole place is yours?” Sakura marvels, taking in the rolling space and the painstakingly crafted buildings. “Is that a dojo?”

“You have a clan?” Sasuke asks softly.

Kakashi turns to look at him and smiles with his eyes. “'Had' would probably be a better word, but yes. My clan declined heavily during the shinobi world wars though, so it’s just me now.”

Sasuke doesn’t say anything in response, but Naruto knows him well enough to see that his view of their sensei his changed.

“Why would someone take our stuff here?” Naruto wonders.

Kakashi grimaces strongly enough that it’s visible a little underneath the mask. “I, uh, had this place reopened recently. Just in case of emergencies, or if you three needed more room, I suppose.”

And that’s stress and a little bit of embarrassment that Naruto can sense coming off him in waves, and is Kakashi saying what Naruto thinks he’s saying?

“ABOUT TIME HATAKE.”

Kakashi turns his gaze to narrow his eyes across the green at the purple haired kunoichi stalking towards them from the main house. “Anko? What are you doing here? And why are you wearing an apron?”

The kunoichi in question is in fact wearing a short black apron covered in grey and white smudges, her hair tied back with a black bandanna.

“What the hell does it look like? Spring cleaning, jackass. You really let this whole place go to hell, you know. You better be grateful Iruka knows you better than you know yourself.”

“I- what?” Kakashi says, confused.

“Whatever.” Anko dismisses. Hurry up then. We’re almost done.”

When Kakashi ducks into his old childhood home, he almost trips and smacks his head on the doorframe when he comes face to face with Genma in a bright fuchsia apron decorated with yellow sunflower patterns.
“What?” Genma grumbles, flicking his senbon crossly. “It was my mom’s.”

“I didn’t say a word.” Kakashi defends, holding up his hands in placation once he has his balance back.

He pauses again once he gets a look at the main room past Genna’s eye searing cleaning-wear, and finds he hardly recognizes the place. It’s been stripped of all the old furniture but for a few of the fur rugs he remembers, which have been rolled up and set in the corner. Everything has been scrubbed down to a spotless shine, even the dusty old carvings over the doorways and the corners. All the traditional elements of the house have been left where they are, the statues and the wall scrolls, but all the personal elements of the house that Kakashi had been afraid of tripping over emotionally have been either discarded or moved somewhere else.

“I put a lot of things in storage.” Iruka says as he comes around the corner from an adjacent room, as if reading his mind. “You should have listened to me Kakashi. If you’d have told your kids about this in the beginning I wouldn’t have had to take such drastic action.”

Kakashi groans and leans against the doorframe dramatically. “Was this really necessary?”

“Yes.” Genma snaps at him.

His kids had been accosted at the gates by Kurenai’s Genin and the Ino-Shika-Cho trio, where Kiba and Shikamaru admitted to breaking into the apartment and grabbing their things with the help of Shino and Choji, and Ino and Hinata told Sakura they’d gotten even more of her things from her house, including a snow globe that nearly got Ino bowled over for how happy Sakura was to see it.

“Gai was here earlier, but he said he had to get back to his students. You actually just missed him.” Genma informs him.

“Thank god.” Kakashi mutters. “I mean, too bad.” He says louder, but Genma is already laughing at him.

“Sensei!” he hears Sakura call, and he turns without thinking as she appears around the corner. “Yes, cub?”

He regrets the word almost as soon as it leaves his mouth then he sees Genma still in the corner of his vision, a hand coming up over his mouth.

“Which room is ours?”

Kakashi’s brain stalls at that, puttering out until he manages a quick reboot. “What?”

“Was that offer to stay not serious, sensei?” Sasuke asks, appearing over Sakura’s shoulder. “It was.” Kakashi manages, still bewildered and blinking.

“Okay, because Naruto is wondering if the big room on the far end is yours.”

Kakashi’s brain abruptly stalls again, memories of his father’s blood painting the floor of that room, silvery in the light shining through the shoji doors– he shakes his head to clear away the memory. “No. If you three are staying in the same room, then it’s best you have that one, I think.”

Sakura makes a shout of triumph and Sasuke disappears down the hall quick as a flash, already shouting at Naruto to set up their things.
“Told you.” Iruka says easily, and then Genma bursts into laughter.

“Oh my god.” he gushes. “The great Hatake Kakashi, the feared Copy-nin, is a parent.”

“Please shut up.” Kakashi groans, but doesn’t contradict him.
Second Interlude: Something to Believe In

Chapter Notes

So for those of you who thought the last interlude was deliberately vague (it was), this one is much more direct. The lyrics and chapter title come from the song Something to Believe In by Young the Giant, which is the song I used to write both this interlude and the coming one, since it is very much my Obito Theme Song. A great deal of creative liberties have been taken here as well, especially with the Zetsu. And, as usual;
I Regret Nothing.

It gets old when you talk to the sun,
In a tongue understood by no one.
Can it be that I hear what he’s saying?
Is there a reason why I’m still awake?

Obito wakes from death with pain searing through his body so hot he cannot breathe. He is on fire, every cell alight with foreign chakra that crawls along his veins like a million microscopic spiders, tearing along the tissue in a frantic fight to move, move, MOVE.

He wrenches upright in a panic but only half of his body obeys, the other half dead and leadened and pulling him back down like it’s still being crushed under the boulders of Kannabi bridge, still pressed on by ton upon ton of broken stone. Kakashi’s face is seared into his mind’s eye, that stunned broken look branded to the inside of his single working eyelid.

He feels like lightning is coursing through his every nerve, and he focuses on that because it’s easier than the burning, more familiar, even though the pain of both are nearly equal, fighting back and forth for dominance over his body. His chest feels like there’s an anaconda curled around it, so hard that despite his pain he cannot pull in enough breath to scream.

The two pains battle themselves out, the crawling angry red and the sharp crackling blue. Eventually the two begin to cancel each other out, smoothing together into an aching pulse that radiates over his bones and through what must be the mess of his muscles and skin. When he manages to open his eyes the world is tinted navy, not the bloody red that he’s used to accompanying his sharingan. The world calms, the two pains still swirling together inside him, burning and piercing in turns, but Obito can gasp a breath around them now, bring air into his shattered chest enough to clear the darkness from the corners of his eye.

The world around him smells heavily of rich earth and moss, the air laden with the scent of recent rain. The sounds of his gasps echo strangely in his ears, bouncing around unseen obstacles as Obito gets his bearings. It’s still dark, but it’s a softer darkness than the pitch of unconsciousness, and out of the corner of his eye Obito can make out the glow of firelight.
“Do not move.” An roughened old voice intones from outside Obito’s line of sight. “I spent a great deal of time and chakra putting you back together. I would prefer you not undo my work so soon after I’ve finished.”

“Where am I?” Obito manages, so rough and breathy that the words are hardly distinguishable at all. The stranger seems to hear him though, because he answers readily.

“We are in the Mountains’ Graveyard, resting place of the Deva and the Elder Demons. Between the land of Waterfalls and the land of Stone.”

“Waterfall country?” he rasps. “Why–” he cuts off when he runs out of breath, and takes a moment to snatch it back into his mangled lungs. “Who are you?”

There’s a rustle as the man moves, followed by a strange sound like something dragging over the stone. An elderly man comes into view, a ninja by the way he holds himself despite his age. His hair is long and thick and bleached silver by the years, his eyelids sunken and closed. Strange chakra seems to glow from the sockets, moving like spotlights along the inside of his eyelids—some kind of artificial sight, if Obito had to guess.

“I will answer all your questions in a moment. But first, how are you feeling?” The man asks as he moves towards some kind of console to Obito’s right, an apparatus hooked up to several long IV lines attached to points all along Obito’s body.

“Like I’m on fire.” Obito replies truthfully, though he leaves out the second, stranger pain that is coursing through him, unsure of how to describe that feeling in words.

The man seems pleased with his response regardless, nodding as he observes the readouts from the console. “That is to be expected. Almost thirty percent of your body was beyond salvage, a great deal had to be replaced with cultivated tissue. Had your body rejected the transplants, you would have surely died.”

Obito looks as far sideways as he’s able without actually moving his head, noting the strange white patches of foreign tissue stitched along the length of his arm and over the right half of his torso. “Why did you save my life?” He asks, swallowing hard to try to banish some of the roughness in his voice so that it sounds less like a whisper. “And how did I end up in Waterfall country? I was in Grass…” The question is asked in no fewer than three parts, since every few words Obito is forced to stop for breath.

“The right place at the right time. My Zetsu we scouting in the area, and they saw fit to bring you to me when they found you.”

“Zetsu?”

“Step into the light so that he may see you.” the man commands, and from the edges of the dark room a pair of strange white beings come into Obito’s line of sight. One looks mostly human in shape but for a mutated and warped right half, a dozen spikes curling out from its barklike skin. A single moss green eye fixes dully on him from dark grey sclera, dead and lifeless. Obito can’t even really see the eye in the other one—its body seems largely to be a human-shaped spiral, centered around a single right eye socket.

“You saved me?” Obito asks them, and they look at him strangely, as if surprised he’s addressing them directly.

“We pulled your broken body through the earth to here, yes,” the spiky one answers.
“Thank you.” Obito says genuinely.

The spiked Zetsu blinks, eye brightening a little in surprise. “What?”

“They are only pawns, imperfect clones of a fool I once knew. There is no need to thank them,” the old man says, turning back to him.

*That doesn’t seem right.* Obito thinks. Despite their strange appearances, they seem human enough to Obito, though he doesn’t quite understand why he’s so sure of that.

“They will be aiding you through your recovery,” the old man continues, running a hand laced with a diagnostic jutsu over patchwork portions of Obito’s body.

“You still haven’t told me why you helped me,” Obito reminds him with strained breaths. “Not that I’m not grateful.”

The man pauses, mulling over his answer, the spotlight flickers behind his eyelids cast downwards. “I too know what it is like to be left for dead. Abandoned by those once close to you.”

*But they didn’t abandon me.* Obito thinks, wondering at the twisting of words. *I died for them. I died for him.*

He closes his eyes at the thought, swallowing hard against the emotion in his chest, pressing it down. It is a private thing, something he can indulge in within the safety of his own thoughts and nowhere else. He’s never let it show before, and he won’t now.

The old man misinterprets his moment of weakness, his expression softening into something almost sympathetic. “Apologies. The wound must still be raw, I did not mean to aggravate it so soon.”

“It’s fine,” Obito murmurs.

“You should rest,” the man tells him, almost tenderly. “Getting you back on your feet will be a long and arduous process, you will need all the strength you can muster. I have matters to attend, but should you need anything, the Zetsu will aid you.”

“Thank you,” Obito replies.

The man nods and turns away, and for the first time Obito sees the cause of the dragging sound—cables are attached in intervals down the length of the stranger’s spine, winding chords that snake off into the darkness, humming with thick, unnerving chakra.

When he vanishes down the hall, Obito turns to the strange white beings standing at his side.

“Thank you for helping me,” he tells them, watching as once again their eyes flicker with a bit of strange brightness.

“You said that before.” The spiral Zetsu reminds him, voice a bit warped in a way that Obito can only guess comes from a lack of mouth.

“It seemed worth repeating,” Obito says softly. “Without you two I’d still be flat as a rice cracker, the way I understand it.”

“Madara-sama was the one who replaced your damaged tissue,” the spiked one states.

“Is that his name?” Obito asks, wondering about why it sounds so familiar.
“It is,” the Zetsu allows.

“Well what are your names?” Obito asks.

“Our names?” The spiked Zetsu asks, balking at the question, that strange light flashing in his eyes again.

Obito blinks. “Yes, your names. You’re assigned by the creepy old man to look after me while I’m an invalid right? I should know what to call you.”

“We are Zetsu,” the spiral one states sharply, clearly just as unnerved by Obito’s question as his companion. “What else would you call us?”

Obito narrows his eye in confusion. “You’re kidding me, right? The way it sounds, Zetsu is what you are, not what you’re called. You wouldn’t just call me ‘human’ would you? My name is Obito, you’d call me Obito.”

The Zetsu don’t quite seem to know what to make of that but when they turn to one another, seemingly discussing something without words, but their body language eases, making them look less like mannequins or walking corpses.

“We don’t have names then,” the spiky one admits.

Obito wishes he could sit up to get a look at the two of them properly, but even the smallest movements of his torso sends pain rushing through his body in breathtaking waves, so he keeps still and beckons them forward with his uninjured arm instead.

“Well come here then. I’m not just going to call you Zetsu #1 and Zetsu #2.” The spiky Zetsu approaches, looking more than a little bewildered, the spiral one following close behind. He stops at the edge of the cot and Obito looks him up and down, thinking.

He reaches up with his good arm and pokes the Zetsu in the head with one knuckle, the way he used to do to Kakashi to tick him off when they were having a moment. “Shiro.” He decides, going off the pearlescent scales Obito can see like armor on the Zetsu’s spines now that he’s close, casting bright white reflections on the stone around him.

“Shiro?” The creature repeats softly, head tilted in befuddled curiosity.

“That’s what I’ll call you from now on,” Obito states firmly. He draws the kanji for white on the creature’s plaster-like skin. “When spelled like this it means ‘White’ or ‘Pure’.” He draws another kanji. “And when spelled like this it means ‘Castle’ or ‘Fortress.’ You can choose which one, I feel like either would fit.”

That strange light floods back full force, the darkness clearing from the edge of the creature’s earthy gaze, and something deep inside of Obito, some strange new sense or force, sits up and takes notice.

Unsure of exactly what he’s done, the Zetsu blinks once, hard, the eyelashes of his single eye fluttering as if waking from a dream or a genjutsu. His pupil dilates to the point where it’s nearly swallows the green of the iris, and then abruptly shrinks to the size of a pinprick. Another blink and it’s back to normal, and the Zetsu looks at him with some bizarre kind of awe.

“I don’t think you were supposed to do that,” the creature says quietly, and Obito snorts, grinning with the half of his face that he can make work. It probably looks terribly creepy. He figures the Zetsu is probably right, that they were meant to be mindless servants of some kind and Obito just
ruined it, but a person is a person as far as Obito is concerned, and that strange force he can feel in his chest very much agrees.

“Don’t care,” Obito declares. “If you don’t want the old creep to know, don’t tell him.”

The spiked Zetsu, Shiro now, blinks at him like the thought never occurred, and then grunts as he’s suddenly shouldered aside by his spiral shaped companion, who points a twisted finger at himself.

“My turn now, right?” he insists. “What’s my name?”

Obito blinks, a little taken aback by the sudden enthusiasm, but then he manages a weak and breathy chuckle. “How about Guruguru?” He says, reaching forward to trace the lines of the swirl that makes up the Zetsu’s face. “‘To whirl or spiral outward’”

Again that flash of awareness, that strange light flickering. “It’s so long though.” The Zetsu complains, edging even closer and earning himself a glare from Shiro.

Obito hums, gives a cough when the vibration irritates his still damaged chest cavity. “What about Tobi, then? As in ‘to leap forward.’”

The Zetsu shivers a little, as if suddenly cold, and brightens even further in Obito’s senses. “I like that one better.” The Zetsu decides.

Obito tries a smile again, and this time he manages to get most of his face to agree with the expression. “Glad you like it. Now would you two help me? I want to see if I can still stand on the leg that works.”

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And he says “I’ve got you written, in a back book, by the railroad track.
You see I know your fate.”

And I said. “You’ve got to listen, I’m a songbird with brand new track
You underestimate.”

Obito recovers slowly. It’s not unexpected, he lost nearly half of his body to the compression jutsu on the night he nearly died— in fact, according to Shiro, he actually had died for a few minutes. But with Obito’s recovery comes… something else.

The world feels different.

From the places where Madara stitched his patchwork body back together with cultivated cells and ancient chakra, a strange pulsing has been spreading— part sensory, part energy— throughout his body. He can sense more than chakra now, he can sense life, the tiniest flickers from the canyon mice that skitter through the passages beneath the Mountains’ Graveyard, the great echoes of it still clinging to the bones of the colossal creatures above them.
It is because of this strange sense that he does not trust the black Zetsu. Not as far as he can throw him as the invalid he currently is.

He claims to be a manifestation of Madara’s will brought into existence though the Statue of the Outer Path, but through this strange new energy flowing through his body Obito can sense that he is something else.

Something far older.

And it’s not the only thing he can sense.

“Hey, Guruguru.”

“Not my name, little brother,” Tobi reminds him in a singsong tone. Shiro is off coordinating with the other Zetsu, a pack of which just returned from Kiri. Shiro tells him things about the outside world when he can get away with it, when Madara and the Black Zetsu are out doing whatever it is that they do. The old man normally can’t travel far from the Demonic Statue, but combining his strength with that of the strange black formless creature tends to give him enough energy to travel outside the Graveyard for a few days at a time, provided the dark Zetsu himself stocks up on the statue’s chakra before departure. Any longer than that though, and the absence of the Statue's strange chakra would kill him.

Obito tries not to worry when he goes off, but doesn't always succeed. The man saved his life, and even if Madara trusts the dark creature with his life and his chakra, Obito does not.

“Was there something wrong with my heart when the old man was patching me up?” He asks his friend.

Tobi blinks, looking up from Obito’s daily health readouts. “Your heart? No, the damage only made it as far as your sternum. You right lung was pretty mangled, but your heart was out of the way by at least a few inches. Why?”

“There’s something there that wasn’t before. It’s faint though, and I’m… not sure what to make of it.”

Tobi stands up from where he’d been seated on the cavern floor next to Obito’s cot and comes over to him. Obito’s single sharingan eye tracks him easily in the dark, and even now having the complete eye is strange, odd in its fluctuations and fractals and blue tints. It’s like dying had woken up something buried inside of it, something that had spent far too long asleep. “Let me do a chakra echo,” the Zetsu insists, going over to the medical console’s semi-permanent place beside his cot.

Obito leans back, already resigned to the plethora of tests that his paranoia will no doubt garner– Tobi would never admit it, but he can be nearly as big a mother hen as Shiro sometimes. It’s better them than Madara though– if the old man even suspects Obito might have a cough, or, god forbid, a fever, he’ll end up on bedrest for another week at least. Obito is massively sick of bedrest, and despite the old man’s prideful and stern demeanor, he’s a champion coddler.

...Not that Obito would ever say that to his face.

The cool touch of the resonance device on his sore chest starts a hiss from Obito, causing Tobi to snort.

“Don’t be such a baby. If you hadn’t insisted on ignoring Shiro’s advice on pushing yourself too far, you wouldn’t be in so much pain.”
“Whatever Guruguru,” Obito huffs back.

“Huh,” Tobi grunts, moving the chakric reader back and forth over the left side of Obito’s chest “It looks like there is something.”

“What is it?”

“I’m not sure,” Tobi hums. “Inorganic, chakra based, embedded in the top portion of the septum,” he lists. “It seems benign though– I’m not reading any tissue damage or chakra leakage. Do you want me to alert Madara-sama?”

Obito grimaces and shakes his head. “Yeah, no thanks. If it starts hurting me or something sure, but no need to bug him if it’s not causing me problems.” Despite how he’s making it sound, Obito isn’t just keeping this secret because he fears Madara’s oddly maternal wrath– the strange and faint pulse of chakra that Obito can sense in his chest is setting off all kinds of foreboding warning bells in that strange new sense of his, the one he has yet to tell even Tobi or Shiro about. For all that Obito respects Madara, for however much in debt he is to the old man, Obito isn’t stupid.

The old man is hiding something, something big, and until Obito knows what it is, he’s going to keep his cards close to his chest.

“If you’re sure, Outoto.” The Zetsu allows. “How are you feeling otherwise?”

“Booooooooored.” Obito groans without hesitation, startling an echoing laugh out of Tobi.

“Of course you are. When are you anything else?”

“When the hell am I going to be able to do some training, at least?” Obito whines. “I feel like I’m wasting away here.”

“You should be up for basic muscular training soon?” Tobi tries.

“Ugh.”

“What are you two groaning about now?”

Obito looks up to see Shiro materialize out of the wall to his left, white form pulling out of the earth until he steps whole into the cavern, brushing clay dust off his arms and from between his spikes. Unlike Tobi’s form Shiro’s has altered somewhat in the time Obito has known him. The spikes are no longer disorganized shoots sprouting from every direction, they have a curling sort of organization to them now, each one stretching out from his left side and reaching upwards across his body like a curled cage. His right arm has been freed from the strange mangled growths on his right side, though the fingers of that hand are still too thick and clumped to be dexterous, and the limb still sprouts a half dozen long armored spines that curl up and back to cup the air over his shoulder blade.

“Little brother here still wants to be up running around,” Tobi tattles.

Shiro hufs and shoots Obito a disapproving look. “Didn’t you just finish doing exercises not long ago?”

“Yeah, this morning. Can I at least get up and walk around a bit?”

“I guess,” Shiro allows. “But only if we go with you.”
Obito groans again. “You jerks are as bad as the old man.”

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*I’ll give you something to believe in.*

*Burn out that basement full of demons.*

*Realize you’re a slave to your mind, break free,*

*Now give me something to believe in.*

Despite Obito’s groaning and complaining, it takes him nearly another month to be able to stand for a decent length of time without feeling drained or pulling at any of his patchwork seams. His recovery is starting in earnest now. He’s managed to coax friends out of a few more of the Zetsu, mostly the runners who come by to give information or orders to Shiro. The hive mind connection means that kind of thing doesn’t happen often, but enough that he has started having to actually think up good names to keep them all straight.

Shiro and Tobi remain his closest friends though, and have become something of his right and left hands respectively. They seem to have grown inordinately fond of him lately, and Shiro will sometimes bring him news on the outside world before he even goes to see Madara, telling him tales of the growing conflicts across the nations, the battles waged over land belonging to both shinobi and civilians. He’s the most in-tune Zetsu of all of them to the hive mind, and so he’s become the central node through which almost all their information is passed. Tobi hardly has a connection to the hive mind at all though, and had trouble sending even the most basic of impressions through.

Sometimes, in whispered tones like he’s imparting a secret, Shiro will even tell him of his sensei—of Minato’s decimation of forces far and wide, and of Kushina, who is still apparently a terror both on and off the battlefield. Apparently his impromptu parents have managed legendary wanted status— the first ninja in decades to be marked in the ‘Flee on Sight’ category.

Obito misses them terribly, misses Minato’s stupid parables and stupider jokes— he even misses the too-hard noogies Kushina would harass him with when he was being a brat, and the leering looks should would send at their sensei when she knew they were looking. He misses Rin’s tender heart and kind hands, how even when he was acting his strangest or most naive, on purpose or not, she always had such unending faith in him.

He says as much to his caretakers during a night of weakness, knowing Shiro will have to share what he knows with Madara and his black Zetsu pet, but not really caring. He keeps his remembrance of Kakashi fondly antagonistic though, out of both habit and reflexive reservation.

Sure enough, Madara asks him about it a night later over a meal of lotus root and pork soup— a common food for them since both lotus ponds and boar are plentiful in the area, or so Shiro tells him.

Kakashi is an achilles heel he’s been protecting for as long as he can remember, so when he asks
Obito if there is anyone back in Konoha that he holds particularly dear, answering Rin’s name is immediate.

It’s not even really a lie—Obito loves Rin, loves her charm and wit and kindness and strength, just not in the way he’d lead her and Kakashi to believe. A subtle shift, but enough to hide the truth of his weakness. Because Obito is an Uchiha, and despite how much his mannerisms differ from those of the rest of his clan, it means that Obito’s love is a powerful weakness, and like any weakness, Obito had sought to hide it from view.

The warm comforting thing he feels for Rin is potent and calming, a light that guides him through darkness and pain, hands that set him straight when he steps too far. But trying to compare that to what he always feels for Kakashi… it can’t be done. They don’t even fall into the same category of emotion.

What he feels for Rin is soft and intangible, what he feels for Kakashi is something knotted into his bones like a cancer. Their bond is something rough and unexplored, dangerous and heavy, powerful in a way that Obito wasn’t ready for, still isn't ready for, something that if left unchecked could no doubt kill him. Even when they were still in the academy Kakashi saw him in a way no one else had, saw underneath the carefully crafted guise of the village idiot, not all the way, but enough to trip his sharp instincts and make the wolf wary.

Obito’s only option had been to shut the feeling down completely, hide it, cover it in rivalry and foolish doting over a girl that would never love him back. Kakashi would never accept him, much less love him, and so at the first sign a bond was forming Obito had hedged his bets and cut his losses, kept Kakashi at arm's length whenever he could.

Not that that always worked.

Sometimes, despite his best efforts, when they were collapsing under the pressure of anger or abandonment or just feeling, their bond would slip out in the place Obito couldn’t keep it from.

Fighting.

Obito had balled up and hid as many of the good parts of himself as he could, so as a result their fights drew out the absolute worst in both of them, and they would tear into each other, rip and mangle until Kakashi could rake clawed fingers over the bitterest of his anger and insecurities and Obito had Kakashi’s suffering animalistic heart by the throat.

The weeks after Sakumo’s death had been the worst.

He still has the faint veinlike lightning scar to prove it, a ghostly hand of jagged lines that curls over his shoulder and cuts up the side of his neck, barely visible even in the harshest of light. The number of times he’s run his fingers over those invisible markings in the dark of night, as an anchor in the mind-rending storm of his pain, is beyond count.

“Do you feel up to doing the resonance testing tomorrow?” Madara asks him after a long silence, lifting another bite of stew to his mouth with a practiced efficiency of movement that makes Obito a little envious. His hands still shake a little as he eats, and Madara is technically into his two-hundreds and can still move like the fourty-something he was when Hashirama won their little spat. Obito hasn’t asked about it at all, he likes his head attached to his shoulders, thank you, but he knows the history and is pretty adept at clocking emotional triggers after so long going out of his way to try and step on Kakashi’s.
It seems to Obito that there was more going on between Hashirama and Madara than a clan spat, if
the whole centuries-long grudge is anything to go by, and if the scowl Tobirama’s name brings out
of him is any indication, he had something to do with it too.

“I think so. I just have to sit really still and let the Zetsu poke me with probes like usual, right?”

Madara chews and swallows his mouthful before speaking, always so formal. “It will require you
to channel and sustain chakra flow for an extended period of time. If you do not feel as if you can
comfortably do so yet…”

“Old man, I’m practically crawling with chakra right now, after all the sitting around I’ve been
doing. I’ll be fine, I promise,” Obito assures him, and the old Uchiha patriarch huffs, half
aggravation, half strange fondness.

“I only say this because I will not be here for the testing. Your Zetsu will have to conduct it in my
absence, and since I will be gone for a few days, it would be imprudent to wait to conduct it until I
returned.”

Madara has taken to calling Tobi ‘Obito’s Zetsu’, since his spiral patterned friend tends not to
leave his side for very long, for any reason. Given Tobi’s poor connectivity with the Zetsu hive-
mind, a connectivity that is getting poorer and poorer, Madara had even gone so far as assigning
him to Obito permanently.

“He can do it,” Obito replies, scrapping at the dredges of his soup with his spoon to get at the last
bits of pork. “And if anything happens there are other Zetsu around. I’ll be alright.”

Madara inclines his head in agreement, and the conversation ends.

The next morning Tobi wakes him up and has him sit in the testing chamber while he sets things
up for the resonance assessment, which should tell him how much of Hashirama’s jutsu Obito has
gained control of through the old Hokage’s cells. According to Madara, it could be anything from
30%, the amount of his body replaced by Hashirama’s cultivated tissue, to somewhere around 60%.
The old man himself has about a 74% resonance according to Shiro, and the highest known is
some kid in Konoha with 91%— though Obito isn’t sure he wants to know how that happened.

Obito peers into the clear, slightly silvery liquid that fills the resonance basin set into the floor,
framed on all sides by cables designed to measure chakra output, composition, and biological
impedance. It starts to flicker with energy as Tobi charges it with natural chakra from the command
station at the head of the pool.

“How’s the hive-mind, Guruguru?” Obito asks to make conversation while the Zetsu double
checks the specs for testing.

“Farther and farther away every day, weirdly enough,” Tobi mutters.

“Does that bother you?”

“A little,” the Zetsu admits. “But less than I thought it would. Here.” He hands Obito a breathing
mask. “Hop in and start channeling.”

“Bossy,” Obito teases, but straps on the mask and slides into the basin. The liquid is cool against
his skin and a little odd against the newly forming nerves on his right side, but other than that the
feeling is almost pleasant. He begins to channel his chakra, letting it run laps through his system as
the liquid around him starts to vibrate with energy.

He keeps it up until the energy dies down and takes that as the cue that the test is over, rising from the water and pulling the mask down. Tobi is staring frozen and unblinking at the chakra console, hand poised just above the readout.

“What’s the matter Guruguru?” Obito prods. “You look like you just swallowed a snail.”

Tobi shakes himself out of his stupor. “Uh, I think I screwed something up. You mind going under again?”

Obito blinks his singular eye and tilts his head. “Okay… if you say so.” He shrugs and straps the mask back on, sinking once more beneath the cool liquid of the basin. He waits as the process repeats, keeping up a steady flow of chakra around his body the best he can while the energy of the sensors thrums around him. Again he rises when the humming of the energy tapers off, but this time he waits until all trace of the vibration is gone before he surfaces.

He slips the mask off, dark hair dripping into his eyes until he runs a hand through it to brush it back. He looks up at his companion, who still seems to be frozen over the readings.

“Can I get out now?” he grouses, but then pauses his complaining.

The solid mask-like nature of Tobi’s face normally makes it difficult to distinguish any kind of expression, so the Zetsu mostly conveys moods and emotions through expressive body language or varying (and sometimes over-dramatic) alterations in the tone of his voice. Right now he’s disturbingly still bent over a printed sheet that supposedly holds the result of his test.

“Tobi?” he asks, concerned.

“That can’t be right…” The Zetsu mutters, practically to himself, but then he looks up again. “Just one more time, I promise. Then you can stop being cold and wet.”

“Third time better be the charm, Guruguru,” Obito warns. “I don’t have enough chakra reserves right now for anything more.”

They repeat the process and this time when surfaces he goes right into pulling himself out of the basin before his strength abandons him.

“Have you been keeping things from me little brother? Because this reading doesn’t make much sense.”

“What are you talking about Tobi?” Obito grumbles.

The Zetsu moves to sit beside him, crossing his legs over the stone and holding out the long strip of paper. Obito trains his eyes on it, reading through the scrawled words and symbols. Most of it is nonsense to him, jargon more familiar to the Zetsu than most living men, but a set of numbers at the bottom paint a very clear picture of what Tobi is talking about.

Obito takes hold of the bottom of the paper to bring it closer to his eye in case the lack of depth perception is screwing with his vision. “That can’t be right.”

“I got the same number on all three tests. I checked the equipment twice over. It’s not a technical error, the machine is running perfectly,” Tobi insists.

At the bottom of the page, tacked on before a percentage mark, is the number 300.
“That doesn’t make any sense. The 100% mark is Hashirama himself, right?” Obito wonders, going up through the other readouts in case there’s something there he missed that explains it.

“Yes. It was the original level of the Mokuton jutsu and the unique chakra within Hashirama when he died, as attuned by Madara-sama. It should be the highest threshold.”

“You’re sure the machine is working right?”

Tobi huffs indignantly. “Absolutely sure. I wouldn’t have redone the tests otherwise.”

Obito is quiet while he reads through what he knows of the symbolism and the technical terms on the page, searching for patterns that might indicate something is out of place. Obito has always been good at seeing patterns, manipulating them even, but he finds nothing off about the report.

“Once you’ve eliminated the impossible, whatever is left, however improbable, must be the truth.” Obito mutters, running through idea after idea in his head, searching for pieces and analyzing what he knows, contrasting it with ideas about what Madara might be hiding from him, or what the Black Zetsu might be keeping even from the old man.

“Where is that from?” Tobi asks, stirring Obito out of his musings with a start. Rin had always called it ‘daydreaming’. Obito doesn’t blame her for making the assumption. In fact he’d intended it that way.

“It’s something my sensei used to say to get us to think outside the box.” Obito muses. He looks up into his friend's face, chewing his lip as he thinks. “That tree that holds up the Demonic Statue, what do you know about it?”

Tobi blinks. “It came from Madara-sama’s clone of Hashirama.”

“Other than that.”

Tobi sets his chin in his hand and thinks. “I know it keeps the Statue… calm, in a sense.”

“Calm? Calm how?”

“Their chakra signatures are similar, I believe. They resonate, and it keeps the Statue’s chakra flow stabilized. Shiro would know more about it than me, though. I haven’t been attached to the collective knowledge in some time now.”

Obito tilts his head and puts the paper down. “Why do you think that is?”

“If I had to guess?” Tobi ponders. Obito nods. “A lack of interest in the bond, for one. I am more… independent than Shiro and many of the other Zetsu. I am unsure why. For another, prolonged exposure to you.”

That brings both Obito’s head and attention up. “Me? Why me?”

“You are… brighter in my senses than any other presence. Normally, for most Zetsu, the brightest presences are the Demonic Statue and Yami– the Black Zetsu. But to Shiro and I, you’ve always outshined them quite a bit. Did I never mention that?”

Obito lets out a bit of a nervous chuckle, suddenly uncomfortable– that had sounded dangerously close to a compliment and Obito is very much not used to those. “Uh, no. You left that out.”

Tobi shrugs. “Either way, extended time in your presence seems to affirm my own presence, and
thus that same sense of independence. I can only assume Shiro is not experiencing something similar because his duties as the central node take him away so often.”

Obito swallows. “So, theoretically, if you wanted to keep a secret from the hive-mind, could you?”

Tobi sits up straighter, looks Obito in the eye directly. “If I am careful, and I would be, I could safely keep several.”

“Can you tell me about the Demonic Statue? Not what it does, but what it is? I know the Black Zetsu—Yami, whatever, has told you not to.”

“Ordered, more like,” Tobi mutters, and swallows hard, his voice dropping to a whisper like the walls might have ears, even though both Madara and Yami are currently in Kiri for reasons unknown. “It’s not like I know much anyway, just vague impressions.”

“Impressions of what exactly?” Obito asks, lowering his tone to match his friend’s.

“A woman? Or maybe it was a girl, with white hair and eyes. And then the tree.”

“Tree? What tree?”

“Enormous. A massive thing as old as the earth, with bark so thick and dense it shone black, and leaves that glittered like gemstones. There were orbs too, fruit I think, but that’s all I remember from the black before Yami brought Shiro and I into existence.”

Obito turns the words over and over in his head. “Is it possible the chakra that fuels Mokuton and the Demonic statue of the outer path came from the same place?”

Tobi shakes his head. “Maybe, but why would Yami not inform Madara of this?”

“Oh the blob monster has been keeping secrets from day one,” Obito informs him, waving it off. Tobi mutters ‘blob monster’ to himself in bewilderment before he responds. “How would you know that?”

Obito scratches a scarred cheek sheepishly. “Probably because I’m a pretty great liar myself. Once you know how to fool people, it’s easy to see when other people are doing it to.”

“That… explains a few things.” Tobi mumbles. “You are very good at pretending not to be intelligent. It’s very confusing sometimes.”

“I like to hold my cards close, is all,” Obito hedges.

“So in keeping with the metaphor, you’ve never tipped your hand?”

“Once,” Obito admits. “A long time ago with a too-perceptive smug little bastard. And I didn’t so much tip my hand as throw my cards across the room,” he shoots his Zetsu a wry smile and changes the subject, tapping at the resonance report to bring attention back to it. “Anyway, if this says what I think it does, I’d rather not let Creepy Black know. Any way you could fudge the results a little?” he asks, handing the report sheet back to Tobi.

The Zetsu hums, looking over the paper. “I’m fairly sure I can make one of the zeros go away,” he muses. “A subtle problem with the scribe portion of the machine, easy enough to rig. I will need you to take the test again though.”

Obito huffs and grins. “You’re the best.”
“Obito.” Obito stops his slide into the basin, looking up at Tobi. The simple atonement of his name is low and serious, and out of character for his normally bright personality.

“Yeah?”

Tobi doesn’t answer immediately, but Obito waits patiently as the Zetsu gathers his thoughts. Eventually he speaks. “You know that I’m with you, right?”

Obito blinks. “Of course I know that.”

“I don’t think you do.” The Zetsu counters. “I am on your side before all else. Shiro too. While Yami still holds a little sway over us, it is nothing we couldn’t shake off if we wanted to. If you were to walk out of this place, turn your back on everything here, we would follow you.”

Obito feels the unexpected hot prickle of tears suddenly threaten, and he turns his head away before Tobi can see. The Zestu don’t lie. They don’t see the point of it, it’s not in their programing, so every word Tobi speaks is nothing but truth.

Obito needs a few seconds to compose himself, he’s never been good at dealing with gushy emotions like faith or acceptance or loyalty, he just doesn’t have a lot of experience with it.

“Thank you.” He says eventually, and whether or not Tobi was ever human Obito can tell he understands.
Okay, so I know I've said this before, but the comments you guys give this thing are amazing. It's the only reason why this week's chapter got done even close to on time (I have like three research papers due this week, dying a little)
Anyway, you're awesome, know this, and enjoy the fun chapter.
I Regret Nothing

Kakashi wakes when pre-dawn light slats across his face at an unfamiliar angle, jolting him right into sudden awareness until memory reasserts over base instincts and he remembers where he is.

He is not in the tiny spartan apartment he’d spent most of his life in after Minato and Kushina had died, with the tight rooms and familiar sharp corners softened only by the tiniest of personal touches. For the first time in two decades, Kakashi wakes in the first place he ever called home. For the first time in twelve years, he wakes and the morning isn’t empty.

Even in the quiet the air feels somehow fuller, brighter with the dormant life of the three Genin still sleeping down the hall.

“Boss?” Pakkun yawns, curled on the pillow beside him, still half asleep. Kakashi doesn’t blame him for being drowsy– they’d been up settling in until the small hours of the morning, shuffling around training scrolls and equipment, necessities and precious trinkets, arguing about how close the futon should be to the window.

Kakashi rubs his knuckles over Pakkun’s head to lull the pug back to sleep and slides out of bed, stepping carefully over Shiba and side-stepping Bull’s sprawled bulk. He eyes the shower contemplatively, but decides it can wait until he’s checked on his charges.

He slides the shoji door open softly and steps out into the hallway, taking a moment to admire the soft glow of dusk on the stretches of tall grass that march all the way to the cliff’s edge. In the soft morning breeze the blades shift in waves of pale green, moving as one like ocean tides. Kakashi’s room is one that– as far as he remembers, was once used as a guest room. It lies across from his old room, which Kakashi had been more than willing to let his cubs convert into a study.

It’s also strategically sound– Kakashi chose the room primarily because it lies between the old master suite and all the major entrances, and is close enough that he can hear trouble before it starts.

He pads silently down the hall, smiling softly to himself when he hears Sakura’s soft snores and Naruto’s sleepy rumbling. He eases the door open, and is unsurprised to find all three of them curled up on one side of the large futon, still sprawled in their civs with hands buried under pillows or arms thrown over one another. They seem to have developed a system for sleeping on futons meant for one– Naruto and Sasuke lie parallel and Sakura sleeps upside down between them, conserving space and likely protecting the boys’ poor ribcages from the menace of Sakura’s elbows. Even in sleep the boys seem to gravitate together, heads tilted just above Sakura’s toes so that their foreheads are mere centimeters apart.
The sight makes something pang hard in Kakashi’s chest, a reminder of an old, raw pain anchored into his chest by older regrets, actions never taken due to anger and wariness and foolish, foolish pride.

The hurt softens into something bittersweet; Sasuke and Naruto show no signs of making the same mistakes, and they are already older than Kakashi had been, already stronger. Even so, Kakashi will do whatever he can to make sure they don’t trip over the same obstacles he did. If their bond is as strong as he thinks it is…

He allows himself one last indulgent smile and slides the door closed again, slipping back into his room and heading for the shower. He reviews his mental to-do list as he goes through familiar motions, stepping under the spray before it fully warms to clear the last of the drowsy cobwebs from his mind. A great deal of the main house is still closed off and has been even since Kakashi was a child— it had been a big house for a single shinobi father and a kid still in the academy, and from what he remembers a great deal of the rooms had been cordoned off for being either superfluous, dangerous, or both. But Kakashi has three cubs just coming into their skins, and he plans to give them all the room they may need and more if possible.

The dojo needs some fusuma panels replaced and a fresh coat of paint, and then there’s the old building by the cliff edge that he might be able to whip back into some semblance of functionality, maybe as a surprise…

When he steps out of the bathroom, tucking his mask up around his face again and still toweling off his hair, he finds that his entire pack has gone missing. Blinking bewildered at his suddenly empty room, Kakashi pads out the door and peers down the hall.

Sure enough, the door to the cub’s room has been nosed open, and as he approaches he finds every one of his dogs nested around the kids; Bull curled around Naruto and Sasuke’s heads, Bisuke wriggled underneath one of Sakura’s arms, Pakkun tucked into the small of Naruto’s back, and Uhei sandwiched between Sakura’s legs and Sasuke’s torso.

“Traitors,” Kakashi mutters, and Urushi gives him puppy eyes from where he’s nestled under the crook of Naruto’s arm.

“The bed got cold, boss,” he reasons, soft enough not to wake the exhausted Genin, and that’s something else because Urushi has always been the loudest and least caring of his summons.

“Sure it did,” Kakashi murmurs sarcastically. “If they wake up before I get back, let them know I went out to run errands.”

“Should we start them on morning exercises?” Uhei asks softly.

Kakashi raises an eyebrow. “They’re adults. I’m sure they’ll start them on their own.”

“But we can help, right?” Uhei insists, a tail wag giving away his enthusiasm.

“You’re all terrible,” Kakashi informs them all with a rub to the bridge of his nose. He can hardly blame then for being attached though— that would make him a hypocrite. “Have them train with their own summons as well, then,” Kakashi instructs with a roll of his eyes, and slides the door shut again behind him.

Genma wakes, easy and slow, to a calloused hand drawing through his unbound hair. The way he wakes tells him immediately where he is, since in Raidou’s arms is pretty much the only place
Genma has the luxury of easing into consciousness.

“Is there a reason why you’re coaxing me into a false sense of security?” Genma mutters, not opening his eyes, tucking his head up under his partner’s chin with a pointed bop. Raidou chuckles, one of Genma’s favorite sounds, low and warm and deep in his chest, flavored with fond exasperation and that rare hint of indulgence.

“I have border patrol soon. I have to leave in a few minutes,” Raidou intones lowly, pressing a tender kiss to the edge of Genma’s left temple.

“What border patrol?” Genma demands sourly, noting with distaste as he opens his eyes that Raidou is indeed already outfitted in most of his traveling gear, leaning over him from his seat at the edge of the bed.

Their bed. Genma remembers after a heartbeat. Even after a week the novelty of that has yet to wear off, and the feeling of being smothered that he’d been expecting has yet to rear it’s ugly head. Genma has never liked feeling confined, in any way, and that phobia of being stifled had been the source of a great deal of their arguments within the last month about whether or not Genma would be moving in.

It had been Raidou’s declaration of fine, I’ll move in with you then that had jolted Genma into actually considering it, because he’d yelled don’t be stupid my apartment is a wreck and Raidou had responded with well so are you sometimes and that hasn’t scared me off to date.

Raidou is an idiot, but he’s Genma’s idiot, and that had been the deciding factor.

“The border patrol I told you about last night. And three times before that,” Raidou reminds him patiently.

“I only remember a few very specific things from last night and you telling me about a border patrol in not on that list.”

Gemna is gratified by the soft red that skates Raidou’s scarred cheeks for the space of a few heartbeats, but is even more gratified by the kiss Raidou leans down to give him, molten and slow. Genma feels no remorse when he scrapes his fingernails up his partner’s neck, tracing the pulled lines of the scars there until he can grip the back of the squad captain’s neck and pull him in closer.

Raidou falls into him for a few long seconds, cupping his jaw with a large calloused hand to slant their mouths more firmly. Eventually though he pulls away with a groan, much to Genma’s displeasure, parting them with a soothing stroke of his thumb against Genma’s cheekbone.

“I’m going to go now,” Raidou tells him firmly. “Before you start something I can’t finish” Genma snorts. “Speak for yourself,” He rumbles, leaning up to steal another kiss before Raidou can sway out of range. “You can be a little late can’t you!” he reasons, pushing into a second deeper kiss.

Raidou breaks away with a wry laugh. “Not that late,” he counters, leaning intelligently up and out of Genma’s strike zone. “I’ll be back tonight late, barring any bad skirmishes.”

Genma huffs and leans up so that he’s almost vertical, tapping their foreheads together briefly. “Keep your head on your shoulders,” he demands.

“Sir yes sir,” Raidou murmurs with a fond smile not seen on his face outside of these tender moments between them, brushing a chaste kiss over the bridge of Genma’s nose in goodbye.
He flops back into the pillows when Raidou pulls away, watching as he shoulders his pack and vanishes out the window.

Genma takes a long moment to stretch before he bothers rolling out of bed. He doesn’t have any planned missions until midnight tomorrow, so he’s going to take the rare opportunity to be lazy for as long as his Anbu trained body will allow.

When he does get up to start his morning breakfast of coffee, coffee, and maybe some more coffee, he finds that Raidou has strategically left a plate of onigiri and between him and the coffee machine, wrapped in plastic and stuck with a vindictive little note.

No, Shiranui.

Sneaky bastard knows him too well.

Just to be contrary, Genma sets the plate aside and starts his first cup of coffee before he deigns to unwrap the goods, nibbling on a single rice ball until his stomach discovers it actually is hungry and he devours two more in quick succession.

After that and a second cup of coffee Genma feels vaguely human enough to actually shower and dress, throwing on a sleeveless shinobi top and a pair of Raidou’s ratty old sweatpants for comfort, tucking his hair into a short pony tail. It’s been a while since he’s just taken a walk, and he figures the sunshine can only do him good– the sun is just coming up, so he tapps on his sandals and heads out the door.

He’s only been soaking up the vitamin D for about half an hour when he spots a familiar shock of silver hair outside the the market circle. “Oi, Hatake!” he calls. “I thought today of all days you’d be sleeping in.”

Kakashi turns from a little stand selling assorted belts and harnesses. He has a bundle of bamboo slats and a thick roll of rice paper under one arm, and a long weapons duffle with an emblem stitched across the side that Genma recognises as being from Bone– a high end blacksmith in the center of the primarily Jounin sector of the shinobi district.

“I had a few things to get done.” Kakashi admits with a careless shrug, and Genma raises an eyebrow, ticking his senbon at the complementary katana bag.

“Uh-huh. Those kids have been living under your roof for less than a day and you’re already spoiling them.”

“It’s necessary equipment for kenjutsu.” Kakashi defends.

“A-grade chakra enforced steel for Genin is a necessity?”

“They’ve earned it.” Kakashi states firmly, then tilts his head with and awkward eye-smile. “Though in truth, at this point they’re Genin in name only.”

“So Iruka keeps telling me.” Genma allows with an inclination of his head, striding up to stand beside Kakashi. “Looking for harnesses to go with?” he asks, peering over the array of of leather harnesses, wrist guards, sheathes and hip holsters. He blinks a couple times, somewhat astounded by the quality, and even more alarmed by how low the prices are in comparison.

He looks up at the vendor in astonishment, a dark skinned young man with short bluish-black hair.
He’s clearly not a native—his colorings speaking more of Kumo or Taki than anywhere in Fire country. “You’ve got to be joking with me on these prices, kid. Where did you get these?” he demands.

The young man smiles awkwardly. “So this gentleman was telling me.” the young man laughs, answering the first part of his question and inclining his head towards Kakashi. “I am sorry if the item pricing is a little skewed, I spent most of my life as a hunter, and I’m a bit new to the trade.”

“I caught him just as he opened.” Kakashi murmurs to Genma. “The cubs already have some decent harnesses, the basic stuff for scrolls and kunai, but—”

“But this stuff is premium.” Genma finishes for him, patting his pockets. “Shit, I forgot my wallet.”

“I’ll spot you, if you help me figure out what I should get my cubs.”

Genma is so grateful that he doesn’t even make fun of the whole ‘cubs’ thing, already eyeing a new wrist pouch he could easily rig to carry a whole pack of poison senbon. “Kakashi, you’re still a lazy asshole, but I take back everything I ever said about you being a selfish one.”

Kakashi offers him a crooked but genuine smile just visible beneath the mask, and turns back to the young vendor. “Would I be alright if I payed you for what I believe the goods are worth, so long as it’s above the listed price?”

The poor kid looks taken aback, as if confused by why Kakashi would offer such a thing. “I suppose…”

“Oh, great.” Genma chirps, snatching the thin graceful wrist pouches off the table and ignoring the little folded paper in front of them with the price on it. Together Genma and Kakashi start a debate over functionality value vs. luxury value, discussing sums easily two or three times the listed price. The boy gapes at them as they agree on a solid number, and Kakashi hands the stunned young man a bundle of ryo while Genma happily straps them on to test them out.

“Where did you get this leather?” Genma asks.

“I-I get it from hunting. It’s a hobby, mostly.” The boy admits with a stutter. “Those particular guards came from the hide of black deer up in the Kofun mountains, southern Lightning country.”

“Quite the journey they’ve taken.” Kakashi marvels.

The young man shrugs. “I take mostly untrodden roads to avoid bandits. They sometimes lead me to interesting places. I don’t understand though— the blacksmith out towards Grass country told me they weren’t worth much at all…”

Genma growls. “I hate civilians. Look kid, this here is Shinobi grade stuff— what are you doing selling to backwoods nobodies?”

“I’ve never actually been to a ninja village before.” The kid admits. “A wandering shinobi tradesman told me to come here.”

“This is good work.” Kakashi says firmly, enforcing Genma’s statement. He reaches forward and selects a belted harness with an attachment meant to go up over the shoulder, one that could easily be rigged to carry scrolls.

“For Naruto?” Genma guesses. “Better than the standard stuff you’d get. And it would be more resistant to wear…”
An hour or so later they’ve cleaned out half the poor vendor’s stall, leaving him with more ryo than he probably knows what to do with and a recommendation to visit Shinta at Bone and get his stuff appraised— with any luck the kid and his goods will stick around for a while. Genma had taken the construction material off Kakashi’s hands so they could carry everything, and readjusts the roll of rice paper on his shoulder as they head back towards Hatake clan lands.

“Oh, I was going to ask.” Kakashi says suddenly. “You don’t have any missions today, right?”

“Nope.” Genma affirms. “I’m free and clear until tomorrow night. Why?”

“Could you run some drills with my team while I work on one of the buildings on my compound?”

Genma snorts. “Are you asking me to babysit, Hatake?”

Kakashi grimaces. “Nothing so easy, unfortunately. My kids can be… obstinate. Consider it repayment for the wrist guards.”

“Done.” Genma agrees, ever the cheapskate. “If you're looking for some cheap labor to help you out, Kotetsu and Izumo are off mission today too.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Kakashi muses. “Thank you.”

By the time Sasuke manages to drag himself into wakefulness the sun is already streaming golden through the windows, which on any other day would be a red flag that he’s late for something. But on this particular morning he squashes down the urgency and settles contentedly back down into a half sleep. Judging by the smell of dog fur and the extra warm bodies piled around him, Sasuke guesses that the ninken had filtered into their room sometime while they were asleep.

Judging by the buzzing chakra signature next to him he can tell that Naruto is awake, if only barely.

“Is Kakashi-sensei gone?” he asks, face still half buried in his pillow, one forearm lost underneath it.

“Urushi says he went to run errands.” Naruto responds drowsily, the words followed by a jaw-cracking yawn.

Sasuke turns his head and cracks an eyelid, noting Naruto’s face not far from his own. The Uzumaki is lying on his back and rubbing his eyes with the back of one hand, the other stretched above his head. Urushi is snoring on his ribcage and Shiba has tucked himself against the Uzumaki’s side. “We should get up, shouldn’t we?”

“Probably.” Naruto agrees sullenly, lifting his hand from his eyes to stroke Urushi’s back.

Sasuke rolls onto his side, careful not to disturb Uhei. Naruto rolls his head towards him at almost the same moment, causing their foreheads to slide together in an accidental brush. It surprises a warm, slightly sleepy chuckle out of Naruto, a sound that makes Sasuke’s chest swell unbidden.
The gesture is a reminder of their promise, of that oath made in the last dredges of evening sunlight as the day dipped into night.

“Promises to keep.” Naruto murmurs, almost as if reading his mind, and Sasuke allows himself a quicksilver smile.

“Promises to keep.” He agrees, shifting to sit up.

Naruto shakes Urushi a little to wake him, and the ninken yawns widely before hopping off his chest, landing carelessly on Shiba’s flank. Sasuke gives Sakura’s arm a jostle, nimbly dodging the elbow she automatically attempts to bludgeon him with.

“Come on, “ he urges. “We’ve slept enough.”

Sakura grunts unhappily but pushes upright, not bothering to unhand the still sleeping Bisuke as she stands, cradling her favorite ninken in the crook of her arm.

It’s the start of a brand new morning routine.

At first it’s strange, because suddenly they have all this space that wasn't there before, and they’re not tripping over each other with every third step, all elbows and knees and tight spaces. It lowers the number of morning squabbles they have significantly, though the space between them is now filled with the scrabbling paws of their sensei’s ninken, leaping this way and that, both to help and to hinder.

The kitchen is huge compared to Naruto’s tiny space, a long open line of counter space and appliances along one wall, outlined by a large L-shaped island that cuts the kitchen off from the main living space. The windows over the countertops have a view of the woods that lead back to the village proper, and on the opposite end of the room are a set of sliding glass doors that lead out to a patio, and then into what was probably once a garden, now wild and overgrown. Beyond that lies a series of jagged stone outcroppings, which drop off sharply at the cliff line.

Naruto has thrown the doors wide open, allowing a breeze to chase through the freshly cleaned house. It’s still brisk despite the sunshine, but Sasuke finds he doesn’t mind. It seems fitting for a new start to a new day.

“You three should invite your summons to breakfast.” Bull rumbles, trailing after Sakura with a bag of ninken food in his maw.

“All of them?” Naruto asks from the countertop.

“I don’t see why not. “ Uhei reasons. “It’s good for bonding.”

“We should have enough food.” Sasuke decides with a shrug, opening the fridge to check. “Iruka-sensei is the one who stocked the pantry.”

So they lie out plates of raw meat cut into various lengths and chunks as soon as they finish filling the ninken’s bowls and putting together their own breakfasts. Naruto summons first, since his summoning limit is still two, and as usual the two kits appear snarled up in each other’s throats, in a fight once again.

“Oh man. Knock it off already.” Naruto grumbles, reaching down with practiced ease to snag the kits by their scruffs. They’re bigger now than when Naruto had first summoned them, about
Shiba’s size, and after a week of gorging on Naruto’s chakra, are each sporting three tails instead of two. As a testament to their new rank, the foxes can now manifest Foxfire; which would be great if they could control it at all.

Sasuke sighs as Sakura puts out the fire roasting merrily away on the floor with a low level Suiton jutsu. The strange flames that the kits are now capable of manifesting from their mouths and around their feet and tails seem to have the ability to set alight almost anything— from the waxed bamboo floors to the side of the refrigerator. Sasuke snuffs that particular fire with a fuuton vacuum.

The foxes’ hackles flatten though at the offer of food, and Sasuke takes that moment of calm to summon his roc. In a puff of glittering sand-like smoke Kikri alights easily on his shoulder, her gilded ivory plumage glittering in the morning sunbeams. She leaves behind two rather befuddled looking roc, both of which are quite a bit larger than she is. The smaller of the two, an adolescent gildedwing with bronze plumage about the size of a large eagle, is Krell, an associate of Kikri’s from her clan, born one clutch before her. Beside him, nearly twice the size of his companion, is the sleek dark form of Valkra, a stormwing of similar age.

Sakura summons Ravia and his twin Saveri, both of which are substantially larger than when Sasuke first saw them— though they still both tend to hang off Sakura’s arms like long scaly scarves.

Both of Sasuke’s relatively new summons look at him expectantly, awaiting orders, but he given them none, instead taking a seat at the island and starting on his breakfast. Kikri, experienced with the nuances of human behavior by now, and more particularly Sasuke’s behavior, hops onto the counter by his elbow with a click of talons and primly selects a dish of thinly sliced raw meat from the array of goodies to call her own.

“Good morning.” She greets Kuran-kha, who has his head buried in a dish of rabbit the ninken had thoughtfully offered up when Naruto was raiding the fridge and freezer. It’s odd though, Sasuke hadn’t thought that ninken were ones to share food readily.

“Mornin.” Kuran replies around his mouthful, swallowing and licking at his bloody maw before digging back in.

“You, are a barbarian.” Renge informs him from his right, eating his chunked rabbit in dainty bites. “Good morning Kirki.” he adds politely to the raptor.

Kikri kees softly at the pleasantries and digs into her meal, pausing to turn her agile head over the bulge of her upper wings to glare at her fellow summons.

“Well? Don’t just perch there. Sasuke-sama has offered quite the meal, it would be rude not to partake. Sasuke smirks a little when the two roc immediately flutter forward, as if spurred into action by the mere idea of being rude.

Naruto sits down beside him with a laugh, having just finished setting all the ninken up with their breakfast, and slides a plate of tomatoes and pickled cucumbers towards him for him to eat off of. Looking down at the the stupidly simple gesture, it’s alarmingly easy for Sasuke to think home.
Anko and Genma can not, without stretching the term obscenely far, be considered friends. Extraordinarily antagonistic co-workers would be closer to the mark, so when Genma shows up on her balcony, smelling of ozone with one sleeve mostly on fire and says; “I need your help,” Anko finds it well within her rights to blink at him, eyes tracking back between the Tokujo’s damp hair and his merrily smouldering overshirt, and wonder if she’d fallen asleep over Ibiki’s paperwork again.

“Say again?”

Genma rolls his eyes and pats out his sleeve. “Look, you can either help me for the next few hours, or I can tell Inoichi that you were the one who threw up on his flak jacket two weeks ago.”

Anko sits up immediately, knocking over her empty coffee mug in her haste. “That wasn’t my fault! I caught that stupid demon flu in Tea country and it was that or Ibiki’s report folders!” She defends with a snarl.

“Whatever, are you coming or not?”

She is, but not because she’s afraid of Inoichi, but because of her very healthy fear of Shikaku. Despite their lazy calculating natures, Nara men can have protective streaks that are outmatched by absolutely none, and the Jounin-commander is the first place Inoichi would go cry too if he finds out she’s the one who almost ruined his favorite vest.

“Fine. What is it? You piss of the Anbu lieutenant again?” She demands, getting to her feet from her seat in front of her coffee table and reaching for a tank-top.

“I can run from lord stick-up-his-ass. I can’t run from this.” Genma mutters crossly

Anko raises a grudgingly interested eyebrow, her trouble senses tingling. “Alright Shiranui, you have my attention.”

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“Aoba! Hayate!”

Aoba is not proud to say that he jumps so bad he drops his shogi piece, startling raspy laugh out of the sickly ninja across from him. Hayate abruptly stops laughing however when Anko comes around the corner soaking wet and covered in stone dust, her dark hair sticking up at all angles.

“What the hell–” Aoba starts, but cuts himself off with a squawk when Anko snags him by the back of his shirt and begins to drag him bodily out of his seat. It has been a perfectly nice day, and he’s just wanted to relax outside with a nice strategy game with one of his few nice friends, but noooo.

“You’re being conscripted.” Anko declares wrathfully. “You too, Hayate, if you can breathe today.”

“I’m coming, I’m coming.” the Tokujo agrees, seeming to find a humor in the situation that Aoba really doesn’t see.

“Where the fuck are you draggin’ me you crazy kunoichi!” he snarls, trying to regain his feet, but Anko keeps him on the diagonal with another vicious tug to his collar.

“There’s a war on.” she growls in answer. “We need every able-bodied soldier.”
“A little more to the right! You missed a spot in the top corner!”

“I did not! That corner is **flawless.**”

“You’re **blind.** It’s missing at least two coats!”

“Bulshit.”

“It is! Look at it!”

“I am looking at it jackass, you’re out of your mind!”

Kakashi sighs to himself, leaning against the doorframe. As helpful as Izumo and Kotetsu are, they’re not exactly **efficient** workers. The dojo is done at least, with only a little blood shed in the process, and the fringe building Kakashi had hopped to get working is starting to look promising.

A rustle, a shift of shadow out of place, and Kakashi turns immediately to greet Shikaku before he fully materialized from the shade of the nearby pines.

“Something I can do for you, Jounin Commander?” he asks, perfectly polite in the borderline sarcastic way that he knows grates on people’s nerves.

Shikaku just hums at him, amused. “Are you aware that your kids have started a firefight with half the Tokujo currently on standby? Pretty much literally?”

“Already?” Kakashi muses, glancing up to check the position of the sun. “It’s only been an hour.”

Shikaku’s chuckle is smokey and rough. “They’ve gotten my son and his team involved apparently, as well as Kurenai’s young ones. They’re proving astonishingly good at working as a unit to terrorize my ranks.”

“They’re something else.” Kakashi agrees readily. “But you didn’t come all the way up here just to tell me what I already know.”

“No.” Shikaku admits readily. “I’m actually here to ask you something.”

“How long has Naruto known about his heritage?”

Kakashi’s eye narrow immediately. “Is this a question from you, or from the Sandaime?”

“Easy, wolf. It’s a question from me, so I can let the old man know just how badly he fucked up.”

That wasn’t the response Kakashi had been anticipating, but he lets the automatic hackles drop. He has to force himself to remember that Shikaku has something to protect here too– Naruto and Shikamaru are close, and Kakashi forgets sometimes that such a bond automatically makes the young Uzumaki a part of the Nara extended family– not that such a thing is obvious with the Nara. With the Nara, very little is obvious.

“The Kyuubi told him. Probably when he was very young, seven or eight.”

If Shikaku is alarmed by the ‘kyuubi’ statement he doesn’t let it show, his only sign of incredulousness the tick of a single scarred eyebrow. “Shikamaru said it was attached to him, after
he made me admit that I knew. He said that it *listened* to him. Is that true?"

“It is.” Kakashi admits. “He befriended it, somehow. Years ago probably, I’m still unsure how he managed that, but I can no longer say I’m surprised.”

“That Shimura bastard can’t know, then.” Shikaku says firmly. “He’s always had an unhealthy obsession with the beasts. And if he thinks the boy has a way to control one…”

“A bad idea, to say the least.” Kakashi agrees.

Shikaku laughs suddenly. “Though there’s not much the old warmonger could do even if he did know. Sidelining the Sandaime’s protection, there are a lot of people looking out for him now.” There’s a subtle statement in the words, like Shikaku is unintentionally including himself in that number, except that nothing Shikaku does is unintentional.

Kakashi inclines his head in both thanks and agreement, and peers over at the portion of the building Kotetsu and Izumo are busy perilously painting.

“And is it just me or is the right corner missing a coat?” He mutters blandly, and Kotatsu promptly shrieks and falls of his ladder.
Stronger than you Think

Chapter Notes

Finals and end of the year BS came at me like a horde of rabid radioactive zombie badgers.
Updates will be sketch until the second week of May as I fight off the rest of said badgers, then normal shit shall resume, but should not take as long as this one did.
That is all.
I Regret Nothing.

Smoke floods the spaces between the trees, trailing from half a dozen banked fires, turning the air hazy near the canopy. Several craters dot the landscape, crackling with ozone, framed by unnatural outcroppings of harsh rock and pools of water that sink into the cracks between them. Movement flickers in the shadows, flashes of metal glinting in the light.

This is war.

Both sides have pulled reinforcements, bolstering ranks and adding to the chaos.

Naruto hasn’t had this much fun in ages.

~Come on, kit. We’ve caused enough havoc here, time to rendezvous with your team.~

“Yes, I think we need a war council.” He agrees, body flickering back into the depths of training ground 31. With the ease of long practice Naruto reaches out with his senses, seeking familiar chakra signatures in the mess of energy they’ve turned the area into. As usual it’s Sasuke he finds first, the familiar cool sharpness of his chakra a beacon against his senses. By the dark smooth texture of the chakra signature nearby, he’s with Shikamaru. He finds them hunched together in conversation in an alcove covered by a curving wall of natural granite, the entrance blocked mostly from sight by a pair of wild cherry trees. Naruto lands nimbly on the low branches of one, just as he hears Sasuke call; “About damn time. Get in here.”

“So grouchy,” Naruto laughs, swinging into their little camp. They have a couple of scrolls open between them, new jutsu by the look of them, along with a surprisingly detailed map of the area drawn into the soft clay.

Sasuke grabs him by the arm and tugs him in, and they hunker down over the map.

“Where are the others?” Shikamaru asks, a smoothed-out tree branch held loosely between his fingers. He doesn’t take his eyes off them map.

“Not sure where Kiba and Choji got off to after they clashed with Anko and got separated, but last I saw Ino and Sakura were giving Aoba hell around here, before Genma almost cornered me by the river rise and I had to book it,” Naruto informs him, pointing out the place on the map where he’d last seen the girls. “Where’s Hinata? I thought she was with you two.”

“She was, but she went off with Shino to grab Choji and Kiba,” Shikamaru mulls, rubbing his jaw as he ponders the map. “We have to get everyone together and regroup or this is going to dissolve
out of our favor quickly.”

“This site will be compromised soon,” Sasuke adds. “We disengaged from Hayate too close to here for it to be undiscovered for much longer.”

Shikamaru nods. “You two find Ino and Sakura, break them off of their fight if you have to. I have a good lock on Choji’s location— I’ll go get him and everyone else.” He taps the end of his stick at another spot on the map. “We’ll meet here by the springs in training ground 27.”

“Sounds good to me,” Naruto chirps, and Sasuke scoffs but follows him as he stands, a tiny smile lurking at the corner of his mouth.

They honestly hadn’t meant for it to escalate quite this badly. But Genma had just been so much fun to mess with, and it had been his idea to pull in crazy lady Anko to even the odds.

Things had just kind of devolved from there.

None of the Jounin instructors have gotten involved yet, which is probably a good thing— especially if they’re anything at all like Kakashi-sensei.

Right now though, Naruto is liking their odds.

They find Ino and Sakura fuming on the river, obviously aggravated about having lost their prey.

“Aoba give you the slip?” Sasuke asks Sakura as they land at the bank.

Sakura growls and aims a kick at a river rock so hard that part of it splits in half and goes hurtling through the air, missing Naruto’s head by a couple centimeters max. Naruto sends her an annoyed look and doesn’t flinch– even when angry Sakura’s control is close to flawless, and Naruto has pretty solid faith in that control, whatever her emotional state.

“Slippery asshole,” she snarls.

“We’ll get him,” Ino insists. “He can’t have gone that far, body flicker or no.” She looks towards them from where she had been scanning the trees, flaxen hair swaying in the light and catching it. It’s a little bit singed on one side and her bangs are uneven lengths, but she doesn’t seem to be that upset about it at the moment.

She spots Sasuke and waves. “Hi, Sasuke-kun!” she calls, and Naruto has to give her some credit– it’s only a little bit dreamy.

“Ugh,” Sasuke grunts, and then very pointedly maneuvers himself so that Naruto is planted firmly between them.

Naruto snickers a little as Sasuke’s discomfort, earning himself a jab in the ribs. Naruto knows that it’s not actually the attention that bothers him– at least that’s not all of it. He hates people who are in love with the idea of him, and that’s not just fans– it’s well wishers too, and the strings that come with a stranger’s pity. Naruto doesn’t blame him one bit.

“We’re falling back for now,” Naruto informs them. “Shika’s got a plan in the works.”

“Rodger,” Sakura says brightly, bumping arms with Ino. “Come on blondie. We’ll get him back for the haircut later.”
“We’d damn better,” Ino growls, but follows after readily, trailing behind Sakura as they leap up into the trees.

On the way to their meeting spot Ino eyes him strangely, gaze flitting back and forth between him and Sasuke before she sidles up to him, leaping side by side with him through the branches. “So…” She starts vaguely. “You two are pretty close, huh?” The way her eyes keep tracking towards Sasuke’s back make it obvious who she’s talking about.

Naruto blinks at her for a few seconds before his gaze turns suspicious. “Why?” He doesn’t actually answer her because the answer is obvious, and she smiles slyly at the unspoken acceptance of her statement.

“I’m curious how you managed it, is all,” She says with false casualty, waving her hand as if to dismiss his suspicions. “Any advice you can give would be welcome. Care so share?” She asks sweetly, and now Naruto’s bullshit sensors are going off in earnest– something is up, and for some reason he gets the feeling that Ino isn’t asking for herself.

“No,” he says firmly. Eyeing her warily.

For some reason that only seems to encourage her, a mischievous glint firing off in her periwinkle peepers that makes Naruto feel like he’s stepped on a trip wire. “Oh really? Not even one word of wisdom?”

And Naruto has no idea what her game is, but that protective instinct in him is flaring again. “I don’t fall all over him for being someone or something he’s not, if that’s what you’re asking,” he says lowly. He doesn’t mean it as an insult, but he doesn’t like what she’s implying either.

She doesn’t look hurt, but the syrupy sweet smile she’d been sporting drops away into something surprised. “Wow. You two really are close,” she observes.

Naruto shrugs. “It’s not that odd. Are you not close to Shikamaru and Choji?”

“That’s different. Our parents have been friends for forever. We were practically raised as siblings,” Ino counters, leaping a little farther ahead of him so she can face him as they travel. Her spacial sense must be almost as good as his– she hardly has to look around her to know where the branches will be.

“We’ve been friends for two years. Why are you just now asking about it?” Naruto wonders.

“Because you two aren’t just friends. You’re friends with Kiba, but that doesn’t mean you two read each other’s minds. I saw you and and Sasuke thrashing Genma together; do you click like that with all your friends?” Ino demands, her gaze probing. “Because that was something else to watch.”

Naruto is shaking his head before she’s even finished. “That’s different.”

“How so?” She asks, genuinely intrigued, and Naruto makes a face.

“You honestly want me to try and explain that?”

“Can you not explain it?”

Naruto grimaces again. “What’s with the grill session here? I’m bad with words, okay?”
Ino holds her hands up in placation. “Easy big guy. I’m just curious, is all.”

“You get really curious really fast then,” Naruto grumbles. “Look, it’s just different. He’s different. We just... sync, I guess.”

“Sync?”

“Yep. And that’s all I’m going to say about it.”

“Alright, alright. So defensive.” Ino sidles up next to him again, but drops the subject, instead going into the topic of mixing up styles—she’d gotten a look inside Aoba’s noggin for a couple of seconds and even though the Tokujo’s head had been heavily compartmentalized (a byproduct of being a spy apparently) she’d gleaned enough off the surface to know that he was starting to clock the patterns in their movements and it was time to switch things up.

“Shikamaru was probably thinking the same thing,” Naruto agrees.

Ino snorts delicately. “I’d be surprised if he hasn’t already figured out how to wrap this tiny war up in a neat little bow. He’s been crazy on point lately as far as the strategies go.”

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“Waiting? What kind of tactic is that?” Naruto asks, curious rather than accusatory.

“A psychological one.” Shikamaru replies lazily, hip cocked against a boulder at the edge of the springs tucked deep into training ground 27. “Let them worry themselves sick about tracking us down while we rest up and change strategy. And lick our wounds in Kiba’s case.”

“It’s a scratch,” the Inuzuka growls, leaning back against a fallen tree trunk with his legs crossed over the forest floor. He’d stripped out of his fluffy jacket and has his mesh shirt pulled up over his chest as Sakura mutters over the gouge in his side. It’s a nasty wound mostly because it tapers in a jagged arc from over his hipbone to curl up over his lower ribs, flared at the edge like the teeth on a saw.

Shino leans down to watch the proceedings with interest, eyes fixed on Sakura’s hands as she pulls energy back and forth, channeling chakra in concentrated streams to stitch tissue and focus healing.

“Fascinating.” He murmurs. “Your chakra control is prodigious. I don’t suppose you’d be willing to teach me a few of your first aid techniques? I feel that keeping this idiot on his feet is going to be a full time job.”

“Screw you, bug boy.” Kiba mutters amicably.

Hinata stands hovering nearby, twisting her hands together nervously. “You’re sure he’ll be okay?”

Sakura laughs shortly. “He’s fine. A stubborn idiot, but fine.”

“I don’t suppose you have a cure for that?” Shino asks blithely, swaying out of the way when Kiba takes a swipe at him.

Sakura pins his shoulder back against the tree crossly. “What about ‘sit still’ was so hard to understand, dog breath? Don’t. Move.”

Kiba winces at the shove and gives her a nervous lopsided grin— as if reminded suddenly that Sakura could crush the bone under her hands with vey little effort. “Yes ma’am.” He says sweetly,
and then turns his head to Akamaru. “Sic’em boy.”

With an affirmative yip Akamaru leaps, springboarding off Sakura’s back and launching himself full throttle at Shino’s chest, knocking him back into the dirt with a grunt. Kiba snickers, and smiles wide when the antics startle a smile and a giggle out of Hinata.

~Quite the bunch you’ve gathered here.~ Kurama muses, curled contentedly in the back of Naruto’s thoughts.

Naruto hums in agreement, his attention called up when Sasuke comes out of the surrounding trees and sits beside him on the warm boulder he’d claimed as his own.

“How’s the burn?”

Sasuke holds up his arm instead of answering—other than a slim streak of red the burn he’d gotten from their fight with Genma is practically gone.

“You got that flashfire jutsu worse than I did.”

Naruto shrugs. “Side-effect of the mach-nine healing factor. My burn was gone in a few minutes.”

“Seems like cheating to me.” Sasuke mutters, but he’s not actually cross about it.

“And having super sight that can practically predict the immediate future isn’t a cheat?” Naruto ribs good-naturedly, and Sasuke bumps their shoulders.

There it is again, that click, that synchrony. Naruto suddenly remembers Ino’s words about their friendship being strange, but that’s the thing—nothing about this feels strange. Sasuke just slots so easily into his life, like there’s a place carved out in Naruto’s spirit made just for him. It hasn’t always been that way, obviously—there had been so much emotional debris and fractured pride in the way at first, old hurts left unhealed and festering, too much of a mess of dark feelings to be room for much else.

But once they’d cleared everything out, washed light into the cracks of their dark places and dealt with their demons, everything had settled. Naruto wonders sometimes if they hadn’t accidentally swapped pieces of themselves in the confusion, in those first few months of pain and conflict where they’d raged and crashed against each other. It would explain the way boundaries and thoughts start to blur when they sit alone together, it would explain why their body language tunes in a fight or even just standing still, it would explain why he can tell what Sasuke is thinking just by the way his eyes crease at the corners.

“Do you think this is weird?” he asks quietly.

“Hmm?” Sasuke questions, eyeing a scratch on the blade of his tanto with distaste.

Without really thinking about it Naruto pulls one of his storage scrolls off his belt and unrolls it, trailing his fingers across the seals until he finds what he’s looking for. With a quick flick of his fingers and a pulse of chakra he unseals a whetstone and hands it to Sasuke, who takes the tool with a soft nod of thanks and goes to work on his blade.

“This.” Naruto murmurs, tapping a knuckle to Sasuke’s chest and the gesturing between them.
Sasuke looks up, brows furrowed for a moment of confusion. But then blue eyes meet black and Sasuke blinks a few times, his expression smoothing out into understanding.

He snorts, a little slice of a smile flashing the white of his teeth. “I have no idea.”

Naruto laughs at that. “Me neither.”

“I’m going to string Kakashi up over the Hokage tower by his intestines.”

Anko looks up at Genma’s dramatics from where she’s wringing out her vest. “Cry me a river, Shiranui.”

“What the hell are they teaching those Genin?” Hayate asks, still bent over a little, his breath coming too shallow to be good for Aoba’s blood pressure.

“Forget that.” he growls. “What the fuck is Hatake feeding those three monsters of his? The pink one hit me with a earth-water combo most Chuunin couldn’t pull off. Not to mention those twin demons got the drop on you.”

Aoba directs the last part at Genma, who scowls and clicks his senbon against his teeth. “I’ll tell you one thing. I’ve seen a lot of pair fighting in my life, taken down my fair share of dual acts; good ones too.” Genma takes the senbon out of his mouth gingerly, like the way one might hold a cigarette, and points it towards the edge of the lake that had been their battleground. “And I have never seen that before.”

The span of the bank at the lake’s edge looks like ground zero for a natural disaster. The ground has been upturned, charred, electrocuted, flooded, blown up and pounded down until it’s nothing more than a cracked black mess of broken earth reminiscent of a meteorite crater. Aoba had seen the first half of the fight but missed the tail end of it when the she-devils had gone for his throat. Literally.

It had been pretty surreal to watch Genma, The Flashfire, wanted man and cold blooded assassin, struggle to take down a couple of pre-teens.

Then again, Aoba hasn’t seen a couple of pre-teens that strong, not since Kakashi himself. And two powerful pre-teens that could flow together like old partners? Never.

Genma grunts and rubs the back of his his neck in frustration. His left eyebrow is doing that twitch thing that it does sometimes after really long missions or dealing with Gai too much, his eyes slightly wild as he scans through the trees for any sign of the nine ninja brats. “I’m supposed to be watching Kakashi’s kids, not hunting for them through the woods like this is a B-rank tracker mission.”

“Relax, Genma.” Hayate soothes as he takes a seat on one of the upturned boulders. “Knowing Kakashi, he probably knew something like this would happen.”

“They don’t listen.” Genma growls. “How the does Kakashi wrangle these little shits regularly?”

“Kakashi doesn’t have this kind of trouble with his brats.” Anko cuts in. “It must just be you they don’t like.”
“Oh they like us just fine.” Hayate counters. “The Uchiha even asked me to show him some kenjutsu while we fought. I just don’t think they see us as authority figures.”

“We outrank them.” Aoba whines.

“Only on paper, apparently.” Anko mumbles, pulling off one of her long boots to shake the rock dust out of it. “Why the hell are they still Genin again?”

“The exams aren’t for another few months.” Hayate supplies helpfully.

“You proctoring that?” Aoba asks.

Hayate nods.

Genma checks the position of the sun and grimaces, cracking his knuckles in preparation. “Come on. I don’t know about you three, but I’m not letting a bunch of Genin catch me unaware.”

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They catch him unaware. The Tokujo lose the war.

Kakashi stares down at Genma as he lies scowling over the grassy ground, hand placed suspiciously over his masked mouth. Genma flips him off.

“I hate you.”

Kakashi does laugh at that, low chuckles under his palm. “I did tell you they could be obstinate.”

“Unless obstinate is some kind of code for demonic, that was not an appropriate disclaimer.”

Kakashi laughs again, which is weird since Kakashi’s quota for real laughter usually never exceeds a maximum of twice every month or so. “To be honest, I didn’t actually expect them to get the entire graduating class involved,” he defends.

“Get it off, get it off, GET IT OFF!” Anko shrieks from nearby, hopping about and waving her arm wildly like it might send the seal etched on her skin flying if she just shakes it hard enough.

Kakashi raises a dry eyebrow at her. “It’s a seal, Anko. Not a spider.”

“GET IT OFF.” she demands viciously. “I CAN’T. CHANNEL. MY. CHAKRA.”

Aoba curses colourfully from halfway up the pine tree he’d been shadow possessed into. Judging by the difficulty he’s having getting down, he still hasn’t managed to break the genjutsu he’s under.

“To the left, Aoba. Left.” Hayate directs. “No, no your left.”

“Fuck it, I’m jumping.” Aoba declares, and before Hayate can gainsay him otherwise Aoba leaps, obviously aiming for the loudest thing he can use for direction, which in this case happens to be Anko. They go down snarling and striking like cats, cursing and hissing.

Hayate sighs, rubbing the bridge of his nose with the back of his thumb.
“A couple tents short a full circus.” Kakashi drawls.

“Just help me up, jackass.” Genma growls. He’s still out of breath from where he took Choji’s expanded fist right to the diaphragm, not to mention dizzy from the combo platter of Yamanaka mind altering jutsu— which had swapped his sight with Hayate’s, he’s pretty sure even Inoichi can’t do that consistently— and Hyuuga taijutsu that he got caught up in when he was paying too much attention to the Inuzuka brat.

Kakashi readily offers a hand and pulls him up slow and easy, so that Genma’s already rattled neurons don’t shake anymore than they already are. “It’s not like you let someone catch you unawares.” he comments offhand.

“Well excuse me if I wasn’t expecting Genin to use guerilla tactics.” he snarls.

Kakashi claps him on the shoulder amicably. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that underestimating them is a bad idea.”

“Did anybody clock where they went?” Aoba asks after he and Anko have managed to extract themselves from each other.

“Oh hell.”

Genma turns around at the low voice and smell of smoke to see Asuma alight at the edge of the clearing.

Kurenai appears not long after, tucking a bright laugh behind her curled fingers. “I think we’ve created a monster.”

Asuma rubs the back of his head wearily. “It’s not like they needed much encouragement.”

Kakashi hums, casting his gaze up into the trees. “Okay you three, come on out. Fun’s over for today.”

“Aww.”

Kakashi’s three brats drop out of seemingly thin air, followed not long after by teams 8 and 10.

Asuma looks thoughtfully up into the trees where the brats came from, noting the strange composition of the illusion that had been cloaking them. It’s not a genjutsu— Genma would have noticed a genjutsu. Asuma’s eyes then track immediately to Shikamaru, who has his hands stuffed low in his cargo pants and a bland expression on his sharp Nara features. “How long have you been keeping that little trick up your sleeve?” he asks his charge.

Shikamaru shrugs. “Couple weeks.”

Asuma hums approvingly, but doesn’t say anything more.

“Asuma-sensei! I figured out the cross perception jutsu!” Ino chirps, dancing over towards her teacher.

Asuma ticks an eyebrow up with a smile. “Did you now?”

And then suddenly the air is filled with the sound of chattering twelve-year-olds as they talk over each other to tell their Jounin-senseis what they learned, and Genma watches with no small amount of fascination as the three strong willed little brats that had been giving him so much trouble
practically clamor for Kakashi’s attention. And he gives it—crouching down to listen and respond as they ask questions and show him hand signs and tell him theories and ideas, even reaching forward to gently correct a sequence of signs for one of Naruto’s jutsu that didn’t quite go right.

To his right Kurenai is ruffling Kiba’s hair with both hands and praising Hinata for her ingenuity at the same time. She then reaches over as Shino starts to speak coolly as well, adjusting his hood fondly and nodding as he recounts his use of her teachings in illusions to disrupt Aoba’s special senses.

Asuma is laughing as Choji recounts his courage against Genma and Anko, rubbing the Akimichi’s head with his knuckles. Ino practically hangs off his arm and chatters in his ear all the while, adding her take to Choji’s story and telling her own tales in between. Shikamaru doesn’t talk other than to clarify a few things, but softens his rigid stance when Asuma rests a hand on his shoulder.

...Well shit. Genma finds his sour mood evaporating quite against his will, bringing a reluctant smile to his face. Anko harrumphs from behind him and drapes herself over his shoulders, leveling an accusing finger at Naruto.

“You.”

And the kid has nuts, Genma will give him that, because he has the nerve to blink and look around, as if to imply who, me?

Anko nearly lunges, but Kakashi steps in before she can get too fired up.

“She has a mission tomorrow, cub.”

Naruto sighs dramatically “Oh fine,” and squeezes between his teammates to go over to Anko and Genma, unafraid, and hold his hand out expectantly. Anko eyes him suspiciously but hands over her arm. The kid makes a few hand signs, including one Genma doesn’t even know, and then touches two fingers to the center of the seal on Anko’s upper arm.

With a flash of white-hot chakra and a sound like breaking glass the seal dissolves right off her skin. Naruto, job done, hops back over to his sensei and settle next to his partner in crime again, the dark haired Uchiha swaying out of his way to make room for him without thought.

Kakashi laughs and straightens, turning to the Tokujo as they pick themselves up and crowd behind Genma. “Well we did inconvenience you all day.” he allows. “How about we make it up to you with an early dinner?”

“Food?” Aoba asks, focus instantly captured.

“Oh! We can make curry! Our curry is the best.” Sakura claims with feeling.

“We have enough room now, I suppose.” Sasuke reasons.

“Can everyone come?” Naruto asks Kakashi.

Kakashi tilts his head. “Of course. It’s as much your home as mine.”

“Did I hear curry?” Choji demands.

Asuma laughs. “Now you’ve done it.”
Kakashi wonders sometimes what he was thinking, hesitating the way he did.

He had been so afraid of the dark emptiness of this place, never really full even when he lived here as a child, too expansive for a too-smart kid and a worn down veteran. After his father’s death it had grown impossibly colder, emptiness seeping into the walls the same way Sakumo's blood had seeped between the floorboards. He’d been afraid to bring his team here, afraid that the empty cold that he remembered haunting the rooms would weigh on their bright souls as they slept.

He hadn’t counted on the reverse being true.

Any cold that once tried to linger here has been chased off with force; Naruto’s warmth and energy diffusing into every corner and crack and lingering in whatever space he occupies, Sakura’s bright determination and strength a bastion against whatever ghosts may yet have lingered, even Sasuke’s quiet resolve hides the strange subtle burn of devotion that banishes any chill that might be lurking in the seams. These little ninja have pushed themselves into every cranny and nook, transformed every chakra enforced wall and piece of furniture, and now Kakashi hardly recognises his own home.

And even if there had been any emptiness stalking around between the walls, it’s sure as hell gone now.

“Easy Aoba, don’t spill.”

“If you want this endeavor to go smoothly then you should tell your brats to stop darting past my shins!”

“You’re a Tokujo for gods’ sakes you should have better balance.”

“Blame the Bug Brat, I still can’t see straight…”

“Ino, honey. Come here and let me see your bangs. We’ll see what we can do about the singed bits.”

“Iruka-sensei! We need a taste tester!”

“Coming, coming. Don’t shout inside Naruto, it’s bad manners.”
“Soooorry.”

“Genma-san, do you know if anyone has any allergies?”

“No peanuts for Anko, kit-kat. It’s not that bad, but it makes her face puff up.”

“Don’t say it like that.”

Kakashi watches from against the partition that separates the kitchen from the larger half of the main room, hiding his observations behind the easy guise of his Icha Icha. He’s comfortable enough with the company to be a little dressed down– his Jounin vest and overshirt are gone and he’s changed out of his mission pants into dark grey civilian sweats, since he’d managed to get both paint and chakric plaster on the former.

He’s not the only one in less than standard clothes– almost all the Tokujo had run home to change before taking Kakashi and his kids up on their offer for free food, Asuma has stripped out of his vest and Kurenai had used one of the spare rooms to change into black mission pants and a matching tank top earlier, and Iruka had been in his civs when he arrived.

It’s almost cozy enough to make Kakashi uncomfortable.

And speaking of uncomfortable…

“Well isn’t this quite the trainwreck.”

Ikari Ryouta stands glaring and smoking in the open doorway, his hands deep in the pockets of his standard shinobi slacks. Kakashi raises an eyebrow at the grouchy surgeon, and the man huffs out a breath laden with smoke.

Sakura materializes around a corner with a bright smile, a streak of curry sauce on her cheek, no doubt from kitchen shenanigans. “Ikari-sensei!” she chirps, and Ryouta’s posture relaxes a bit.

“There you are, short stuff. Shiki said something about free food?”

“It’s not done yet, but it will be soon. Did you finish your paperwork?”

Ryouta chuckles wryly. “What are you, my secretary? And what the hell is that on your face? You’re training to be a medic-nin not a slob.” He rubs the streak of curry spice and beef bullion off her cheek with his sleeve until she wriggles away with a laugh and swipes the rest away herself.

“Come on in, we have snacks!” she chirps, and then darts back into the kitchen.

Ryouta looks up and meets Kakashi’s eyes again, his glare falling right back into place from where it had slipped to something close to fondness. “Calm down Hatake, I’m not going to give you a shot in the hallway.”

Kakashi lets his eyes curve up in a taunt of a half smile. “You say that like you haven’t done it before,” he counters.

Genma takes the moment to walk back into the main room from the kitchen, take two long76
blinks at Ryouta, and walk right back out again. Ryouta rolls his eyes and goes to sit down next to Hayate, who offers him a bowl of wasabi peas.

Kakashi returns to his pretense of reading, unease crawling around under his skin again. It’s tempered easily by the warmth around him, simple enough to ignore. It would be rude to leave
now, even for him; he can wait until the everyone leaves to go settle his nerves.

But just as the thought crosses his mind there's a rustle and a soft step and Sasuke appears by his elbow, apparently finding a body flicker easier than actually walking to him from the kitchen.

“Something wrong?” he asks.

Sasuke shakes his head, his eyes oddly intent. “You should go.”

Kakashi blinks at the non-sequitur. “What?”

Sasuke huffs and looks pointedly at the group of Jounin and Tokujo nearby, as if suddenly irritated with their proximity. “You haven’t gone to the memorial today yet, right? Naruto can tell it’s bugging you.” Sasuke says so softly that the sound barely carries, like it’s a secret. It’s not, Sasuke knows that, but he also knows that Kakashi doesn’t exactly appreciate drawing attention to it.

Kakashi can’t help the fondness in his smile and the calming bloom of warmth in the normally chilly space of his chest from the consideration alone. Out of all three of his Genin Sasuke by far is the one who hates emotions the most, and coming from him the thought is that much warmer.

Unable to help himself he sets a hand on the Uchiha’s head and ruffles his dark hair. “I’m alright, cub. I can go later.”

Sasuke indulges the attention for a few seconds before he ducks away, looking a little miffed like Kakashi missed his point entirely. “Curry is going to take another hour, sensei. It’s fine, really.” And then Sasuke looks up at him, determined but also a little bit vulnerable, like he understands, and Kakashi realizes that he probably does. “Go.” he repeats.

Kakashi looks at him for along moment, but then, eventually he nods. “Alright then. Make sure the Tokujo don’t break anything while I’m gone, yeah?”

Sasuke, the brat, rolls his eyes with a derisive, obviously, and flickers back into the kitchen.

Kakashi takes a deep breath and pushes off the partition.

Iruka sees him go, but doesn’t say anything, much less attempt to stop him. He just smiles a little, eyes soft with compassion but never pity, and makes a shooing motion with one hand before turning back to the stove, settled as in intermediary between Sasuke and Naruto’s customary flavor debate.

Genma notices, because of course he does, but instead of drawing attention to him, he covers his escape by yelling too loudly at Anko stop chasing Kiba and Hinata around indoors because you’re going to break shit goddammit what are you even doing.

Kakashi wonders what he did to deserve them.

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It doesn’t take him long to get to the memorial stone. He doesn’t plan to stay long since it’s only a matter of time before even his brats start to miss him, and he’d be shunned out of his own house if he missed curry. But even as he approaches he feels his nerves begin to calm, the monster of grief pacing restlessly back and forth in his chest stilling for now.

He doesn’t talk much to anyone but Obito this time around, and the words flow easy once he starts, soft and fond as he talks about Naruto’s rising and terrifying penchant for sealwork that’s looking
to overtake even Minato’s skill, about Sasuke’s adaptability and skill with a variety of different weapons and his growing fondness for kenjutsu that is starting to become contagious, about how Sakura’s monster strength and cleverness are turning her into a kunoichi to be feared already and how he’s a bit worried about her glee in discovering that certain aspects of medical ninjutsu could theoretically be weaponized.

He talks about the upcoming chunin exams, asks theoretical questions about what missions he should take them on in the interim, how best to help them overcome their weaknesses and develop their strengths as individuals as well as their strengths as a team. He swears sometimes that he can feel warmth in his chest that isn’t his, contentment and maybe even relief blooming under his ribs in approval or pleased surprise that isn’t his.

Maybe he’s going mad. It wouldn’t be the first time he’s thought so.

He feels a great deal better by the time he’s finished, even though it took him longer than he thought, and by the time he heads back his chest feels lighter for once instead of heavier.

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When he returns he finds Ryouta loitering outside the fringe building on the grounds, the one he’d spent the day working into some semblance of order. Kakashi approaches warily, through Ryouta seems far too interested in the building to even really notice him, his cigarette burning merrily away at the corner of his mouth.

“Something I can do for you Ikari-san?” he asks, as much to announce his presence as to ask a question– it’s never a good idea to sneak up on ex-anbu. He would know.

But Ryouta just hums absently and reaches up to take his cigarette from his mouth, eyes never straying from the the dark painted walls and carvings that make up the building’s face.

He gestures forward with his cigarette. “Is this what I think it is?”

“It depends on what you think it is.” Kakashi says blithely.

Ryouta’s contemplative expression sours. “Don’t get smart with me, Hatake. This is a Black Temple, isn’t it?”

Kakashi shrugs, can find no reason to lie. “Yes. It’s in poor shape still, I’ve managed to get it’s most basic functions up and running, but nothing else.

Ryouta huffs, still staring intently at the shrine-like facade. The dark chakra paint is finally starting to set, darkening from a matte grey to deep black as the sun bakes it’s energy into the surface. As the moon rises the heated chakra in the paint will crystalize, transforming into a smooth lacquer-like polish.

“I don’t get it.” The surgeon grunts.

Kakashi ticks an eyebrow up skeptically. “What’s not to get?”

“I’ve seen the Black Temples in the Aburame clan lands, the Nara, the Inuzuka. Hell, I maintain the one behind the hokage’s main house. I’ve even seen the old massive pair, perched on the edges of the Hyuuga complex.”

“So?” Kakashi mutters, through he already has an idea where this is heading.
“So why is this one older.”

“Because it was the first.” Kakashi answers blandly.

Ryouta does finally turn to look at him, eyes narrowed. “Are you trying to tell me that the first Black Temples were built by the Hatake?”

“No and yes.” Kakashi allows. “This is more a… prototype to the traditional healing temples. If you were to drag an old Hatake clansman from the grave they’d tell you that the ones spattered around the clan lands aren’t true Kuro Tera at all.”

Ryouta takes a final drag from his cigarette before stubbing it out on his sandal, turning to give Kakashi his full attention at last. “I don’t follow.”

“The Black Temples around the clan lands are for advanced healing, recovery from intense missions that are draining physically mentally, and chakra wise.”

“What else would they be for?” Ryouta grumbles, but Kakashi has his full attention, gaze fixed in him like a hawk.

“Well, in true Hatake tradition,” Kakashi says drolly, “The Black Temple was developed for healing second and strengthening first. They have similar processes, but not the same.”

“So it was created during the first war, then.” Ryouta surmises. “A way to turn broken soldiers back onto the field faster.”

“That is a very kind way of putting it.” Kakashi says wryly. “The chakra network and symphony lines are still disabled, but I was planning to let my team lay into it, turn it into whatever they wanted.”

“Something to keep them busy?” Ryouta guesses.

“That too.”

Ryouta rubs his jaw, giving the building another once over. He seems conflicted for a few minutes, his expression rotating through concentration, consternation, and anticipation in turns. “This whole thing is a recipe for disaster, you realize.” he says suddenly.

“I’m sure they can refrain from blowing it sky high.” Kakashi defends, a sarcastic lilt to the statement. He has no idea if that’s true— Naruto alone would easily be capable of that kind of destruction.

“Not what I meant, Hatake.” Ryouta counters. “You have no idea what you’re doing here do you?”

Kakashi’s stomach dips low at the statement. Despite the way his kids are clearly growing and maturing, doubt still festers, cold and bitter, low in his chest. He has no experience in this, and somewhere in the back of his head he’s sure he has to be doing something wrong.

Kakashi’s body language only shifts a little, so long training in Anbu dulling even the most reflexive shows of emotion, but he’s not the only one here Anbu trained, and Ryouta catches the practically microscopic stiffening of his shoulders and tightening around his visible eye.

“No, no, not like that.” he says quickly, grimacing and rubbing the back of his neck hard. “You do just fine by these kids, and that’s the whole issue here.”
“I’m afraid I don’t follow.” Kakashi replies easily, keeping his tone reserved.

Ryouta huffs and leans against one of the carved pillars, digging around in his pocket for his cigarette case. “The ninja world works on a pretty well defined system. Weaker ninja are placed on less heavy missions, raised more or less normally, and are allowed to develop decent emotional reserves and maintain mental stability. Higher level ninja, gods forbid prodigies, develop lopsided; all form and function but usually lacking emotional stability or capability, riddled with ticks and maladaptive personality traits. It keeps things balanced more or less, because the strongest ninja are typically the craziest, and manifest personality weaknesses that can be exploited if not properly accounted for.”

He's talking like an Anbu, in a kind of tone that Kakashi is conditioned to pay very close attention to. Kakashi sees his point– and Ryouta would know more about high level shinobi psychology than most.

“And how does that apply here?” he questions, though he thinks he can see where Ryouta’s train of thought is leading.

“I talked to your brats. Kakashi.” He says crossly, like that should explain everything.

Kakashi narrows his eyes. “You mean you performed field psych evals on my Genin. Without my permission.”

Ryouta waves him off. “That’s not the point. What I’m saying is that aside from some clear codependency issues, I can count their psychological problems on one hand all together.”

“What psychological problems?” Kakashi demands, momentarily sidetracked.

Ryouta shrugs, crossing his arms and waving one hand in absent circles as he recalls. “Uchiha is still coming out of severe emotional repression, likely a result of clan orientation, trauma, and extended emotional isolation all wrapped up together. The fact that he’s coming out of it at all is frankly astonishing, though the reserved quality of his personality is likely permanent. Uzumaki shows some signs of contact based stress trauma, a result of spending his formative years without any kind of physical contact, though it’s only really noticeable if you sneak up on him. Sakura and the Uchiha are exceptions to the rule as far as I can tell, which is a good sign. Sakura is still kicking out the last of her inferiority complex, but other than that and some temper issues, she’s right as rain.”

Kakashi nods along with Ryouta’s diagnosis. He was aware of most of that already. In the ninja world, much more detrimental quirks have been considered normal, and he’s glad to see that what he gleaned from their behavior was the extent of it.

“I don’t really see the problem, Ikari-sensei. Given the way they grew up, things could be far worse.”

Ryouta rolls his eyes, exasperated. “You are raising a handful of Genin with already strong baseline skills, that are honing strengths past the Chunin level of ability already. They are emotionally stable. This means that they will not be prone to burnout or psychological pitfalls. They are stubborn but reasonable, proud but not arrogant, and they chafe under authority.” Ryouta finally succeeds in lighting his cigarette and takes a long drag before he continues. “It’s a godsdamned powder keg. You give them the room and the support and they will grow completely unchecked. That kind of power attracts a lot of attention from unsavory places, a lot of things become possible that weren’t before, and it’s going to piss a lot of people off.”
Kakashi, nods. “The best of us find that the greatest source of adversity is mediocre minds.” he agrees.

“A quote of the Yondaime’s.” Ryouta acknowledges. “You prepared to protect them from that?”

“Of course.” Kakashi says immediately, without even the slightest of hesitations.

Ryouta snorts. “Spoken like a Hatake. Not even sure why I asked.”

He stares at Kakashi for a long moment afterwards, jaw flexing, letting his cigarette smolder past the ends of his fingers. He’s making a decision of some sort, picking a side maybe– Kakashi isn’t sure– but eventually he brings his half wasted cigarette up to his mouth and take a drag, before huffing out out the smoke in a long breath of grey-flecked white.

“Allright wolf.” He says at last. “I’ll give you and your brats access to the spare materials for the Black Temples that I have access to, reserves and all. In exchange, your other two Genin see me at least thrice a week for combat medic lessons.”

Kakashi blinks, taken aback. “That’s… generous of you.”

“Your brats are going to be World-Wreckers, Kakashi. One way or another.” Ryouta grumbles. “They need responsibility with that power or it’s going to run out of their control, and if they’re going to learn how to take a human being apart, they damn well better know how to put one back together.”

“Fair enough.” Kakashi allows, though he’s fighting a grin. “Looks like Sakura almost has that covered already.”

Ryouta levels an accusatory finger at him. “Don’t get me started. She’s putting my nurses out of a job.”

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“How come this stuff tastes different every time I eat it?” Kiba asks no one in particular as he shovels curry in his mouth with an absence of manners that makes Ino cover her own mouth reflexively. Hinata, bless her gushy little heart, just giggles at his enthusiasm.

“I think it’s evolving.” Shikamaru rumbles dryly, taking another bite himself.

“It’s quite delicious.” Shino appraises. He’s taken off his jacket entirely as not to get any of the messy curry on the pale fabric, and Ino can’t help but notice how different he looks without the heavy outer layer. She can see the tiny lines of holes in his skin down the length of his bare arms, the little burrow holes of his symbiotic insects. She hasn’t seen any of them poke their heads out though, and when she’d asked about it Shino told her that they spent most of their time hibernating unless he was actively channeling his chakra. She finds it weirdly fascinating.

They’re circled on one of the flat boulders that dot the long grass of the Hatake property, perched close to the cliffs. Ino peers over the side of their stone seat, settled like an island in a waving sea of pale grasses. The cliff slopes harshly away into the Konoha wilds, thick emerald trees with branches woven into a verdant mat that filters the light chlorophyll green.
Ino starts a little when Sakura plops down beside her without warning, her own bowl of curry in hand, and tugs softly on a thick strand of her bangs. “Kurenai-sensei did an awesome job with damage control. It looks good.” she hums, surveying the spot on her head where her hair was singed off by Aoba’s renegade Incendiary Shot.

Ino touches the spot reflexively where it’s been sheared short. It’s not a large area, just a square bit past her temple where Kurenai-sensei had clipped away the damaged hair and then styled it to match everything else. Her hair is parted entirely to the other side of her head now, no effort made to conceal the short, admittedly stylish buzz on the side. She had been a little upset at the time, but she thinks the style might be growing on her.

“You’re sure it doesn’t look strange?” She asks, trying not to sound as self-conscious as she feels.

Sakura only beams and shakes her head. “Not at all! I think it suits you, personally. Gives all that soft gold an edge.”

“Really?” Ino questions. She hadn’t really thought about it like that. Her mother had always told her that a woman’s hair is sacred, that she should always be the first thing she cares for in her appearance. But Kurenai had warned her that long hair could be impractical in battle and could be used against her if she wasn’t careful.

She looks up at Sakura’s ponytail, eyeing the short, sharp swish of pale pink. It’s hardly half the length it was before she’d left on that strange C-Rank the three Genin of team seven seem reluctant to talk about.

“Did yours get clipped during the mission?” Ino asks, gesturing to her ponytail.

Sakura blinks a little, surprised, her springwater eyes flashing turquoise in the light filtering through the trees, then she shakes her head with a smile, reaching up to trace one of her thin fringe braids with two fingers.

“No, I just felt like I needed a change.” She says easily, like the decision is that simple. Maybe it is.

Ino leans her cheek against her palm and looks at Sakura sideways. “So you really gave up on him? Sasuke I mean.”

To Ino’s surprise, Sakura snickers at that. “If you mean I’ve stopped falling all over someone I don’t know very well, then yes.” She replies easily. “But I know him now. Sasuke? The real one? He’s a jerk, a picky eater, terrible at getting up in the mornings, stays up too late sharpening kunai, is still too fire-heavy with his jutsu, and cheats when we play capture the flag.” Sakura turns her head to meet Ino’s pale sky eyes with her shining liquid green ones. “He’s family now. Sure, I gave up on a dumb crush, but I’ll never give up on my brother. Either of them.”

Ino blinks hard, and stares, and stares and stares. Sakura sounds ten years older than she is, mature in ways Ino has been envious of for months. She just sounds so damn sure of herself all the time and Ino wants to know where she can get some of that confidence for herself.

Without thinking about it, Sakura’s words ringing in her head, Ino glances to her side, where Choji and Shikamaru are sitting together talking lowly over their curry bowls, and all she can think is; oh hell, she’s got a point.
Kakashi-sensei shows them the building after everyone has left. Naruto can sense the chakra in the walls even as he steps foot in the place, the echoes of old chakra constructs dormant within the walls and beneath the floor.

“What is this place?” Sasuke asks.

“This is a Black Temple.” Kakashi answers readily. “They were made for internal strengthening and recovery during the first shinobi world war. It’s been broken down for as long as I can remember, and a great deal of it functions on now extinct forms of jutsu.” Kakashi stops to look down at Naruto. “But I figure, since we already have one expert here on extinct jutsu, you three might be able to figure something out.”

“I’ve seen something like this before.” Sasuke cuts in. “There's a similar building on the Uchiha compound.”

“Most clans have a more refined and specialized version of a Black Temple on their grounds, to speed up recovery from damage on missions that might require long term healing otherwise.” Kakashi clarifies. “This one is a little different, as I’m sure you’ll discover.”

“What do we do with it?” Sakura wonders, peering down across the open floor of one of the rooms, circled with a dozen oval shaped basins set into the floor like the numbers on a sun dial.

“Whatever you like.” Kakashi allows. “Consider it a project you three can work on between missions, if you like. I have a feeling it will help with your training for the Chunin exams I’ll be signing you up for in June.”

“Sweet!” Naruto shouts. “Does this mean we’ll be going on more C-rank missions now?” he demands.

“As much as you can stomach, twerp.” Kakashi says fondly, dropping a hand down to ruffle his gold hair. “Also, in exchange for raw materials to help with your little project here, you and Sasuke will be seeing Ikari-sensei between missions for training in field medicine.”

“Oh?” Sasuke quips. “We probably would have done that anyway.”

“Speak for yourself.” Naruto grumbles. “My chakra control is still shit.”

Sakura leaps sideways to put her sibling in a headlock. “How the hell are you supposed to get better if you don’t practice, idiot.”

Naruto flails when she gives him a squeeze that threatens his bone structure. “Alright, alright! Now stop trying to kill me!”

Kakashi-sensei laughs at them, herding them back outside. “Alright. Evening stretches you three and then get some sleep. I’ll see what kind of C-ranks are available in the morning, now off with you.”
You know when your parents go on business trips and sometimes bring things back? Well my old man came back from a trip, and guess what he brought back? Not a souvenir or a trinket or what have you, no. A Columbian Death Flu. Whole family has been mostly dead all week him included.

On a more pleasant note, will be changing update day to Fridays, it seems to be working better with my new schedule. Also, chapter is a bit of a shorty compared to some of my other ones, but it’s also the last fluff chapter before plot and angst things. Chunin exams officially start next chap.

Enjoy

I Regret Nothing.

“You’d better hurry and finish calibrating those alarms Naruto, we’re going to be running late as it is.”

“I know sensei.” Naruto calls back and promptly curses as the seals spark at him again for his momentary inattention. “These things are harder to tune than I thought they’d be. I’ve only got a couple signatures left.”

“Yes, but you also have to move your treasure scrolls down into the vault before we leave.” Kakashi reminds him patiently from the kitchen where he’s handing bowls of breakfast out to the ninken.

“Craaap.”

“I’ll do it, Idiot.” Sasuke calls, swallowing his own breakfast and hopping down off the counter where he’d been multitasking taking weapon inventory. “You finish programming.”

~Remember kit, open negative space, place imprint, and close the space before you charge the circuit.~

“I got it, I got it.”

~Just do the Nara’s now, kid. He wanted to work on the Black Temple, right?. We can calibrate everyone else in when we get back.~

~Hinata and Ino wanted to look too. I have to add them in at least.”

~Alright, alright, just do it quick or we really will be late.~

“I know okay?” Naruto grumbles.

He arches back a little more, curving from his perch on the wall above the doorway to get at the proper seal placements on the ceiling.
The last few months have been the definition of hectic, a rapid fire back and forth of training and missions as the three of them try to work through as much of Naruto’s Uzushio scrolls and jutsu as possible and Kakashi-sensei squeezes in field experience and practical application wherever he can.

He and Sasuke have managed to get Ikari-sensei’s basic stamp of approval for practicing medical ninjutsu in the field, while Sakura has already been pre-licensed as a medic-nin, which is as far as she can go without actually passing the chuunin exams.

Friday, which has been eternally dubbed Team 7 Curry Night forevermore according to Kiba and Choji, has become a communal sort of sparring day where teams 7, 8, and 10 all come together to laugh and fight and show off. Kakashi-sensei claims not to mind even though they always end up breaking something in the Dojo, and says that what they get out of it is worth a little property damage.

He doesn’t think they’ve even remotely slowed down for over a month, and he’s tired and aching most days.

He also kind of feels like he could take on the world most days, but he figures that’s an acceptable side-effect.

He finishes the seals in record time thank you very much Kurama, and from there the whole house is a mess of running feet and shouting that tends to be normal when team 7 has early missions. Today they’re heading out for the far end of Tea country, a trip to the very edge of the peninsula to pick up a delegation from one of the island nations for some kind of meeting with the Fire Daimyo.

Kakashi-sensei does an automatic headcount as they go through the front door, a kind of reflex Naruto finds both reassuring and a little embarrassing as he taps a hand on each of their heads as they exit the Hatake main house before sealing the door and locking the alarms and traps behind them.

They head for the Hokage tower with speed, and they don’t bother taking the stairs– they bolt right through the upper window, landing one-two-three Naruto-Sakura-Sasuke in front of the mission desk with Kakashi perched on the window right behind them. If their reflexes were any less sharp they would have landed right on Shikamaru and company– as it is Sakura has to springboard back off Asuma’s hip to avoid crashing into him headfirst. The Jounin-sensei just laughs.

“Running late again, I see.” Jiji drawls from the head of the table, voice fondly exasperated around the rush of smoke and the end of the pipe held loosely between his teeth. “Just what are you teaching these children, Kakashi?”

“Too much, from where I’m standing. And let’s be honest, pops, I don’t see any children in here. Do you?” The words are Asuma’s, heavily amused, and Jiji concedes with a chuckle.

“No, I suppose not. Now if only they could learn to stop breaking my village and traumatizing my Tokujou.”

“You three on your way out, too?” Naruto asks Shikamaru, whose hand is still a steady weight on his shoulder from where he’d placed it when Naruto had tumbled in and nearly knocked him over. The only one of them who’d gotten out relatively unscathed had been Sasuke– who had broken his momentum with Naruto.

“Just got back, actually.” Shika corrects. “Short border trip, we were only gone a day.”

“Conserving energy for the Chunin exams?” Kakashi asks Asuma, who chuckles.
“That was the plan. Except for the fact that even the laziest of my kids seems unable to sit still these days.”

Shikamaru snorts derisively like he’s just been personally insulted, shoving his hands deep in his pockets. “It’s just common sense.” He defends. “There needs to be at least one reliable medic-nin in every unit and I have the best chakra control of the three of us.”

Sakura shrieks happily and throws an arm around Shikamaru’s shoulders, nearly knocking him off balance for the second time in ten minutes. “Awesome! Are you going to see Ikari-sensei, then?”

Shikamaru accepts the tackle-hug tolerantly, tucking an arm around her waist to give her a half-hug back. “He is the best, asshole or no. Besides, you softened him up for the rest of us.”

“I’m going with him and Shino too.” Ino adds, coming around to Shikamaru’s other side and bumping his shoulder with hers. “I’m not going to take it as far as specializing though.”

“Oh?” Sakura hums. “Then what are you specializing in?”

Ino grins, feral and catlike. “Hayate-san has offered to teach me nagamaki kenjutsu.”

Naruto gets the mental image of Ino twirling a sword longer than she is tall, and is surprised by how much it suits her. He laughs, jackal-like. “That’s awesome.” he declares with feeling. “You’re gonna be terrifying.”

Choji laughs deep in his chest. “Right? And Genma-san is going to to teach me how to use his breathing techniques with my family jutsu.”

“Yes.” Asuma drawls. “So as you can see, Hatake, whatever brand of crazy it is that fuels your brats, it’s contagious.”

“I’d like to state in advance that I am only barely responsible for them.” Kakashi disclaims happily.

There are a handful of ninja also stationed at the mission desk, and every one of them is staring at them with a wary sort of bemusement, as if unsure if they’re supposed to break them up or not. They keep sending Jiji looks as if searching for answers, but Jiji only chuckles and pulls out a scroll to wave in Kakashi-sensei’s direction. “Just take it and go before they damage my office.” He demands, and Kakashi retrieves the scroll with a half-assed two-fingered salute.

“Naruto keyed you guys into the Black Temple on the complex in case you guys wanted to work on it.” Sasuke informs Shikamaru before they turn to leave.

Naruto nods in affirmation. “Kiba's.”

Shikamaru tilts his head and nods back. “I think I’ve figured out those Ido-senshi katas, so come find me when you three get back and we’ll see if we can get them down before the exams.”

“We will.” Sasuke affirms.

“For sure!” Sakura reinforces, reaching forward to give Ino a side-armed hug and jostle Choji amicably with her shoulder.

Ino blushes a little and hugs her back, and Choji laughs and waves as they head off. Shikamaru bids them all goodbye with a fond; “Troublesome.”

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A few minutes later the door to the office is thrown open and Iruka-sensei enters bearing a stack of papers under one arm and a tripod of scrolls tucked into his elbow. He takes one look at the dumbstruck ninja flanking the Hokage and the weary smile on the man’s face coupled with the grin on Asuma’s.

“Aw, I just missed them, didn’t I?”

“By a hair.” Asuma confirms. “They were in a hurry though. Running late.”

“Who’s running late?” Grumbles Ryouta as he comes up behind Iruka. He’s nearly a head taller than the Chunin, practically Kakashi’s height, so he has no trouble peering over the Iruka’s shoulder into the room, eyeing team 10 and their sensei. “You twerps just get in?”


“Then lessons can wait until afternoon.” Ryouta informs team 10 in particular.

Shikamaru scowls. “Why?”

Ryouta huffs. “Because I know how you Nara get when sleep deprived. They can wait a few hours while you and your team take a cat nap.”

“Grumpy has a point, kiddo.” Asuma agrees. “Come on you three. Bed.”

Team 10 takes off grumbling, and Sarutobi chuckles out a breath of smoke with a fond smile, reaching up to take the pipe from his mouth.

“So,” he huffs. “Did you need something Ikari-san?”

“We both had something to discuss with you actually.” Iruka states, his tone a tad too formal to be entirely friendly, and Sarutobi’s smile drops away. He dismisses the two other ninja at the desk and waits until they’ve left before dropping his elbows on the table in front of him and lacing his fingers together.

“Is something the matter?”

“Yes” Ryouta growls, at the same time Iruka says; “No, not at all.”

The Chunin elbows Ryouta hard in the ribs, up and under and right into the diaphragm so that he’s forced to exhale all at once. “We’ve had this argument already, Ikari-san.” Iruka growls behind a smile bared like a bite. “Do you honestly want someone else to have the position?”

“There is no one else.” Ryouta returns harshly. “All the other surgeons have air for brains. And Shiki is still on active duty so it’s not like he can do it.”

“The two other ninja at the desk and waits until they’ve left before dropping his elbows on the table in front of him and lacing his fingers together.

“Is something the matter?”

“Would either of you care to inform me of what’s going on?” Sarutobi asks with worn patience.

“We have some legal documents that need to be approved and that need your seal as well.”

Hiruzen sits up straighter, wincing when his back cracks in several places it really shouldn’t. He’s too old for this. He was too old for this ten years ago. “Legal forms?”

“Guardianship.” Iruka clarifies. “And designated physician.”

“For Naruto, I presume?” Sarutobi guesses. “I assumed Kakashi would have been the one to approach me about this.”
“Naruto and Sasuke both, actually. And technically these are Kakashi’s forms.” Iruka corrects.

“They already have all the necessary signatures, he’s just being a coward about it. He also made the mistake of putting my name down as the secondary, so I have just as much right to bring them in as he does.”

Sarutobi manages a laugh. “Hardly surprising. Though this is very unlike you, Ryouta.”

“They grow on you.” The surgeon growls. “Like parasitic fungus.”

“Iruka chuckles. “He’s just mad because they’re constantly ruining his reputation as a hardass.”

Ryouta actually smirks at that. “Yeah sure, the new nurses stop taking me seriously when they realize I regularly teach a tiny pink-haired Genin and her brothers, and then they realize she can cave their skulls in without even channeling chakra and they generally shut up.”

Hiruzen flips through the papers Iruka sets in front of him, him, flicking his eyes past the repetitive legal script to the places where the names need to be signed. The forms are filled out impeccably of course, and he stamps each form with his seal readily. “The physician forms are for the whole of team seven, I presume.”

Ryouta nods and sets his own smart stack of files at the Hokage’s elbow for him to sign off on.

“Jutsu non-disclosure agreements?” he wonders allowed.

Ryouta blinks. “Well yeah. Pretty standard, right?”

“For Tokujo and above maybe.”

The surgeon just shrugs. “Consider it preemptive then.”

“...Fair enough.”

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“So the blonde brat has his mother’s chakra.” Ryouta tells Iruka quite out of nowhere as they’re walking back down the halls of the Hokage tower.

“Beg pardon?”

Ryouta sighs. “Uzumaki Naruto has inherited all the chakric qualities of Uzumaki Kushina.” he repeats slowly. “His chakra is three and a half times denser than normal. And, just like the fourth Hokage, it possesses double the energy output.”

“How do you know that?” Iruka questions.

At that Ryouta sighs again, and recounts a day three weeks prior.

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“I don’t get it.” Ryouta mutters to himself as he stares down at the Uzumaki brat, flanked as always by his menacing little Uchiha shadow.

If Ryouta didn’t know any better he would say the dark haired brat looked bored, sitting on one of the wide window sills in his office and glaring at his practice work, but by now he’s learned that it’s really just his face.

Uzumaki has a hard furrow in his brow from concentration, but he has yet to mend any of the pork bones they’ve been using for practice, and Uchiha is already halfway through.

“So you have no issues waterwalking or flash channeling chakra in your jutsu?”

Naruto shakes his head. “Not even a little.”

“And no problems bending the chakra in those squiggly little seals of yours?”

“Nope.” he replies unhesitant, cheekily popping the ‘p’ in the word.

Ryouta grumbles, leaning sideways and bending a little around a stack of binders on his office floor to get at the top drawer of his desk, skimming his fingers over the contents until he finds the jagged shape of the object he’s looking for. He yanks from the drawer’s depths a chunk of chakra laced quartz, as long as his palm and half as wide, and drops it into Naruto’s palm.

“Charge that with chakra for me, kid. And just yours, none of your demon friend’s.”

The brat shrugs and does as he’s told, pressing the hunk of crystal between his palms. The quartz changes from foggy and colorless to clear sapphire in seconds, a deep rich blue so potent that it seems to cast it’s own light.

The Uchiha stops what he’s doing, leaving a pig femur half cracked to lean over Uzumaki’s shoulder and eye the crystal with interest. “Is chakra supposed to be that colour?”

“Plain unfiltered central chakra is typically light blue.” Ryouta says in answer, reaching out for the crystal.

Naruto drops it back into his hand and Ryouta is surprised when the thing is several times heavier than it was when he first handed it over, like it’s made of lead instead of crystal quartz.

“One sec.” He tells his impromptu students, and then gets up to go yell down the hall.

“SHIKI.”

“WHAT.” his secretary shouts back, voice echoing from inside one of the Jounin grade patient rooms at the end of the wing.

“GET OVER HERE.”

“I’M WORKING, IKARI. UNLIKE SOME PEOPLE.”

“JUST GET OVER HERE I NEED A PROFESSIONAL OPINION.”

Senri relents with a sigh Ryouta can hear clear down the hall and ventures from the room, tapping his clipboard crossly against his hip. “Get one of the other surgeons to help you then. Why are you bothering me?”

“I need a sensor-nin’s opinion.”
Shiki blinks, looking at him skeptically over the bridge of his glasses like some sort of cross librarian that’s just caught him trying to smuggle old jutsu books into his bag, and Ryouta is reminded vividly of the first time they met. “What the hell for?” Shiki mutters.

Ryouta rolls his eyes. “Just get over here, will you? It’ll only take a second.”

Shiki just glares and taps his foot in agitation for another long second, but then he gives in and heads down the hall. Ryouta tosses him the crystal when he gets close. “What do you make of that?”

Shiki blinks down at the bright blue crystal as he walks, flicking his glasses up to sit atop his head as he turns the corner into Ryouta’s office.

“Dense.” is the first word out of his mouth as he turns the crystal back and forth in his long fingers. “Three fold and then some the density of regular chakra. High rate of energy enrichment, starburst patterned emission, high yang concentration, 2:1 ratio against yin.” He looks up and catches sight of Naruto and Sasuke sitting together on the floor and raises an eyebrow. “Yours, I take it?”

Naruto nods. “What’s wrong with it?”

Shiki turns back to Ryouta. “You’re teaching him medical-ninjutsu?”

“Osteo repair, specifically.” Ryouta affirms.

“There’s nothing wrong with you, kiddo.” Shiki tells the young Uzumaki. “You’re having trouble because you’re trying to channel a waterfall through a sink faucet.”

“Um… what?”

Shiki cocks his hip against the wall and holds the chakra charged crystal up to the light. “Most medical-ninjutsu requires you to condense chakra down into a fine point before putting it to use. In your case, you’re trying to press something dense into an already smaller form– like trying to force more water through a sink faucet already turned on full blast.”

“So if he skips the condensing step, it’ll work?” The question comes from Sasuke, who had up until that point been quiet.

“In theory.” Shiki agrees. “Though you might still have to tune the density by smaller measures to get the consistency you want.”

“Oh, well that’s easy.” Naruto exclaims, already flicking his fingers through the hand signs of the jutsu to try again. “I have to tune consistency all the time in seals.”

Shiki grins. “Then you should have no problem then.” He turns to Ryouta. “Can I go back to work now?”

“When have you ever asked my permission for anything?” Ryouta points out.

Shiki just rolls his eyes and turns to leave.

“Thanks, Senri.” Ryouta adds quietly as he leaves.

“Yeah, yeah.”

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“I had no idea.” Iruka mutters. “That’s why he had so much trouble with genjutsu– his chakra is too heavy.” He tilts his head, stops in the middle of the hallway to face Ryouta. “Why are you only telling me this now?”

The surgeon shrugs. “You’re his secondary guardian now, officially, so you should know. It’s also a health concern if he ever needs a chakra transfusion, as unlikely as that is given the presence of the Kyuubi. There’s also another thing you should know– you and Kakashi both.”

“Is something wrong?” Iruka has to ask– Naruto has always been family to him, and he and Sasuke have been through quite enough as it is…

“Not wrong, not necessarily, but something of possible future concern.”

“What is it?” he insists, not liking Ryouta’s change in body language from idle to serious.

“Well, after the issue with Uzumaki’s chakra, I ordered chakra composition tests on all three of the brats. Naruto and Sasuke’s chakra both share some… disturbingly similar traits.”

“What kind of traits?”

Ryouta hums and rubs his fingers together as if searching for a place to start. “There are a handful of markers that… reflect one another. Naruto’s Yang-Yin chakra ratio is 2-1. Sasuke’s is 1-2. Naruto’s chakra is high density, low emission; Sasuke’s is low density high emission. Sasuke’s outward flow tends to rotate clockwise, Naruto’s counterclockwise. Little things like that.”

Iruka blinks. “Is that a problem? Couldn’t that just be a result of training in such close proximity all the time?”

Ryouta shakes his head. “Maybe if it were just a single, isolated set of traits, but this is too much to be a coincidence.” Ryouta pauses and meets Iruka’s eyes firmly. “Now this is just a guess, mind you, but I think they might be Kindred Markers.”

Iruka blinks a few times, then scoffs out a disbelieving laugh. “Kindred? As in Kindred Pair? That’s a myth.”

“Namikaze Minato and Uzumaki Kushina were a Kindred Pair.” Ryouta informs him, completely serious, not even a hint of mirth in his eyes, no sign of teasing.

Iruka stops laughing. “You’re joking.”

Ryouta shakes his head. “It wasn’t widely known, but those close to them knew. Kakashi knew; and the old man.”

“But isn’t a fully developed Kindred Pair a–”


Iruka remembers suddenly the reports from the third war, the way a single man and woman struck absolute terror into the hearts of entire armies worth of hardened shinobi. “That… actually makes disturbing amounts of sense.”

“Well, nothing is for certain yet.” Ryouta reminds him. “I just thought you should know that it’s a possibility. It’s impossible to know for sure until they’re older.”

“I’ll keep an eye out if you will.” Iruka promises.
Ryouta manages a smile. “Deal.”
The Strength of Three

Chapter Notes

I know I know I'm a terrible human and hello July I haven't updated in a month whoops.
Long story short, family emergency.
Something I should probably clarify just in case there are doubts: I will not be abandoning this story at any point in time. This is the longest I will probably ever go between posts (baring emergencies I cannot actually predict the future I'm not quite that awesome)
That being said? You guys are still awesome and your comments bring me LIFE.
Also, but of a consolation, this chapter is the longest I've written so far, 15 pages compared to my usual 6-9, so enjoy. Next chapter will cover the exam parts one and two so be prepared for that baby badasses tag to be in effect.
Orochimaru is in for one nasty surprise...

I Regret Nothing

Sakura drums her fingers restlessly on the thick railing of the Knife Runner, a large elongated ship as pointed as it’s name, and gazes out at the docks and through the colourful packs of Tea country merchants and noblemen in search of the distinctive heads and backs of her teammates.

“Take a breath, Sakura. You’re wearing ridges in the ship.” Kakashi-sensei chastises from behind her.

Sakura starts a little, lifting her hand from the railing, and finds she has in fact left rather deep divots in the mahogany the precise size and shape of her fingers. “Sorry, sensei. Just restless.”

“Not to mention bored.” Kakashi muses. He’s leaning against the foremast with his face buried in his social barrier of cheap porn. Sakura has to admit that the ruse works well– not a single shiphand or nobleborn passenger has had the nerve to approach him yet, though if anyone actually bothered to look, they would notice that he hasn’t turned a page in over an hour.

“They’re stupid late.” Sakura whines. “And I’m starving.”

Kakashi gives the sky a contemplative glance. “The delegation should be here soon. If they don’t hurry, the ship is going to leave before they get back.”

Sakura slumps against the railing dejectedly. “I just want my pork buns and dango.” She grumbles.

“I’m sure they won’t be much longer.” Kakashi assures her, though he must be just as hungry as she is if not more so– at least she’d had breakfast before they’d left, Kakashi-sensei had been too busy feeding both them and the ninjen to manage the same for himself.

“They better not be.” She growls, her stomach rumbling again for her attention.

The four of them have only been in Tea Country for a day and a half and Sakura doesn’t exactly hate the place. Tamakai city houses the largest port in the whole of the country, curling out into
the pale green of the shallow sea that frames Tea Country on all sides. Its broad plazas and lanes host a wide array of shops and parlors, all selling goods from across the sea. As one of the rare neutral zones, Tea country is free to trade with most of the major elemental countries, and as a result boasts everything from fine silks and textiles to exotic cuisine. Protected by a rotation of contracted ninja that changes every few months to ensure equality and reduce the chances of corruption and espionage, Tamakai is terribly peaceful.

And terribly boring.

“Sakura.” Kakashi-sensei says her name soft and sharp, a call for her attention, and Sakura turns immediately, directing her gaze to match the focus of her sensei’s. There’s a ship coming into harbor, an elaborate construct of painted wood in rich red and deep dark navy. It’s sails are thickly waxed and layered paper instead of cloth, reinforced by horizontal bamboo slats. It’s a type of ship common to the far south, and now that she gets a good look at it she can tell why the delegation had chosen to change ships at dock– unlike the *Knife Runner*, this elaborate ship has few defences, and those it does have are ill equipped to deal with the kind of assault it’s likely to find in ninja-controlled waters.

It had been decided before they were even assigned the mission that the delegation would take ship almost the whole way to fire country– a ship at sea is far easier to defend from attack than a caravan on land, and the trade agreements that the delegation is apparently carrying are worth a great deal to the fire daimyo– as well as any major elemental country that could get ahold of them.

“Well isn’t that pretentious.” She mutters.

“Best not say that in their company, cub.” Kakashi reminds her. “They are guests of the daimyo after all.”

“And obviously used to being treated like royalty.”

Kakashi just gives her a look, and Sakura sighs.

“Oh fine, I’ll keep my snark to myself.” she concedes.

“Only while they’re in earshot.” he assures her amicably. “Though this does mean that the boys are officially ‘stupid late.’”

“What is taking them so long? They stopped to go shopping I’ll bet you. Sasuke’ll blow our whole budget if left unchecked.”

“Not with Naruto there he won’t.” Kakashi disagrees, standing straight and snapping his book shut. “Either way we don’t have time to wait for them. Come on.”

Sakura sighs and follows Kakashi over the ship railing and onto the dock to greet the ship as it pulls in. Deckhands swarm the riggings of the ship, scampering over the netting and up along the yardarms, pulling in the sails and gliding the opulent ship into harbor. Now that the people aboard no longer look the size of ants, Sakura can see that the delegation has arrived with a company of soldiers, a dozen men in fancy-ass lacquered armor that screams *private guard*.

“They do realize that’s not going to do them any good, right?” Sakura mutters.

“The Yucheng archipelago and it’s dynasty operate too far south into the Jade sea to have any real interaction with the elemental countries.” Kakashi explains. “They’ve recently expanded a great deal north, and are here to offer these trade agreements in exchange for Konoha’s protection against Kiri raids.”
“And their contact with actual ninja?” Sakura asks.

Kakashi laughs. “Minimal.”

“Great.” she grumbles.

“Consider it an exercise in patience.”

Sakura is halfway to some kind of witty comment, but snaps her mouth shut before she can voice it.

The ship slides to a stop before them, settling into dock with a rush of parting water, and a gangplank descends to rest on the boards a few meters in front of them.

Almost immediately a pint sized rocket comes barreling down the ramp, dark haired and blue cland and giggling madly. He’s followed immediately by two armoured guards shouting expletives and clomping at the kid’s heels.

“Young master!” shouts the first down the ramp, an older man with thinning hair and a pointed goatee, but the speeding boy pays him no heed, giggling madly and spinning in circles across the dock like a mad windmill, uncaring of the thin breadth of the dock and the fact that if he spins much further he’ll take a header right off the edge and into the water.

He does however have the good fortune of whirling right past Kakashi, who is used to reacting to and wrangling up much rowdier brats than a hyper four-year-old. He snags the kid by the back of his dark blue embroidered changshan tunic with two fingers, pulling him from the edge and setting him safely back on the planks.

“Bohai!”

The little kid whips around to face another form standing at the top of the gangplank, a young man in a golden tunic with the same dark hair and pale green eyes, no more than a handful of years older than Sakura.

“Apologies, young lord.” The elder guard sounds exasperated, like it isn’t the first time this has occurred. “We only took our eyes off him for a moment.”

“You can’t take your eyes off him at all.” The young man growls as he stomps down the gangplank. “A moment is all it takes. Bohai, come here.”

The kid shrieks “GEGE!” and bolts back up the gangplank to meet who must be his brother halfway.

“You must be Jinhai.” Kakashi states as the young man lifts his little brother onto his hip, and Bohai entertains himself by playing with his brother’s dark hair, spinning it into messy braids.

“I am,” the young man replies, looking the faintest bit uncomfortable. “And you are Hatake, I presume. I was told there would be more of you.”

“The rest of our team will be back soon.” Kakashi assures. “Their absence will not interfere with the departure time.”

Jinhai nods, looking vaguely confused as his eyes track from Kakashi to Sakura and back up again. “Very well. We will need an hour or so to transfer our supplies, after which we may depart.”
“Sakura is going to kill us.” Naruto mutters, but doesn’t look away from the shop window any more than Sasuke does.

“She’ll thank us later.” Sasuke insists. “We’re not going to get another chance to come back here until after the Chunin exams.”

Tamakai is a treasure trove of non-native goods, and includes several shops selling items native to the other four elemental countries—rugs and textiles from Suna, silks and art from Kumo, metals and jewelry from Iwa. So far they’ve found Sakura a pair of elegant scale metal cestuses and a set of crystal edge scalpels they plan on saving for her next birthday. They’ve gotten Shikamaru a new set of simple obsidian and gold earrings capable of chakra storage (he’s not vain enough Sasuke, they have to be useful), Kiba some thick leather Katsu armbands, Ino some abalone hairsticks meant to hide half a dozen senbon apiece (It’s subtle Naruto, I don’t expect you to understand the concept), Choji a set of shinobi cookbooks with recipes to boost stamina and improve muscle mass, Shino a pair of metal insect chakra constructs that can be used for surveillance, and Hinata an elegant silk and steel black obi, embroidered with pearlescent Hyuuga white and thick enough to stop a kunai.

Sasuke has not-so secretly been looking for something that suits his idiot– ideally something protective that’s going to be useful for the upcoming exams, but so far, even with all the abundance of Tamakai, he’s come up short.

“We can’t be out much longer or the freaking ship is going to leave without us.” Naruto reminds him for the third time in an hour.

“We’ll catch up to it.” Sasuke argues. “Come on, this way.”

“Jerk…” Naruto mutters as he’s yanked down another side street, but at this point it’s a token resistance at most.

“If we’re getting something for literally everyone we know then we’re getting something for ourselves too.” Sasuke mutters as they enter another shop.

“I don’t see the point.” Naruto counters. “Besides, we still need to get things for Iruka-sensei and Kakashi-sensei. And it’s impossible to shop for Kakashi-sensei. Not to mention that if we don’t actually get Sakura her pork buns she will actually kill us.”

Sasuke just huffs, blowing a strand of his raven hair out of his eyes with the breath. “Details.”

“Something I can help you with?”

The irritated snap of a sentence startles Jinhai out of his idle staring– he had been looking around for the white-haired man, the shinobi, and lost track of his thoughts trying to wrap his head around the pink haired girl leaning easily against the starboard railing. Surely someone had screwed up with the missives somewhere, because Jinhai doesn’t understand how a girl several years younger than himself could be part of the team responsible for the entire vessel while in enemy waters. Though despite her age and stature there is iron in her eyes and sureness in her body language that confuses him– surely someone so young could not have so much steel in their spine.
“I was looking for your commander.” Jinhai admits after a long pause.

“Commander?” She questions with a tilt of her head. “You mean Kakashi-sensei? He was talking to the captain last I saw. I think we’re shipping out here in a minute.”

Jinhai blinks at her. “So soon? We only just got settled. And are we not still short half your team?”

The girl dismisses his worries with a negligent shrug. “The boys will catch up. Besides, it’s best to leave as soon as possible. The longer we sit here the longer your delegation has a target on their back.”

“Catch up? How on earth–”

“ANCHORS AWAY! ALL HANDS TO SAILS.”

Jinhai is startled out of his sentence by shouts and flurries of movement as the deckhands swarm the rigging and masts, going through the motions of pulling the ship from dock. One of the deckhands waves over at them, one arm tangled in the rigging and both feet planted on the side of the mast.

“Miss Sakura! Would you mind giving us a hand with the main lines? We can shave at least twenty minutes of fumbling with your assistance!”

The girl gives the man a quick cut smile. “Sure thing Sato, I’ll be right up!” she then turns back to Jinhai and points towards the back of the ship. “Kakashi-sensei is aft. If you need anything else, best ask him.”

She doesn’t so much as hesitate for a reply before she’s bounding away, there and gone so quickly it leaves Jinhai blinking after her.

He stops to check on Bohai before heading that way, mildly comforted to find him absorbed in chasing wooden dice and thoroughly interfering with his men’s gambling. His guard captain gives him a diligent nod after noting his presence, and then returns to watching the youngest of the royal family steal all his winning rolls.

He finds the shinobi commander right where the girl said he’d be, leaning casually against the aft rail and speaking lowly with the older woman that Jinhai knows to be the ship’s captain. The white-haired man’s single visible eye flicks to him once and then flicks back to the captain without breaking conversation or focus, so quickly that the captain herself doesn’t seem to notice the momentary division of attention at all.

“We’ll have the tahou cannons armed and ready before we reach full sail into the gulf.” the captain is saying.

“Thank you, though it should be an unnecessary precaution.” the commander responds with a respectful nod.

The woman shrugs. “Helps calm my nerves if nothing else.” At that moment the woman turns her head and notices Jinhai over a well muscled shoulder. She gives a small nod, though Jinhai can’t tell if it’s and idle motion or something directed at him, and then turns back to Hatake. “I’ll let you get back to it. Holler if ya need anythin’.”

“Noted. Thank you captain.”

The woman waves off the pleasantries and strides away in the direction of the foresail, already
shouting orders and expletives at the deckhands, her feet sure on the already swaying deck.

“Lord Jinhai.” The man addresses politely. “Is there something I can help you with?”

“I wanted to formally apologize for my mother’s inability to travel here in person. I’m aware this could… complicate things.”

The shinobi tilts his head, meeting his gaze levelly. “And why is that?”

Jinhai blinks up at the man, taken aback. He has always been tall and lanky for his age— even at sixteen he can match most of his guardsmen centimeter for centimeter, but this man seems to tower over him, even if the true difference in their heights isn’t that great. “Excuse me?”

“If you are expecting your age to bother me, it does not. So long as you prove to be competent, things should go quite smoothly.”

Jinhai finds himself standing even straighter despite the words. “That is an… uncommon philosophy to have.” He finds himself saying after a moment.

“Not at all.” Hatake disagrees. “You’ll find it’s a common one in the elemental countries. Though I’ll admit I was not expecting you to bring a four-year-old along for a diplomatic mission that could potentially place you in danger.”

Jinhai grimaces. “I’m afraid there wasn’t much of a choice. Our mother is not capable of caring for him in her current state of illness, and Bohai has a… talent for escaping his caretakers.”

“So I’ve begun to notice.” Hatake drawls. “In fact I’m surprised he hasn’t yet managed to get himself hurt.”

“Yes well, along with having uncanny energy, Bohai also happens to have the luck of the devil.”

That startles a soft laugh out of the shinobi. “Well I hope that luck holds. And speaking of the devil.” The man lifts a hand to point over Jinhai’s shoulder, and when he turns his stomach drops clear through the deck.

Bohai it walking along the portside railing, arms outstretched on either side of him, giggling each time he wobbles in his steps.

“BOHAI!”

Before he can bolt across the deck a firm hand grips his arm. “Calm down. He’s not in any danger.” Hatake tries to assure, but Jinhai is already panicking.

“What do you mean not in danger!? He’s– Bohai!”

But it’s too late, Bohai wobbles too far, his tiny chubby arms flapping for balance, and he’s too far, Jinhai won’t make it–

This time when he lunges forward Hatake lets him go, and he sprints across the deck as fast as his legs can carry him, throwing his torso over the railing to search the water for Bohai’s blue tunic. But he sees nothing, only wave upon wave of clear turquoise water, not a wisp of navy or flash of gold.

For several heartbeats he can’t even move, can’t even breathe, and then suddenly he does see gold— not in the water but at the corner of his eye, and–
“Um, somebody lose something?” says a voice out of nowhere, followed by a high-pitched giggle Jinhai knows very well.

He turns and finds a young man perched on the rail, soaked to skin and sitting casually back on his haunches. He has golden hair and eyes like jewels, and he also has Bohai draped casually over one shoulder, laughing maniacally.

The boy shifts Bohai so that he falls forward, checked only by the wrap of an arm around the four-year-old’s knees at his shoulder. Bohai, obviously convinced this is some kind of fun new game, shrieks in delight as he’s tipped upside down. “This yours?” the boy asks dryly.

Much to Jinhai’s embarrassment, the first words out of his mouth is not a question as to his brother’s safety, or even an exclamation of surprise, instead he asks— “How on earth did you get here when we’re at full sail?”

“We walked.” The boy says as if that’s a perfectly reasonable answer. “Or ran, I guess. We’re kind of running late. You seen our teammate? Angry? Pink hair? Sorta hard to miss?”

“She’s helping the deckhands… I think.” Jinhai responds in a daze, just as Bohai squeaks out an enthusiastic; “Gege!”

Jinhai takes his baby brother from the young man with some rather awkward maneuvering, just as another boy lands beside the first. This one is dark where the other is bright, with back hair and black eyes and a dark expression as he jostles his companion enough to almost send him overboard again. He’s noticeably dryer than his friend, and is carrying several bags filled with something savory that Jinhai can smell from where he’s standing.

“Hurry up idiot.” The dark one growls. “There’s not enough room here for two.”

“Well no one asked you to land right up here with me.” The bright one snaps back.

" YOU JERKS! "

As one the two boys freeze where they are with their eyes fixed somewhere over Jinhai’s head. When he turns he sees the pink haired girl so visibly livid Jinhai could swear she’s steaming, and he only barely has the presence of mind to duck before she launches herself over the railing and tackles both boys back down into the water.

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“I hope we’ve learned a valuable lesson from this experience.”

“Sensei, if you’re going to say something about ‘not being late’ I’m going to call you on the hypocrisy right now.”

“Of course not. But leaving your teammate to starve while you went shopping was poor judgment.”

“We brought like six extra servings of pork buns, and apologised, and dango .” Naruto counters.

Despite this Sakura still hasn’t spoken a word to them since they returned, in fact she hasn’t even stopped stuffing her face with meat buns since they sat down. She’s halfway through Naruto’s portion already, but he’s not stupid enough to say anything until she’s finished.
Kakashi-sensei has eaten his portion already, as usual while everyone had their backs turned or were otherwise occupied. “What were to two up to, anyway?” he asks.


Naruto leans around Sasuke’s back to send a glare at Sakura. “Come on, you can’t stay pissed at us forever.”

She just takes another vindictive bite out of one of Naruto’s pork buns and glares right back. “Watch me, Uzumaki. Three hours. Three .”

“We apologized. And brought you four flavors of dango.”

Sakura narrows her eyes and peers hesitantly at the bag just past Naruto’s knees. “Did you get the sweet red bean kind?”

Naruto snorts. “Of course I did, what do you take me for, some kind of heathen?”

“... You can have your pork buns back.”

They get attacked by pirates like, twelve minutes later.

Sakura is still cranky enough about the pork buns to break their ship with her bare hands.

Kakashi-sensei says it’s better that she break an enemy ship with a chakra charged right hook than the one they’re currently standing on, and Naruto is inclined to agree.

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Shikamaru sits cross-legged in the center of the room, his hands steepled in front of him, forefingers pressed against his mouth in concentration as he thinks. The Black Temple seems finished, for all intents and purposes. The walls are riddled with the elegant tracework of Naruto’s seals, improvements to the chakra flow and regulation systems already built into the walls by old masters that predated the second Great War. Shikamaru has learned a great deal from this room over the last few weeks alone; it has five rooms in total, the main room in which he is sitting, and four smaller ones that flare out in the cardinal directions, each one named for one of the Four Heavenly Kings of Buddhism.

The first room, just past the entryway to the east, is the Jikoku room, which they’ve taken to calling the White room. It’s a place of purification and cleansing, a sauna-esque chamber meant to purge contaminants and impurities from mind, body, and chakra. The second room going clockwise is the Zojo-ten room to the south, also known as the Blue room, for setting growth and conditioning. The third is the western Komoku-ten room, or Red room, for improvement of the five special senses. The fourth is the northern room of Bishamonten, the Green room, for improvement of the spatial and chakra senses.

The central room, the one in which he’s sitting, is simply called the Gold room, a wide circular space host to twelve deep oval basins sunken into the floor, arranged in a flowering pattern
consisting of an inner and outer ring. Each basin serves a specific function, only five of which Shikamaru has been able to work out so far, all in the outer ring.

He’s musing over the sixth when a sound brings his attention away from his thoughts, steady steps through the entranceway and the soothing support of a chakra signature Shikamaru knows very well.

“You still stewing over this puzzle?” Choji asks with a laugh, stepping around the outer ring of basins towards him.

Shikamaru huffs a breath and drops his hands into his lap. “Something about this room is bothering me.” He admits to his friend. “I feel like I’m missing something.”

“Well take a brain break, yeah? I brought lunch.”

Chojis takes a seat in front of him and produces a bag of takeout that Shikamaru recognizes as being from a kebab place on the market square. It only takes one deep inhale for Shikamaru to realize he’s starving.

“You’re a lifesaver.” He says with feeling as Choji hands him a carton. “How’s Ino doing?”

“Still swinging her giant cleaver around. I think she’s in love.”

“Whatever makes her happy.” Shikamaru mutters, mostly to himself, and reaches for a skewer.

He’s halfway through a kebab before he has the self-awareness to notice Choji staring at him. He immediately checks his mouth in case he’s gotten sauce on his cheek or something, but he finds no evidence of a mess and Choji is still staring. “What?”

Chojis just shakes his head, a weird little half-grin on his face, and says “Nothing.”

He goes back to inhaling a steak kebab and Shikamaru doesn’t question it further.

“So,” Choji asks when they’re finished. “What’s tripping you up about this place now? You got the side rooms figured out pretty easily.”

“Naruto helped. And the directional rooms weren’t as complex.” Shikamaru explains. “I think they all feed into this room somehow, but I’m not sure how, or why.”

“What about the basins you got working?”

Shikamaru leans back on his forearms, eyeing the Ivory basin on his left. “I managed to figure out that some of them are meant to help regenerate and strengthen certain types of tissues; bone, tendon, muscle, that kind of thing. The inner six might have something to do with chakra, but I’d need the sharingan to get a read on the components in the walls.”

“Then we wait for the monster triad to come back.” Choji suggests easily. “Most of it is working right? The rest can wait until after the exams.”

Shikamaru sighs and rubs a knuckle between his brows. “You’re right.” He admits. “How was ‘breathing practice’?”

“Genma-san’s a hardass.” Choji complains, flexing a hand. “But you can’t argue with the results.”

“No you can’t.” Shikamaru agrees. Choji looks sturdier, more muscle and less pudge, though still with the healthy heft of his Akimichi energy stores. Combining the natural force of Choji’s hits
with the calm power and rhythm of the breathwork has turned even his regular punches into a force of nature.

Shikamaru finishes his meal and Choji waits patiently as he does, since his portion has already been reduced to the pointed skewers the Akimichi is currently using to absently clean his teeth.

“Is team 8 In-village currently?” Shikamaru asks, packing up the trash from their meal back into the bags for easy disposal.

“Got back yesterday.” Choji answers. “Smash and grab on the Grass country border, I think.”

“Good, I’ve been sitting too long. I think I’ll have it out with Kiba before we meet up with Ino for gift shopping.”

“We should have time.” Choji assures him, chewing absently on the end of one of his skewers, probably still hungry if Shikamaru had to guess, which he really doesn’t. “Ino won’t be done for another few hours. Why Kiba? I thought you and Shino have been sparring lately.”

“Shino’s endurance and mine are about the same. I need to work on it, and Kiba’s got more reserves.”

“Hinata’s reserves are better than Kiba’s.” Choji points out.

“Yeah, but she’s been dealing with clan shit all week, so I’m not going to bother her. Plus, taijutsu on taijutsu Hinata would kill me.”

Choji gives a hearty laugh at that. “I don’t know, brother. You’re still a hell of a lot faster.”

“Yeah well she only has to catch me once for me to be dead.”

Choji dissolves into laughter and Shikamaru rolls his eyes to cover the fond quirk of his lips.

He leans back and away and clears a space on the floor. Then he sinks a canine into the side of his thumb, flicks his fingers through a handful of signs, and presses his hand to the smooth polished floor. A low haunting hum and a swirl of misty silver later Veylan stands before him, eye to eye, large cupped ears flicking side to side. She’s lost a few of her spots already and has grown into her long limbs a little, but for the most part she’s still a fawn, hardly three feet at the shoulder. Despite her age and size she’s as quick as a dart and as agile as any feline, capable of cutting corners and scaling cliff faces just as fast as Ino’s squirrelly little leopard things, the Zheng. But Veylan suits him just like the Zheng suit Ino and Choji’s Nian suit him– large, plate armoured, bearlike, and sweethearts right up until you corner them or something they care about, and then you end up as a neat red smear on the pavement.

“Shikamaru-sama!” Veylan greets cheerfully, tucking around him to nuzzle her nose against his temple. He strokes a hand down her neck, with the grain of her soft fog-like fur.

“Hey kiddo. Can you do me quick favor?”

“Of course.” Veylan agrees readily. Whipping around and shifting restlessly foot to foot, awaiting orders.

“Can you run down Kiba for me? You remember Kiba.”

“The jackal boy with the red fang markings? Yes I remember. Would you like me to bring him a message?”
“Tell him to meet me on training ground nine if he’s not busy or exhausted.”

“Are we sparring?” The young wraith hart questions excitedly. “I love sparring.”

“Sure are. Let’s give Kiba and Shasa a good run around, yeah?”

“Oh absolutely.” Veylan agrees with a lot of predatory glee for a herbivore. “I’ll find you on the training ground!” She’s gone then in a puff of greyish smoke, and Choji is chuckling.

“So much energy. All her brothers and sisters are so calm.”

“She’s still just a kid, she’s allowed to be excited about little things.” Shikamaru defends as he stands.

“True, true.” Choji agrees and follows. ‘I’ll probably go train with Ino for a bit. I’ll come get you when we’re done.”

“Sounds good, we should be long finished by then.”

Kiba and Shikamaru are not done sparring by the time Choji and Ino find them on training ground nine. Ino has her shiny new nagamaki balanced against her shoulder, and she hasn’t stopped talking about it since Choji came to pick her up.

“I just love the balance of it! It’s got all the heft and grace of a naginata with twice the blade, and it just, works, you know? I don’t know what I was thinking not picking one up before now, and Hayate-san is an awesome teacher, even if he has to take breaks every now and then…”

Choji has always prided himself on being a good listener, and so long as that smile stays bright on Ino’s face, he’ll sit here and listen to her talk about steel quality and aerodynamics for the rest of the day.

They both have to duck as the enter the training ground when Akamaru goes flying over their heads, a tiny white ninken leading a pack of vicious looking blood jackals anywhere from two to four times his size.

“I see Kiba upped his summons count again.” Ino comments blithely.

“He’s not the only one.” Choji points out, gesturing to the trees around them. If he concentrates he can spot the myriad of dark ghostly harts and hinds darting back and forth in the trees, outrunning and cutting around the jackals. Even though the jackals do still outnumber the wraith harts, several of Shikamaru’s summons are almost fully grown, with racks of wicked sharp horns and hooves capable of denting steel.

Shadow ripples and flexes to their right and Shikamaru materializes as though stepping out from behind a curtain. He has a wickedly long trench knife gripped in each hand– the right protects Shikamaru’s knuckles with a serrated cage, and the left is equipped with a sword-breaker extension on the handle, which, with the right application of angle and force, can shatter steel and disarm kunai.

He touches down for maybe half a second before he bounds away off into the dark again, pulling shadow up around him once more, slipping it on like a familiar coat and vanishing inside it. Seconds later Kiba crashes through the brush and lands on all fours with a snarl, head on the swivel. He’s in full beast mode, eyes slit-pupiled and fingernails curled into thick razor claws.
“Slippery bastard.” He growls, voice a hair too low for human vocal chords, but he sits still long enough for Choji’s wave to actually catch his attention.

The Inuzuka blinks at him and Choji can practically see the mental backtrack out of Hunter Mode; his pupils expand to normal human width again, his ragged chakra softens and smooths, the hair on the back of his neck drops from its bristle.

“Oh. Hey Choji. Ino. What’re you doin here?”

“That’s not a bad idea. Sasuke gave me some of their modified shuriken and I’ve been meaning to pay him back.”

“Wanna come? We can make an evening out of it.” Ino suggests, twirling her nagamaki and then settling it against her opposite shoulder.

Before Kiba can open his mouth to reply Shikamaru drops out of nowhere to land feet first on Kiba’s back, knocking the breath out of his chest with a grunt and pushing him face-first flat into the grass.

“Watch your back, Inuzuka.” Shikamaru chastises with small cut of a smirk.

Kiba’s first response is an unintelligible string of rumbling snarls, and his second is a very clear mutter of “Stupid sneaky Nara.”

Shikamaru looks up at his teammates boredly, not bothering to relieve his weight from Kiba’s back. “Don’t forget we should get something for Asuma-sensei too.”

Kiba turns his head enough to glare up at Shikamaru. “If you’d get off me, I could get Hinata and Shino and we could all go together.”

“Magic word?”

“Now.”

Shikamaru’s smirk flashes wider in amusement but he straightens out of his crouch and steps off Kiba’s spine, just as Akamaru comes flashing through the trees with his pack of jackals. He runs up to Kiba and gives his face a long lick, and Kiba laughs wryly as he pushes himself up out of the dirt.

“Little late for a rescue, bud. But good try.”

Akamaru yips and dives into Kiba’s sweatshirt, dark grey trimmed with red and relatively new, a gift from his sister when he ruined his old one. Shasa skids to sit at Kiba’s heels, tail on the wag, followed closely by six of his siblings— four brothers around his size and two sisters twice that.

Shikamaru’s summons also step to the Nara’s side, the first of which is Ravain, a dark coloured hart that is the largest of Shika’s current summons— a reserved male with charcoal fur trailing ghostly smoke in iridescent green.

He’s also the only one of Shikamaru’s summons to bear a full rack of dagger-sharp horns,
branching in curled points above the beast’s head. He’s a bit taller than Shikamaru, and he dips his large head over the Nara’s shoulder for a neck scratch, which Shikamaru obliges.

“Are we finished for the day?” He asks his summoner, and Shikamaru nods.

“You’re free to go. Thank you.”

“Of course. If you need us again don’t hesitate.”

“Of course.” Shika parrots, and the wraith harts dismiss themselves in a puff of silver fog.

Kiba’s blood jackals wrestle with him a little and then dismiss themselves as well, leaving him covered in mismatched fur and red on the arms from play-bites and scratching.

They pick up Shino from the jutsu library and Hinata from her family compound. Choji waits outside the property line with Shikamaru and Ino while Kiba and Shino run in to get her. By the frustrated look on Hinata’s face and the way Kiba and Shino have her sandwiched between them, the process was not a smooth one. Choji doesn’t ask, it’s not his business, but he does buy her a stick of tri-color dongo from a stand when they get to the marketplace. It’s worth the surprised smile she gives him in return, and Shino mouths a ‘thank you’ at him behind her back over the collar of his jacket.

Choji has always been a fan of the little things.

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Kakashi spends the morning before the chunin exams drinking coffee in Iruka’s kitchen and being a general nuisance as Iruka goes through all the prep work of the procter rosters and the candidate screenings.

And fusses. He might also be fussing.

“Did they get enough sleep?” Iruka asks as he sorts through a messy stack of files.

“You asked that already.” Kakashi informs him as he walks around the table, stopping to study one of the many knick-knacks dotting Iruka’s countertop.

“No I didn’t.”

“You asked me if they were fully rested thirteen minutes ago.”

“It’s not the same. They could be physiologically rested and still not have gotten enough sleep for psychological well being—”

“Iruka.”

“What.”

Kakashi cocks a hip against the table and idly opens the fridge. “If you fret any harder you’re going to strain something. And I can’t believe I’m the one telling you to calm down.”
“The Chunin exams are no joke, I’m allowed to be worried about my own kids dammit and get your hands off that daifuku Hatake or I will take them off your wrists.”

Kakashi snaps his hand away from the plate of mochi sweets. “Touchy, touchy.” he mutters, but doesn’t reach for them again.

Iruka sighs. “Look, I just want to be sure they’re prepared. That’s all.”

“They’ve been prepared for months now.” Kakashi reminds him patiently, wandering over towards the coffee maker again. “I’ve been thinking of setting up extra parameters during the test just to make sure it’s even challenging.”

“It’s the Chunin exams, Kakashi. There’s still a lot that could go wrong.”

“And they’re prepared even if things do go south.” The Jounin insists, and wanders back over to the table to set a steaming cup of coffee by Iruka’s wrist.

He takes a sip from the offered mug without really thinking– Kakashi knows how he likes his coffee and isn’t stupid enough to mess with it– and looks up when he registers the unfamiliar weight and shape of the cup in his hand.

“Whose mug is this?” he asks as he twists it in his hand. It’s pinwheel colourful, a striped twist of three colours painted vertically up the ceramic and glazed in something silvery.

“Yours.” Kakashi answers blithely, flipping through some of Iruka’s exam memos.

“I don’t own a mug like this.”

“You do now. Look closer.”

Iruka turns the mugs slowly, examining each of the three swirls of colour. One is fuchsia and bears little designs of cherry blossoms etched out in pale turquoise, the second is dark blue with a pattern of down-facing crescent moons, or perhaps fans, and the third is dark orange and covered in trailing black spirals.

“The kids made this?”

Kakashi nods. “It’s sealed and strengthened so that you could shoot it out of a cannon and it wouldn’t even crack. Look at the bottom.”

Iruka takes a long drink of his coffee to reduce the risk of spilling and then holds it high so he can see the underside. Two rows of cramped scrawl read;

‘To the World’s Greatest Teacher; For putting up with us.’

For about a quarter of a second Iruka is certain he’s going to tear up. It’s a whiplash onset of emotion, the combination of the source of the gift the sentiment of it, and the obvious thought they put into making something with him in mind. Iruka has never been a fan of expensive or ornate gifts, but gifts like this one, packed with meaning and sentimental worth, have always been his favorites.

“Those brats.” He manages around a lump in his throat, and Kakashi smiles at him from beneath
his mask.

“They went on a shopping spree in Tea country when I wasn’t looking. Turns out the whole of the Rookie Nine had the same idea.”

“The Rookie Nine?”

Kakashi shrugs. “Teams 7, 8, and 10 collectively. They’re all taking the Chunin exams right out of the gate, so Genma took to calling them that and I suppose it stuck. They all had a little gift exchange last night.”

“But they didn’t buy this.” Iruka counters. There are little imperfections in the ceramics and the glaze, fingerprints in the painted clay and bubbles in the glass that all say hand-made.

“You and I are special, apparently.”

Iruka places his new mug back on the table and makes a note to throw out all his plain white ones. “What did they get you?”

Kakashi reaches for the equipment scroll at his hip and unfurls a little of it. With a quick hand sign he suddenly has a long and heavy drape of fabric flooding over his arms to nearly scrape the floor. Kakashi holds the piece of clothing up by the shoulders and shakes it out for Iruka to see.

It’s a traveling cloak, thick black and trimmed with something silvery, a swath of soft grey fur ringing the collar.

“That’s gorgeous.” Iruka marvels as he reaches for the hem of it. “And heavy.”

Kakashi chuckles. “I’m starting to think the cubs doubt my ability to protect myself. So far I’ve counted six different kinds of anti-chakra seals that are Naruto’s handiwork, weapon sheathes of Sasuke’s doing hidden in just about every seam, and Sakura sewed in an entire layer of lightweight chainmail. Then of course there’s this.”

Kakashi holds the collar of the cloak towards him and Iruka makes out three little symbols sewn into the inside edge, an Uchiha fan, and Uzumaki spiral, and a Sakura blossom.

“The little cretins just dropped it on my head on the way out the door this morning, not so much as a word in edgewise, and asked me to take that with me when I came here.” Kakashi continues, gesturing to the mug Iruka is now clutching with both hands.

“That is very like them.” Iruka laughs. “Also, I’ve been meaning to ask you. I know Ryouta gave the kids a pre-exam checkup yesterday, but when I asked him about it he just walked off cursing about needing to clear his emergency ward in preparation for the ‘apocalypse.’”

“Oh, that. Sakura is starting to develop a Kekkei Genkai.”

Iruka almost spits out his coffee. “A what?”

Kakashi has the nerve to shrug and wave his hand dismissively. “I’m not sure why it surprised him so much. Sakura’s chakra has always interfaced oddly with her physiology. It’s not the first time something like that has manifested in someone without shinobi parentage. I mean Minato-sensei–”

“Kakashi.” Iruka interrupts. “What kind of Kekkei Genkai?”

Kakashi blinks for a second. “Oh, so far she can harden her skin and reinforce her bone structure
with chakra latices. But that’s relatively new. It turns out she’s been reinforcing her muscle fibers that way for months now without doing it consciously.”

Iruka sighs and lets out a high, semi-hysterical laugh. “You’re right. I shouldn’t be worried about them at all. I should be worried about the Sandaime’s blood pressure when the village becomes collateral damage.”

Kakashi just shrugs again. “Details.”

Shikamaru’s dad corners him during one of the rare moments of the morning that he actually bothers standing in front of a mirror. He’s almost completely ready for the exams; he has on the reinforced cargo pants Ino had bought him, extra pockets packed with Choji’s new compact energy bars, some strings of rigged and modified shuriken and his assorted seal tags. His shirt is one of the heavy black steel latticed long-sleeves that Naruto had cut him from his rolls of Ido-senshi armour silk, the same material all nine of them are wearing into the exams in some form. He has Asuma’s gift clipped around his waist, a thick utility belt with kunai and senbon pouches, as well as holsters for his knives and pockets for his field medicine equipment. He has on his reinforced fingerless gloves and bracers, his hitai-ate banded tight around his upper arm, and his totem necklace looped around his neck.

The last was his gift from team 8, a set of four chakra carved jade beads separated and secured by thin metal bracers on a length of black cord, made for the intent purpose of detecting and breaking even the most delicate of genjutsu. Shikamaru strongly suspects that Kiba got the idea from Kurenai.

Now he’s just having minor trouble with the earrings.

“You have to chakra imprint them first.”

Shikamaru doesn’t jump, but he does pull in a breath too fast.

“Can’t you knock, old man?”

Shikaku snorts from where he’s leaning against the bathroom doorframe, like he’s been there for hours instead of seconds. “Door was open, brat.” He tilts his head at the minimalistic jewelry in Shikamaru’s palm with interest, and then holds out a hand. “May I?”

Shikamaru shrugs and drops the black and gold hoops into his father’s waiting hand. “Knock yourself out.”

Shikaku tilts them back and forth in the light, expression softening to thoughtful. “Not really something you would get for yourself. A gift?”

“Team 7. They’re from Tamakai port.”

“Work like this is pretty rare. Capable of storing a half-body’s worth each of chakra when fully charged.” Shikaku comments as he returns the hoops to Shikamaru. “Keep care of them.”

“That goes without saying.” Shikamaru mutters back, “And not just because they’re useful.”
Shikaku hums but otherwise doesn’t respond as Shikamaru sends a soft pulse of dark chakra through the hoops and they pop open. He’d charged them earlier, but he hadn’t counted on jewelry this small having a lock and key system.

He’s just managed to get them in when his mother shouts from the kitchen.

“Shikamaru! Choji and Ino are here! Get going!”

“I’m going, I’m going.” He calls back, turning around to slide past his father and out of the bathroom.

He’s surprised into stopping by an uncharacteristic move on his dad’s part– Shikaku plants a hand on his shoulder and squeezes firmly once. “Knock ‘em dead, kid.” He murmurs, just loud enough for Shikamaru to hear, and then lets him go.

“That’s a given, old timer.” Shikamaru calls over his shoulder, over the soft swell of new confidence in his chest, and Shikaku is still laughing when he turns the corner towards the front room and heads out the door.

Ino and Choji are waiting just outside, and they both look ready for war. In the still faint light of the 5am sunrise Ino’s hair reflects silvery, bangs plaited back from her eyes and the rest tucked into a practical bun accented with her new abalone hairsticks, both packed with poisoned senbon. Her high necked armour silk top sits under a chakra laced mesh three-quarters, tucked down into dark shinobi pants with armour plating up the sides. Her nagamaki is absent, likely stored in one of the three storage scrolls harnessed to her hip alongside her kunai packs.

Choji’s armour silk is invisible beneath the lacquered segments of his family’s signature paper armour, red lacquered and thick enough to easily stop the full-heft slice of a katana no matter how fast or how hard it’s moving. His shinobi pants are armoured on all sides, though with smaller and less flamboyant plating than Ino’s. Over his armour he’s wearing a leather bandolier packed with his essentials, including his homemade rations and his family’s chakra pills in case of emergencies.

Ino whistles as he slides out the door. “You cleaned up nice. Combat gear looks good on you, Shika.”

“Speak for yourself.” Shikamaru fires back, and Ino giggles, leaning forward to throw an arm over his shoulder. “Hell, Choji. You look like a walking tank.”

Choji flushes happily and turns, showing off the red shine of his armour and the Akimichi clan symbol in broad black strokes across his back. “Isn’t it awesome? Mom made it for me early. It fits like a glove.”

Ino tugs Shikamaru in the direction of the street. “Come on slow poke. We don’t want to be the last ones there, do we?”

They’re the second team to reach Ichiraku Ramen, and they walk into the stall while Naruto and Sasuke are in the middle of a heated conversation that may or may not actually be an argument. They’re discussing several chakra condensation theories and Shikamaru hears the words ‘chain’ and ‘hard seal’ several times but he has no idea where it might be leading or what it’s really about in the first place.
All three of them are dressed head to toe in Ido-senshi armour silk, base clothes of high necked sleeveless tops and long shinobi-style pants wrapped down at the ankles and thighs. That’s where the similarities stop however; Naruto’s arms are covered shoulder to fingertip in chakra reinforced arm wraps that shine softly with seal lines when the light hits them right. He has a similar talisman to Shikamaru’s necklace tied around his left wrist in bright blue that serves the same purpose, and has four medium-sized dark grey scrolls cross-strapped around his waist, two on each hip. With the exception of a set of thigh strapped kunai pouches he isn’t otherwise armed, though Shikamaru gets the feeling that whatever is in those scrolls is more dangerous than any obvious weaponry.

Sasuke’s upper arms are bare but for the the spiral traces of several seals that he hasn’t bothered to cover, some of which vanish beneath his shirt at the shoulder. His forearms bear dark leather bracers that could easily conceal two full kunai or a handful of shuriken, and he has two small scrolls harnessed to his right hip. The most obvious thing however is the katana-tanto set he has strapped to the small of his back, handles facing opposite directions.

Sakura is wearing a utility belt much like Shikamaru’s, though hers is clearly meant solely for medical supplies and kunai. At one hip is a medium sized red scroll strapped in a vertical style meant to allow access to the scroll without detaching it from it’s harness. At the other is the pair of chakrams that Ino had insisted on being their gift for Sakura; they’ve been modified somewhat, and there are seals carved into the handle that match ones carved into steel bands around her wrists just past her brutal looking armoured gloves. She too has seals along her arms, through hers are more concentrated around the forearms, and her upper arms bear thick bands meant for concealing shuriken.

She’s the one who spots them and waves them over, standing up with a laugh to give Ino a spine cracking hug. The Yamanaka doesn’t seem to mind though, and returns the hug hard.

Naruto and Sasuke stop their argument to greet them, Naruto laughing and nudging at Choji’s new armour with interest, and Sasuke asking about how Shikamaru’s new chakra reservoirs are working.

“We honestly thought you guys would be here last.” Naruto laughs, leaning and arm on Shikamaru’s shoulder. “What with how Ino normally needs to drag you out of bed by your toes.”

“I was up at 4am thank-you-very-much, Uzumaki.” he gripes, and then waves for Takeuchi’s attention. “One bowl of shio with scallion, one shoyu hold the egg, and three bowls of tonkotsu with extra pork belly, please.” He rattles off, and Teuchi nodds with a grin.

“One Ino-Shika-Cho coming right up.”

He sits down on Naruto’s left and Choji plops down beside him, while Ino trails to the other side to sit on the last booth next to Sakura. By the looks of it Naruto is already halfway through his second bowl, with Sasuke only now finishing his first.

“You guys were up even earlier than we were.” Shikamaru surmises.

“This idiot’s stomach woke us up at 3:45.” Sasuke grumbles, smacking Naruto in the arm.

“Yeah well we went to bed at like, 6, okay? We usually eat two more times after that.”

“I swear sometimes that you eat for two.” Sakura comments. “I think Kurama gets half your calories.”

“Or he just has a metabolism like a shrew.” Sasuke suggests.
“Hey, you eat just as often as I do.”

“Yeah, at half the meal sizes.”

“Aw man, are we late to the party?” Kiba cuts in, ducking into the stall with Shino and Hinata close beside him. Like the six Genin at the ramen bar team 8 is decked out in battlefield dress, all hard steel and dark reinforced fabric, all except for Hinata, whose Hyuuga robes and black-on-white steel obi make her seem like a spirit among devils.

“Naw, we only just got here.” Choji assures as Kiba plops down next to him and waves down Teuchi to take his order.

“Everyone appears as ready as they can be.” Shino muses. “I have a hard time believing it won’t be enough.”

“If that’s your roundabout way of saying we can’t lose, then that something we can agree on.” Kiba chuckles, slapping his teammate on the back.

“Don’t jinx it, you two.” Hinata warns.

“True enough.” Shino agrees. “We should still be ready for anything.”

“You’ve got a point, bug boy.” Kiba agrees mildly.

“Okay, now you guys are freaking me out.” Hinata chuckles. “You usually have ten fights before this time of day.”

“We could argue about something if you like.” Shino offers. “I’m sure there are still some buttons to push.”

For the next two hours they eat and talk, trading ideas and strategy and speculation as to what challenges the exam will present. The ideas get more and more outlandish as the morning progresses until they’re all trying to outdo each other with outrageous speculation. Shino wins the argument by suggesting the the exam is actually a 200 page written test designed to measure a ninja’s potential resistance to mental torture.

The look identical of horror on Naruto and Kiba’s faces is a priceless image Shikamaru is taking to his grave.
An hour before the exams start, Kakashi finds himself taking up a whole couch in the Jounin standby station across from Asuma and Kurenai, his book draped most of the way over his face so no one else will try to talk to him. He doesn’t mind Kurenai and Asuma’s soft conversation, even if he does have to endure the pair’s unsubtle flirting in between speculation about the exams.

“I don’t think Ibiki’s question will trip them up. Kiba and Shino may fight, but only the way siblings do. They’re loyal where it counts.” Kurenai is saying. They’d all gotten a summary of the current test parameters, and after looking through it, Kakashi had scoffed and set his on fire.

“They’ll be fine. They’ve got strong bonds going into it. They’ll make the right choice.” Asuma assures.

“You’re right. Of course you’re right.” Kurenai assures herself, and sends a narrowed look at Kakashi. “You’re awfully calm about this, Hatake.”

“Of course I am.” Kakashi agrees easily.

“You’re not worried? Not at all?”

“Not remotely.”

“Not even about them getting disqualified for disobeying superiors?” Asuma asks. “Your brats aren’t exactly known for being rule-followers.”

“They know to listen when it counts.” Kakashi defends. “I’d like to think I’ve taught them that much.”

“Yes well that’s not all you’ve taught them.” Kurenai counters. “Genma tells me that all three of
them have ‘inherited your electric personality.’ I think I’m more worried for the proctors than I am for the students.”

“I did give them limitations before the test started.”

Asuma tilts his head in confusion, eyes narrowing. “What kind of limitations?”

“I’m sure you’ll find out.” Kakashi mutters boredly from underneath his book, his arms crossed over his chest.

Kurenai is about to say something else when she visibly stalls, eyes tracking to somewhere over the back of the couch Kakashi is camped on. A second later he finds out why— Gai’s chakra is abrasive on the best of days, and sticks out like a sore thumb just like the man himself.

“What a wonderful day for the youth of Konoha!” He bellows, and Kakashi lets out a long drawn-out groan low enough to be mostly lost under the echoes Gai’s voice sends bouncing off the walls. “Three teams, fresh faced and still filled with vigour!” He laughs and comes to stand at the end of the couch by Kakashi’s feet. “Isn’t it glorious, my friend?”

“Yes Gai.” Kakashi responds dryly, with patience he doesn’t actually possess. “Glorious.”

“Bets!” Genma calls as he comes around the corner into the lounge area. “Speak now or keep your ryo to yourself!”

The room is instantly flooded with Tokujo and a couple of Chunin that really should be in here, along with every Jounin in earshot.

“What a splendid idea!” Gai chortles. “I will place 1,000 on my team reaching the final stage of the test.”

Asuma actually laughs— Gai has been gone for the last month training his Genin out-of-village, and was never really involved in the joint training sessions he Kakashi and Kurenai all put their brats through. He has no idea what he’s up against, and Asuma clearly plans to use that to his advantage. “I’ll put the same on team 10 all walking out with a Chunin rank.”

Gai, predictably, looks surprised. “I admire your faith, my friend, as unlikely as it is to be wise.”

“Same bet on my team. 1,000.” Kurenai adds without missing a beat, and Genma nods, writing her bet down.

“Interesting.” Gai muses, turning to Kakashi, who has yet to remove his book from his face. “Are you going to make a similar bet, my friend? This is the first of your Genin teams to pass your test.”

Kakashi doesn’t answer him, instead he raises a hand so that he can wave at Genma over the back of the couch and murmurs, boredly; “5000 ryo on team 7 taking the entire exam by storm.”

>>>>

Ibiki, as a general rule, likes to think himself a pretty decent judge of people. He can look at a ninja, and after a few interactions or a handful of minutes assessing their behaviour, he can usually get a good read on their mettle. He’s seen hundreds of candidates come through the Chunin exams,
most of which fail in the first section of the test, this section of the test.

And none of them have ever look quite so bored.

Out of the dozens of candidates that line the seats of the Chunin exam’s first portion, Ibiki had clocked about eighteen of them as having enough potential to reach the end of the exams. Three times the usual number.

And there are nine in particular that stick out.

If he didn’t know better, he would assume they were his own Chunin plants— except for his plants would be better actors.

He recognizes a great many of them as either clan heirs or members of head families, including the Ino-Shika-Cho triad. Both Shibi and Tsume’s boys are here as well, with the Hyuuga heiress herself parked between them. He gives Kiba an appropriate evil eye— he still hasn’t forgotten the pantsing incident, but the Inuzuka has the nuts to counter his normally withering glare with a careless grin and sticks his tongue out in taunt.

Ibiki’s temper flares and Kotetsu, one of his actual Chunin plants, has to cough to cover his snicker.

The balls on these kids. He thinks. No respect for authority.

Which reminds him of the strange little warning Anko had given him this morning.

“Do not take your eyes off Kakashi’s brats. Seriously. Don’t.”

To be honest Ibiki had thought it was a joke— Hatake Kakashi, with Genin? The idea is so ludicrous he’d dismissed it outright, despite the other Tokujo’s whispers of a trio of terrors being trained under the ex-anbu’s wing for the last handful of months. He has access to the man’s psych profile— the parts of it that aren’t slathered in Anbu black-out ink, anyway, and he knows Kakashi to be the epitome of a socially inert loner— no loved ones to speak of, friends he can count on less than a full hand of fingers, and no desire to forge new bonds outside of mission requirements.

A man like that mentoring kids? If the rumors were true, Ibiki would almost feel bad for them.

But while Anko is a lot of things, a liar isn’t one of them, and her warning had been uncharacteristically serious.

Ibiki doesn’t know much about the Genin team line-ups on purpose— he prefers to judge teams and potentials with in-person snap assessment in order to prevent colouration from outside sources, but now he wishes he’d paid a little closer attention.

By process of elimination, he knows which brats must theoretically be Hatake Kakashi’s, which just fucking figures.

He knows two out of three of them already— one is the infamous survivor of the massacre, the last of the Uchiha, and the other is the Kyuubi container and orphaned son of the last Hokage. The third he doesn’t recognise; a pink-haired kunoichi with steely green eyes and body language more reminiscent of a twenty-year old than a twelve-year-old.

They’ve been pinging some deep rooted warning bell in the back of Ibiki’s head since they walked in— normally he would mentally dock them points for being unprepared; each of them is only minimally armed with the typical shinobi tools of kunai and shuriken and have no visible survival
supplies on their person.

But there are sealing scrolls on each of them that don’t look anything like the regular store-bought variety that he himself uses, and all but the blond jinchuuriki have some kind of specialized weapon on their person.

They’re also dressed disturbingly like Jounin, which is what started Ibiki’s double-take. Minimalistic clothing and equipment, most real supplies hidden or tucked neatly out of all range of motion, almost carelessly calm. At least the other six are showing some form of restless tick after sitting still for so long (excluding the Nara of course).

It takes fifteen additional minutes for the other applicants to figure out what the nine clocked within the first sixty seconds– that cheating on the test is not only necessary, but expected. It all progresses quickly after that, and as soon as he sees that most of the clued in students have gotten at least a few answers down he calls time.

Time for the true test of the evening.

What the fuck is wrong with this test? And is there a fucking dress code I didn’t know about?

Temari has only been in Fire Country for a handful of days and she already hates it here. It’s not the disconcerting amount of green everywhere, or the bugs, or even the vicious wildlife. No, of all the things that had hammered her Suna-born dislike of Fire Country into hate, it had been the humidity.

She wipes the back of her neck with a hand again, and resists the urge to snarl aloud in the half-quiet of the testing room. Her back is sticking to the stupid plastic chairs though her mesh shirt, her hands are clammy against her pencil, and this test is stupidly hard. If it weren’t for Gaara’s sand eyes, she and Kankuro wouldn’t have managed to answer a single question.

What’s worse? Their team seems to be the only one around them struggling.

She sends a glare at the back of the Konoha-nin’s head two seats in front of her, a boy with dark hair tied in a severe tail, who seems to have fucking already finished.

He’s lounging back in the uncomfortable chairs like he’s fucking bored, and he’s not the only one. The blonde girl to his right is drumming her fingers restlessly against the table, her test turned face down so that the Kusa-nin on her other side can’t lean over and peek. The bigger boy to his left has his test covered in the wrappers of no less than four energy bars.

And they all look different, stick out from the rest of the new hopefuls like an oasis stands out from barren desert.

They’re all in black for one, which is pretty ballsy. Tan and green blends in and fades into backgrounds, but these ninja seem to have forgotten that basic survival tidbit and are covered in deep black or, in the case of the larger boy on her left, vibrant red armour.

Morons.
But they're not the only ones who seem to have forgotten the tactic, and Temari counts at least six other Konoha-nin in similar garb.

Temari hates being stuck in enemy territory.

To top things off Gaara has been antsy since they got here—something about this village makes him uneasy, and whatever had caught his attention when they crossed through the gates holds it still. When Temari had worked up the nerve to ask, Gaara had only vaguely mentioned something about ‘strange energy’ and hasn’t spoken since then, not even to Baki.

Temari hates this kind of mission. Too many things that can go wrong.

Answering the final question is easy, since leaving the test— for her and the rest of her team— is out of the question, and after a few minutes the room clears out.

The first portion of the test is over and fifty-four candidates remain, her team included.

Half of the eighteen remaining teams are Konoha, including the three teams dressed in black. The other nine consist of her team, a team from Kusa, one from Taki, and two teams each of Kumo, Kiri and Oto.

They're directed out of the building after that, to congregate deep in the woods at the edge of the village outside a section of trees penned in by fences and seals.

Their proctor stands with her hands on her hips at the edge of the fence, dark purple hair pulled up into a tail and sharp eyes tracing over the crowd of Genin. When she’s satisfied with her headcount she nods to herself, popping her gum, and addresses the rabble.

“Welcome, poor unprepared sods,” she shouts cheerily. “And Rookie Nine,” she adds absently, “to the Chunin exams part two!”

“Rookie Nine?” Kankuro asks Temari lowly, painted eyes narrowed, “You don’t think she means…” Kankuro makes a sweeping gesture in front of him with the back of his hand, including five of the nine black-clad Konoha-nin in the motion.

“Maybe.” Temari allows. “Must mean this is their first time taking any kind of Chunin exam.”

“Maybe.” Kankuro echos, but he doesn’t sound entirely convinced.

“Now!” The Kunoichi proctor announces. “My name is Mitarashi Anko and this;” she gestures grandly to the fenced in wood behind her, “Is training ground 44, fondly known around these parts as the Forest of Death. To you? It’s the battlefield for this portion of the exam.”

With a single swift motion, Anko unhooks two small scrolls from her hip and sends them whirling into the air, catching both in the same hand and holding them up for all to see. One is pale gold with the symbol for heaven stamped on the front, and the other is dark blue with the symbol for earth.

“At the beginning of this exam, each team will be given either a heaven scroll or an earth scroll to protect. Your goal is to reach the tower in the center of this forest with both a heaven and an earth scroll in your possession. If you do not make it to the tower within the five day limit, you fail. If you do not possess both scrolls upon entering the tower, you fail. If you attempt to look inside either the scroll you are given or the scroll you obtain, you fail. If any member of your team dies
before reaching the tower, you also fail.”

“Now.” Anko says sweetly. “You have one hour to prepare, after which I expect to see you all lined up at this gate.” She jerks a thumb over her shoulder at the gate set into the sealed metal fence. “If you’re late, guess what? You fail.”

Kankuro turns to Temari just as the Konoha Tokujo leaps off the rock she’d been using as a soapbox. “If every team only gets one scroll, that means they’re thinning the herd. Only half of us will make it.”

“I’m not worried.” Temari dismisses, looking around the other teams. “There are plenty of weaklings to pick off, from what I can see.”

Kankuro nods, but it’s hesitant. “Fair enough, but I say we give the guys in black a wide berth.”

Temari ticks an eyebrow up skeptically. “And why is that?”

Kankuro just shrugs and crosses his arms behind his head, but his eyes are serious where his posture isn’t. “Call it a feeling.”

>>>>

“What the hell are we supposed to do for an hour? Just sit here?” Sakura whines, shifting her shoulders and tapping her foot irritably.

“I don’t think they expected us to be prepared for a five day stint in the forest of death.” Naruto reasons.

“It’s not going to take us five days.” Sasuke counters.

“Not us, no.” Naruto allows, and plops down in a sunbeam filtering against the trunk of a nearby elm, tucking his arms behind his head. The seals woven into the black fabric of the bandages flicker warm gold and cool sapphire in the light, glittering with chakra.

“I think we probably over-prepped.” Sakura says as she sits down on Naruto’s right, legs stretched out in the opposite direction of the blond’s and her arms braced behind her. Sasuke makes himself comfortable on Naruto’s left, settling himself cross-legged in the elm’s shade.

Sasuke is aware that this test is supposed to be a big deal, that it determines their future and he should take it more seriously, but then he has moments like this; the world seems to quiet, time seems to slow, and even though it’s only for a moment, the peace he feels is bone deep.

He’s never really been sure of anything in his life, but right now, more than anything, he’s sure that this is where he belongs.

Naruto and Sakura talk a little over strategy and avoiding giant centipedes, but Sasuke is content just to listen, eyes closed, to the sound of their voices, and to let the familiar rush of their chakra wash against his senses.

_This test doesn’t stand a chance_. He thinks to himself. _And neither does anyone who stands in our_
He’s interrupted from his pleasant moment by an unpleasant shuffling and the patchwork flicker of still-developing chakra systems. He groans, mood already soured, and turns his head a bit in Naruto’s direction.

“Your fan club is here.” He hisses lowly, nearly a growl with all the irritation he’s holding behind his teeth.

Naruto’s shift and sideways glance tells him he’d already noticed. “I don’t know why they bug you so much.” He mumbles back.

“They’re annoying.” he returns, and this time it is a growl. “Especially their little snot-nosed leader.”

“What’s wrong with Konohamaru?”

“I’m not answering that.”

Sure enough, a minute or so later Sasuke spies them slithering unsubtly over the uneven ground toward them beneath a chakra sheet set to look like a granite boulder– glaringly out of place with all the sandstone gravel.

Sakura bursts their bubble as soon as they wander within reach, snatching the sheet off their collective heads with a playful grin, revealing the messy tops of Moegi, Udon, and Konohamaru in all his snot-nosed scarf-dragging glory.

“Awww!” Konohamaru whines, stomping his feet back and forth like a civilian brat about to throw a tantrum. “How did you catch us?”

“You’re kidding me, right?” Sasuke mutters derisively, and Naruto sends him a glance that is half pleading half admonishment.

Sasuke rolls his eyes with a whispered “Fine,” but leans a little closer into Naruto’s space anyway so he can keep a sharp dark eye on the twerp.

“Iruka-sensei said you had your big test today!” Moegi says brightly. “We thought we’d surprise you and say good luck!”

“Doesn’t look like we surprised anyone though,” Udon adds.

“We appreciate it, guys.” Naruto says kindly. “But you know you’re not supposed to be out this close to the forest of death, especially not during the exams.”

“And especially not you, Konohamaru.” Sakura adds. “Where exactly did you three leave poor Ebisu?”

Konohamaru grins and rubs the back of his head sheepishly, a tick he picked up watching Naruto, Sasuke notes sourly.

The three twerps bicker with each other and Sakura equally while Naruto laughs at them and encourages them in turns. For a while Konohamaru is held at bay from his idol by Sasuke’s presence and occasional glares, until he seems to scrounge up enough courage to brave Sasuke’s way.
temper for Naruto’s attention.

“Hey, hey, what are the bandages for?” he asks, hoping as close as he dares, scarf dragging like a rattly blue snake behind him.

“I don’t see how that’s any of your business, twerp.” Sasuke rumbles, keeping an eye on the brat as he leans against Naruto’s shoulder and forces some of the tension out. Like hell he’s going to let the little shit ruin the whole of his mood just with his presence.

Konohamaru is about to open his mouth, probably to squeak something furious and incoherent, when Naruto adds; “Tactical secret, bud. Can’t tell ya.”

Sasuke’s not sure how that’s much different from what he just said, but the kid eats it up, nodding and snapping his mouth shut.

“What are you three doing here?” Comes a hiss from just on the other side of the cluster of trees team seven is resting in, and Anko stalks towards them, ducking under a maple branch, and leveling a finger at Konohamaru’s team. They all freeze like a couple of startled deer and Sasuke snorts.

“Aclassen students are banned from all areas regarding the exams.” Anko continues. “I know Iruka told you little shits that.”

The mere mention of Iruka makes all three of them jump, and Naruto snickers. “Uh-oh.”

Anko chases the academy students off with the threat of informing their teacher of exactly what they’ve been up to, and then turns to team seven.

“Hey, you little monsters. I’ve got some instructions from your sensei.” She growls, hands jammed pointedly on her hips like she resents being used to deliver a message.

Sasuke opens both eyes as Naruto perks up from his slouch, and Sakura pulls her legs in so she can straighten her back all the way.

“Kakashi-sensei?” Sakura questions. “What’s up?”

“More parameters for your test, apparently.” Anko says with a disinterested wave of her hand. “He says he told you this might happen?”

“He wants the exams to challenge us.” Sasuke says by way of explanation, and Anko barks out a harsh laugh.

“Yeah, good luck with that.” She says seriously, throwing up a hand, sharp fingernails painted with shiny black polish. “Anyway, Hatake is a cryptic bastard, so I’m just going to tell you exactly what he told me; ‘You three may participate as a team, but you must pass as individuals’ whatever the fuck that means.”

Sakura blinks, looking over at the boys. “As individuals? Do you think he means…” She makes a vague gesture like she’s weighing an object in each hand that goes right over Sasuke’s head but that Naruto somehow interprets more or less correctly.

“You mean two scrolls?” He questions.

She nods.
Sasuke catches up to what they're talking about fairly quickly and shrugs. “It’ll take longer, but it shouldn't’ be too hard. It means we can cast a wider tracking net too.”

Anko is blinking, looking down at them with wide wary brown eyes as she tries to follow even a single train of what the hell they’re talking about. They seem to come to consensus, and then they all nod at the same time and turn back to her.

“Thanks for telling us Anko nee-san.” Naruto adds brightly, and Anko blinks again, mostly because the ‘big sis’ tacked into the end of her name is weirdly endearing and she’s still trying to hold a grudge about that one time the little shit sealed up all her chakra.

She settles for a grudgingly fond “Yeah yeah,” before she stalks off to continue overseeing the foreign teams.

Sasuke hums contemplatively after she leaves, a sharp smile creeping onto his face. “So…” He murmurs. “Six scrolls instead of two.”

“There are a weirdly high number of applicants this year.” Sakura adds. “It’ll help weed out the teams who aren’t really ready for this stuff before the test gets dicey. Third stage is supposed to be the hardest.”

“If we’re handed a scroll at the start of the test…” Naruto muses. “Then that’s five teams to take out. Assuming each one has the exact scrolls we need.”

“Excluding teams 8 and 10, that’s fifteen to choose from.” Sasuke points out, and Sakura grins, shark-like.

“Odds say we can’t lose.” Sakura agrees. “Even with the time limit and our restrictions, I say it takes us two days, max.”

“Less than one.” Sasuke counters.

“That a bet, Uchiha?” Sakura challenges.

“Loser has to de-fur all the ninken beds.” Sasuke states. “Without chakra.”

They slap palms, hard enough that Sasuke winces. “Deal!” Sakura says happily. “One second over twenty-four hours and the bet is mine. Any longer than two days and we both have to clean. Naruto will keep time.”

Naruto laughs his agreement and slaps his hand over their two, solidifying the bet.

 Something is wrong.

Naruto has been feeling something strange since the second portion of the exam started, something that rubs dark and foreboding over all of his nerves.

He felt it first at the beginning of the test, right before they’d been released into the forest of death,
when the teams were rounded up at the gates.

He’d chalked it up to all the mixed up foreign chakra and dismissed just as quickly as he’d registered it.

An hour later, as they were claiming their first earth scroll, he felt it again. A flash of something dark and heavy and cloaked, something that smelled of wet clay and cut grass and the acrid tang of poison.

A hand on his arm brings his attention down to Sasuke’s face, to dark eyes narrowed warily.

“That’s the second time you’ve done that.” He states. “What is it?”

Naruto shakes his head, at a bit of a loss. “I… I’m not sure. I could have sworn I felt something weird for a second.”

“Weird?” Sakura asks, wringing water from the Kiri team’s suiton jutsu out of her ponytail and clipping the earth scroll to her belt, stepping over one of their unconscious bodies. “Weird how?”

“Chakra. Heavy.” He says firmly. “And strong. Too strong for a Genin or a Chunin.”

Sasuke turns, keen eyes scanning the thick tree limbs around them. Naruto can tell he wants to activate his sharingan by the way his eyes crease at the corners, but the dojutsu says leashed just behind his irises, just like Kurama is still napping beneath Naruto’s seal and Sakura’s chakra lattices are still dim and dormant.

It had been Kakashi-sensei’s condition for passing his test. They were to complete the Chunin exams using only the abilities they’d gained through hard work, through blood and sweat. Outside of emergencies, they were restricted from any chakra-based asset that they were born with.

“Jounin level?” Sasuke questions.

“At least.” Naruto confirms. “And it wasn’t one I recognised from around the village.”

“The only foreign Jounin that are supposed to be in the village right now are the exam participants and their Jounin instructors, if they even have them.” Sakura says quietly. “Maybe the Kages if they care to show up. No one else should be in village limits.”

“Might be nothing.” Naruto says uncertainly, and Sasuke slaps him on the arm for it.

“Don’t be stupid.” he growls. “Even if you don’t trust your instincts all the way, I do, so if you feel it again, tell us.”

The completely unhsettled declaration leaves Naruto staring dumbly at the back of his friend's head as he steps away to give the canopy another once-over.

“Sure.” He returns, a beat off kilter and quieter than he intended.

Sakura rolls her eyes at them both, like she knows something they don’t, and steps around Sasuke to tap vaguely at one of Naruto’s scrolls.

“Water.” She demands.

Naruto unrolls the scroll on his other hip and unseals Sakura’s lime green canteen, passing it over. She takes a long draw and hands it back, and Naruto reseals it as Sasuke walks back towards them.
“That Kumo team in nearby.” He states.

“The one with the redhead?” Sakura asks.

Sasuke shakes his head. “The pack of blondes.” He corrects, and Naruto remembers the team with the two strawberry blond boys and the ashen haired kunoichi from before they’d opened the gates.

Naruto rolls up his scroll again and grins. “One down, four to go. We’d better get after it.”

And just like that, it’s easy. The three of them click like a well-oiled machine, three pieces that are so much greater when they come together to make a whole.

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“Well that was anticlimactic.” Shikamaru drawls as he stands over the half-dead remains of the Taki team that had been unfortunate enough to cross their path. “The monster triad must be having a blast.”

Ino toes one of the limp bodies over primly, leaning almost casually on her nagamaki. “Not on this one. Choji?”

“I’ve got it,” their teammate confirms, straightening and tossing the scroll at Shikamaru, who catches it one handed.

“Shit.” he mutters, frowning at the earth symbol inked into the scroll.

“Should we keep it anyway?” Ino asks.

“Better than leaving it here.” Shikamaru confirms, hooking it onto his belt. “Status check?”

“You kidding me?” Ino chuckles. “Didn’t so much as get nicked by a shuriken.”

Shikamaru rolls his eyes. “Gotta ask. Plus I saw you take that knock to the ribs.”

Ino makes a face. “Choji and I both did, and you're not fussing over him.”

“Choji is wearing armour five centimeters thick.” Shika returns patiently, and Ino grumbles, looking to Choji for assistance, but the Akimichi just chuckles and shakes his head.

“Oh, fine.” She concedes, shifting her polesword to rest on her other arm and rolling up her armour silk top. Shikamaru steps forward to examine the blooming bruise along the bottom edge of her ribs, still red but quickly fading into purple territory, and flicks his fingers through a handful of signs. Pale green chakra floods over his hand, and he presses his palm gently over the affected area.

Ino hisses a little but otherwise doesn’t move, and after a moment of letting the chakra seep through her skin the red fades, then the shades of purple, and she lets out a sigh of relief. “Thanks Shika.”

“Yeah yeah,” he deflects, changing the subject. “Come on, we’ve got another team to track down before sunset.”
Because it’s just their luck, the next team they run into is Kiba’s.

“Goddamn it.” The Inuzuka snarls, swiping a gouge out of the tree to his right in irritation.

“I think I feel insulted.” Shino drawls, hands stuffed deep in the pockets of his steel lined jacket. “Fifteen teams to choose from and they all run from us like rabbits.”

“You guys haven’t caught anyone?” Ino asks, leaping up to stand on a branch by Hinata.

The Hyuuga shakes her head. “No, we did catch one team. They just didn’t have the scroll we wanted.

“Sounds like what happened to us,” says Choji. “You seen the trio since we started?”

Kiba shakes his head. “Naw, they took off like shots as soon as the gates were open. We haven’t sensed them since.”

“You three don’t happen to have two heaven scrolls, do you?” Shikamaru interrupts, and Shino’s eyebrow shoots up as he pulls twin heaven scrolls out from within his jacket and waves them back and forth.

Shikamaru takes their own earth scrolls from his hip pouch in turn, waving them back.

Shino’s mouth twitches into a small smile at the corner, the Aburame equivalent of a grin. “Trade, Nara?”

Shikamaru tosses their pilfered scroll into the air in answer, and Shino snaps one of his their way in response.

“Niiiiiiice.” Kiba chuckles as he snatches the earth scroll out of its arc.

Choji grabs the heaven scroll between both palms and rolls it back and forth with glee.

“Thank you Shikamaru.” Hinata says with sincerity. “This should save us a lot of t–”

Hinata’s words are cut off instantly on a sharp intake of breath as the cradle of branches they’re in is hit by a wave of crushing chakra, a seething tide of angry clashing energies, surging and crashing. The furious tangle is breathtaking, it rends the air from Shikamaru’s lungs like a blow to the chest, and his stomach drops into his sandals because he recognises parts of it.

The river rush power of Sakura’s chakra, the cold fire burst of Sasuke’s, the storm-wind roar of Naruto’s. It’s all wrapped up and twisted against another force, something that reminds him of looking at his mother’s shelf of medicines and toxins, organic and sterile and poisonous.

It’s strong, far too strong to have any place in the exams, and something is very very wrong.

“Shika!” Ino shouts, and just like that Shikamaru’s brain is working again, the gears are turning, and he spins to face their Inuzuka.

“Kiba! Can you track it?”

Kiba just nods sharply and unzips his jacket, allowing Akamaru to hop down and get his scent-bearings, not hard considering the chakra is still permeating the air. The ninken barks and takes off, and as one, all six of them follow.
Because it doesn’t matter who was stupid enough to do it, or how strong they are, because whoever decided to attack a member of their group is going to find out real fast just how bad an idea that is.

It happens so fast even Sasuke isn’t exactly sure where the attack even comes from. He’s not even the one who sees it coming.

One second they’re leaping through the thick canopy of the forest, five scrolls to their name already and only eighteen hours into the exam, ducking crows and giant centipedes with ease. The next Naruto is crushing into him, an arm barred around his ribs, and he hears something fly so quickly over his head that he can feel the current of air that just misses his temple. They land hard, tumbling over the massive sprawling branch of one of Konoha’s legendary Bodhi trees—gigantic and sacred, and humming with the same old power that makes this forest so dangerous.

Sakura dives after them without hesitation, skidding over, and she obviously sees something they don’t because her hands are snapping through signs even as she throws herself bodily on top of them both, digging her powerful fingers into the flesh of the tree branch for purchase.

“Suiton: Surge Shield!”

Emerald water arcs out of the air over their heads, coloured by the chakra that saturates the space around the Bodhi, twisting into a sphere around them a fraction of a second before a snap-fire jutsu smashes into them hard, hard enough to actually char the branch around their shield.

“What the fuck!” Naruto snarls as they flip to their feet, and without thinking, without hesitation, team seven smacks shoulders, a back to back triangle formation, chakra roiling up through their young bodies, rubbing electric friction into the air as they slide and mix with each other and the chakra of the Bohai, spreading the scent of ozone into the air.

“My my…” The rumbling purr of the voice is oil-sleek and teasing, and Sasuke’s eyes fix on a form standing stick straight across the glade as the shield dissipates, a figure with pale skin and long dark hair under a bamboo cone hat. “That was impressive, even I must admit.”

“That’s one of the Grass ninja.” Sakura whispers under her breath next to him, and Sasuke feels Naruto shake his head.

“Not possible. I saw grass lady before, no way this is her chakra.”

Sasuke keeps his eyes fixed on the figure in the tree. The Kusa-nin is standing stick-straight, too straight, eyes shielded beneath the steep curve of the hat, arms hanging at their sides limp like overcooked udon.

“You three show some talent…” the strange voice lilts, the figure’s arms coming up as they clap their hands together in a coy imitation of admiration. Except the movement is all wrong, the bones bend in all the wrong places, and a shiver of fear chases down Sasuke’s spine as the brim of the hat tips upward.

The strange ninja’s eyes are predator yellow and slitted like a snake’s, and cold dread pours into Sasuke’s stomach like liquid nitrogen, freezing him in place. For a fraction of a second he forgets where he is, forgets everything except the unnatural fear that grips him like a fist around his spinal
chord, that makes him feel like a mouse staring down a cobra.

But then two hands grip his wrists, firm familiar fingers, and the feeling shatters. Warmth rushes back through veins gone cold, and he remembers where he is, he remembers who’s with him.

“Me.” He chokes out, the realization hitting him hard and fast, instinct working with the obvious intent radiating off the strange shinobi. “They’re after–” but he doesn’t get the chance to finish the sentence because the shinobi rushes them, surging forward without warning or hesitation.

But his teammates must understand him anyway, because Sakura pulls his arm around her shoulder and launches them sideways, just as Naruto steps into his place. The shinobi twists unnaturally, honing in on Sasuke like some kind of demented heat-seeking missile, but Naruto anticipates that, takes Sasuke’s word and warning as law, and intercepts the strike with his own.

Naruto spins on his heel and his elbow cracks hard into the attacker's cheek, sending the ninja spinning sideways. By now Sasuke’s shaken off the worse of that strange feeling—jutsu, it had to be—and he plants his feet, flicking his fingers through hand signs, even as Sakura spins a roundhouse at the ninja’s side.

The Kusa-nin dodges the kick but not the fireball Sasuke sends right on it’s heels, and that forces the shinobi back, with a fluid leap to put distance between them and avoid the worst of Sasuke’s jutsu.

The three of them use the distance to pull back, assess the situation, and it’s Sakura that says what they’re all thinking.

“Yeah, I think this definitely counts as an emergency.”

Naruto nods heavily, eyes trained on the shinobi as they begin to right themselves. “He’s crazy fast. And I get the feeling he’s not even trying yet.”

“He?”

“Look.”

It doesn't take long for Sasuke to see what he’s talking about. The shinobi's face, where Naruto’s strike and Sasuke’s fire had both caused damage, is cracked open.

Spiderweb fissures crawl along the cheekbone and up around the orbit of the left eye, flaking and crumbling like a shattered porcelain mask. Beneath the veneer of the first face is a second one, paint white skin cut by the vibrant purple curl of a clan mark arcing over the single exposed eye.

The shinobi is still for a moment, hand coming up to touch the edge of the fracture in what might be surprise, and Sasuke’s mind works fast.

He catches Naruto’s arm before he can move to unlock the seal keeping Kurama asleep. “He underestimates us,” he whispers. “We need to use that.”

Naruto grits his teeth but nods grudgingly and drops his arm. “Fine.” he mutters. “But if things get bad I won't hesitate.”

“I know.”

“We need a plan.” Sakura mutters, unhooking her chakrams from her hip. “Or this is going to get out of hand really fast.”
Sasuke thinks he has one, formed halfway already in the back of his head, but if they’re going to pull this off, they have to be more in synch than they’ve ever been, have to put every ability they’ve trained into practice. The timing has to be perfect.

Because given the way the shinobi’s chakra is rising, the way it rubs like a physical entity against the air and exerts its pressure on their lungs, they’re only going to get one shot.

Funny though, how after that first strange lapse of judgment, the idea of running away hasn’t even crossed his mind.

“Those flow-splitter seals you made…” Sasuke murmurs to Naruto, keeping his sharp eyes fixed firmly on the enemy. “How long will they hold up?”

“Long enough for something big.” he responds, the quirk of his mouth half smile half snarl, one sharp canine exposed, like he already knows exactly what he’s planning. Sasuke’s not sure the thrill of that is ever going to wear off.

“We need to be completely in synch.” He warns, and Sakura snorts.

“Three Monkeys, anyone?”

“Risky.” Naruto says. “But it’ll work. I don’t like you playing bait though.” The last part is directed at Sasuke, and he wonders if Naruto really can read his mind, because that’s the only way they’re going to get this crazy powerhouse in close enough for a trap.

“You’ll get over it.”

“No, I’ll blow shit up and tell Kakashi-sensei it was your fault.” Naruto fires back.

Sakura laughs and flicks her chakrams, widening her stance, and Sasuke feels immortal again.

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“Now this is interesting…” Orochimaru purrs as he observes the little team of children before him, not caring that he’s speaking the words aloud. He admits to some fairly heavy underestimation on his part— he had expected skill from the little Uchiha, albeit less than is evident, but from the other two? The pink haired kunoichi and the Kyuubi container? He’d expected very little.

A mistake, he admits, though not enough of one to be terribly troublesome. The reflexes on the Uzumaki are formidable, and the kunoichi is stronger than she looks, but they are still Genin, and it is easy to accommodate his strategy.

They managed to strike him, which alone would normally be enough to make him rethink things, but what truly surprises him is something else— the Uchiha had broken his first jutsu; a fear based paralysis that has never once failed him before, especially not in a victim this young, with as many doubts as his background should leave him with, as many pitfalls.

But he’d shaken the effects like water off the feathers of a kestrel, snapped an attack back as fast as his feet were solid under him.

And… they aren’t running.
Orochimaru had expected them to bolt as soon as they were given the opportunity— that would have been fine with him, he enjoys a chase every now and then, but the Genin’s feet are planted, their stares are hard, and they’re communicating in snatched whispers and gestures that Orochimaru can’t interpret.

He waits, primed on the balls of his feet to strike as soon as the little creatures drop their guard, but they never do, and all three of them begin work small-scale jutsu.

He watches, wondering what little scheme they have cooked up; he’s bored, he admits, and he has a while before he can enact the next portion of his plan, so he can indulge the time to play with his food.

Except the signs he sees make no conceivable sense— they are sensory deprivation jutsu, meant to be used on the enemy, but the three children are using the arts on themselves, a blinding jutsu for the Uzumaki, deafening for the Kunoichi, and little Uchiha Sasuke renders himself mute.

*What stupidity is this?*

He finds himself instantly disgusted; he had hoped for something interesting out of them at least, and readies a jutsu to bury the two unimportant ones so he can get what he came for.

He uses the location to his advantage, a waterspout jutsu to counter any fire the Uchiha may attempt to conjure. It blasts against their foothold, sending bark ripping from the branches with the force of it. Overkill maybe, but Orochimaru has always had a temper, as his teammates were fond of reminding him.

Except for when the spray clears and the mist dissipates, all three of them are gone.

Somewhere deep in the back of his mind he hears Jiraiya's voice, remembers the exact order and variety of the sensory deprivation and the phrase of that stupid rhyme catches on his instincts.

*Hear no Evil, See no Evil, Speak no Evil.*

A deafening whoosh and a wave of searing chakra is the only warning he gets before the air blasts hot and bright overhead, a vicious katon jutsu bearing down on him fast and hard.

*No, not just a fire technique.*

It’s combination of Katon and Fuuton jutsu, he recognises the composition, *Red Sun Flare* and *Mountain Rush*, and the two jutsu twist and tangle, feeding off each other until the sky above Orochimaru’s head a seething mass of crimson flame and searing wind. He flicks his fingers through a pair jutsu of his own, wind and water to counter, but as the steam clears he finds the trio has vanished once more, flickering through the surrounding branches.

They don’t seem stupid enough to engage him in close quarters, to their credit, but even as he counters another elemental bout with the ease of long practice he finds himself growing irritated with the tactic.

His own lack of patience surprises him; it would be easy enough to wait until the brats tired themselves out against his defences, but something about the way they’re moving as he tracks them through the trees kicks at some emotion inside him, dark and bitter.

They should be tripping and fumbling, falling over themselves trying to move the way they are, but even deprived of a primary sense apiece the move with enviable grace and surety, more so than even he possessed at that age.
The back and forth volley of jutsu goes on for a long stretches of minutes— it seems like the children have no further strategy, but just as he’s about to close ranks and finish the game, plant the seed of control and pain he’d come here to sow, they switch tactics.

Kunai rigged with razor wire launch themselves from the leaves, followed by more ninjutsu, and as Orochimaru trains his eyes on them, on the flicker of dark and light hair and the ripples of chakra, he senses something he does not understand.

Their chakra signatures… are speaking to one another.

It is not something so complex as any form of language, it is something different, something subtle; shifts in flow and radiation and energy that are read and responded to, so soft and suffused that if Orochimaru were not as well versed in reading chakra as he was he would never have noticed it.

He razors his attention on the odd phenomenon, hones his chakra-sense as the interactions become smoother, cleaner, the flares and responses more refined by the moment, and he understands.

The lack of special senses forces them to rely on other abilities they posses, forces them to rely on each other, and it is this rhythm that they are cultivating, this gathering of potential energy that was the goal.

He needs to end this now. Before things get any more complicated, before the stirring bitter green of envy makes him reckless.

He stamps the pesky bloom of emotion out with prejudice, and draws Kusanagi.

The Uchiha is easy to pick out from the tangle of chakra, steady and flickering and diamond hard, and he must admit he lucked out with this one– the boy is strong, stronger than he expected, and even if he has yet to see the fabled sharingan manifest, he can already tell the boy’s sight is even keener than his brother’s.

He expects getting close enough to the boy to plant his seal will be easy.

It is not.

The Uchiha matches him for speed and is protected fiercely by his teammates, who dog his heels and force his hand and it is starting to genuinely piss him off.

The Uzumaki is a fucking menace, because no matter how many times Orochimaru strikes him down he does not stay down, and the kunoichi blocks him from his prize at every turn as the Uchiha spits fire at him from behind her.

Finally his temper gets the better of him, fury overwhelms him at being kept at bay by mere brats, and the fire that leaves him is nothing short of a supernova.

It is a lack of control that has never ceased to aggravate him– he values subtlety and planning in all the things he does, but his Katon jutsu is about as subtle as a slap to the face, vicious blue-green flame that eats through moisture in the air and burns the lungs with it’s heat. It spirals out in an unchecked galaxy of acid bright flame, dangerous and instinctive; Katon: Poison Holocaust.

The fire does not so much burn as it does eat, gnawing through leaves and bark and atmospheric oxygen. But even now the children’s first instinct is to protect each other, and it is this that
Orochimaru cannot understand—fear should override that instinct, self preservation, a living thing’s first prerogative is to protect itself, it is the base instinct that fuels life and its survival, a constant that Orochimaru has always relied on. People are, at the core of their beings, selfish.

But the Uzumaki throws himself into the blast instead of away from it, an anti-chakra seal painted over the back of his hand in what must be his own blood, pulling the kunoichi out of the way of the worst of it and tucking her behind him, and the Uchiha grabs hold of both of them and launches them backwards from the blast as it sweeps outward.

It’s a jutsu that has sent greater ninja cowering, and he’s expecting as much from the children— they are out of their league, out of their element, and he’s expecting it to register now, expecting them to finally bolt.

They do the opposite. Less than fifteen seconds after the release of the jutsu a wheel of water comes spinning through the flames, a sawblade of emerald liquid that clips Orochimaru in the shoulder with startling force. It cuts the flaming atmosphere in half, whirling into the air, and as the water dissipates Orochimaru catches sight of gleaming metal—the kunoichi’s chakram, already spinning back towards her as if by magnetic pull. They’d taken shelter from his jutsu within the cage of the Bodhi’s branches, nearly indestructible at their iron heartwood cores, the sacred bark scorched but intact.

But Orochimaru sees his advantage in that moment—the pink haired child has thrown herself forward for her attack, and the Uzumaki had been knocked apart from his fellows by the impact of the blast, leaving Uchiha Sasuke temporarily exposed.

Finally.

He dives, going in fast for his strike, and bites.

But it only goes half-right— only one seal-charged fang sinks home—the other feels like it strikes right into solid metal; the black fabric the boy is wearing is thick and reinforced with something heavy, and Orochimaru doesn’t have time for a second attempt before the menace of an Uzumaki is there, strike cracking again into Orochimaru’s cheekbone and sending him reeling. There is more chakra in the blow than there had been before, the resonating energy between the three Genin reaches a crescendo high, and for a moment Orochimaru almost knows what's going to happen before it does.

He rights himself just in time to track the kunoichi honing in on his blind spot, and he turns, aims a crushing kenjutsu strike designed to break bone and shatter steel even as he readies an earth jutsu to bury the remains.

But something is wrong—his strike hits the kunoichi’s cross block and holds, denying him the satisfying crunch of pulverising bone. When he turns to look he finds the skin across the girl’s arms blooming with chakra lattices, feeding matrixes of hardened skin linking and overlapping like the scales of a dragon.

He moves to release his earth-style Catastrophe but the chakra never makes it past his fingers, the Uchiha’s eyes are spinning, Sharingan fully formed, and the boy’s fist smashes into the chakra with a perfectly calculated counter-force, neutralizing the earth chakra with an opposite spin of lightning chakra before it even manages to take any kind of form. That requires chakra the boy should not have, technical prowess he should not possess, and before he’s even finished he’s whipping out the katana from the sheath on his lower back, using the extra reach to force Orochimaru back from the wicked sharp tip, which claves close enough to his nose to slice through his hair.
The kunoichi uses the opportunity to duck his guard and smash an open palm into his chest, one laden with enough paralytic ninjutsu to stop even him for a handful of seconds.

And that handful of seconds is all the fucking Uzumaki needs to slam a fully articulated seal dead center into his back.

It a chakra lock, he knows the type; and it should be far outside the range of a Genin’s ability, but it’s enough to flash freeze his chakra in his vessels, leaving him without recourse until he counters it. The placement is no accident; if he were not the man he is then he would not even be able to reach the point at which it is placed enough to undo it. But his bones bend where others will not, and he will be free soon enough.

He is still caught on the fact that this should not be possible, that no matter how strong these Genin are they are still children and could not possibly possess this much raw chakra–

The three Genin leap back and dread floods the air, because all around him power surges from each corner of the triangle they’ve formed with their bodies, hands raised in preparation for hand signs. This chakra, this deadly dense rush that makes the atmosphere heavy with its mere presence like deep-sea pressure, is one he recognises at once.

He turns his eyes to fix on the blond-haired blue-eyed menace only find those eyes are no longer blue at all, but amber bright and slit pupilled and dangerous, and the Kyuubi no Kitsune’s power saturates everything.

There are seals glowing, he can see them now, at the center of each of the Genin’s upper chests, just below the throat. The power of the seals shine even through the dark fabric of their tops, intricate traces Orochimaru can’t even comprehend.

~Bad move.~ He hears around him suddenly, a rumbling growl of a voice too deep to be human, spoken with malice and amusement in equal measure. ~Looks like the snake bit off more than he could chew and choked.~

All around him the air thrums with power as the Genin flick their hands through signs, and Orochimaru knows those sequences–

“Katon!”

“Fuuton!”

“Suiton!”

They shout, and then again all at once, “Raijin Taihou!”

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The devastation of their combination jutsu is unreal.

The thunder god canon is an A-rank jutsu, one of their sensei’s favourites, and it is the strongest of their elemental fusion ninjutsu. Normally they can hardly manage it with full energy reserves, let alone in a regular battle, but Kurama’s chakra can more than make up for what they lost in the fight.
Naruto looks down as the flow splitter seal on his chest degrades away, and Sakura sways on her feet next to him. He steadies her with a hand on her shoulder, noting the blackening bruises on her arms as the chakra lattices retreat back from her skin.

Sasuke lets out a grunt of pain on his other side and leans into him, a hand gripping the point on his neck where the creepy asshole had bitten him.

“Fuck.” He spits.

He’s about to peel back the collar of his friend’s top and inspect the damage when Kurama’s voice stops him, a rumble still heavy with protective rage.

~Later, fishcake. It’s not over yet.~

“That shit burns.” Sakura hisses, but Naruto doesn’t ask her what she’s talking about.

He hadn’t expected that jutsu to kill the shinobi, their enemy is a powerhouse of chakra like nothing Naruto has ever seen, but the man is still standing as the ozone clears, angry chakra still pulsing out from him like crashing waves.

The impact of the messy blast of mixing elements has completely destroyed the shinobi’s plaster disguise and dealt heavy electricity burns to the whole of the arm the man had used to protect his face, as well as a swath of his side.

The man is battered and scorched, but still breathing and standing and still very very dangerous.

The last attack had been their trump card, and with the way Sakura is breathing hard and Sasuke is still listing sideways in pain, all they can hope now is that it slowed him down enough.

“You little peons are going to pay for that…” The man hisses with the fury and calculated rage of a wounded cobra, gripping his strange katana tight.

Sakura is recovering fast but Sasuke isn’t, and there’s black creeping in strange spirals up his neck like ink, like poison, and Naruto can see the pain creasing his face even as he tries to keep his feet, tries not to show how much agony he’s in.

Naruto leans down, pulls Sasuke’s arm over his shoulder and loops his arm around his middle, giving Sakura’s upper arm a squeeze with his other hand. She nods, overused muscles tensing beneath her skin as she prepares to bolt at his side, to counter their pursuer if necessary while they make a break for the tower and help.

Turns out they needn’t bother.

Naruto feels the chakra on the air and relaxes, a bite of a smile spreading over his lips, and when Sakura looks at him, a question in her eyes, Naruto’s smile just grows wider.

“Gods I love our friends.”

Only a handful of seconds after the words leave his mouth the smooth tone of a familiar voice rings out through the trees above them.

“Katon: Black Fire Artillery!”

A concussive shot of heavy black and indigo flames blasts the spot where snake-face is standing to smithereens, forcing him to leap back, even as another, harsher voice shouts;
Spinning bullets of bedrock shoot up from below, one catching the arm snake-face has flung out in front of him for defence and drilling through skin and tissue with a spray of blood.

“Guys! Sakura!”

“Guys! Sakura!”

“Guys! Sakura!”

“Guys! Sakura!”

“Guys! Sakura!”

“You okay? What’s going on, who is this creep?” Ino asks as she tucks an arm around Sakura’s middle and lets her lean, her other hand gripping her nagamaki high up towards the blade, the shaft braced along her forearm.

“He just jumped us out of nowhere. He’s fucking crazy strong, you need to be careful.”

Ino nods, turning back to where the rest of team 10 and the whole of team 8 are peppering the area with attacks; Shikamaru cloaking and uncloaking them in turns so that it looks like the attacks are coming from nowhere at all as snake-face is forced back, his slit-pupiled eyes darting between the Genin and the surrounding woods as if weighing his options. “What the hell does he want?” Ino demands.

“He was after Sasuke. Fuck if I know why.” Naruto snarls; he doesn’t like the way Sasuke doesn't bother adding anything, too focused on his own breathing to respond himself. “The asshole bit him and injected him with something.”

Ino looks about ready to say her piece about that but teams 10 and 8 take that moment to fall back, touching down with them in the massive cradle of the Bodhi’s branches, Shino and Hinata at Sasuke’s side, Kiba and Shikamaru at Naruto’s, Choji joining Ino at Sakura’s.

“Are you guys alright?” Hinata asks, her byakugan pulling the skin around her eyes tight as she checks them over without waiting for a response.

“Define ‘alright’.” Sasuke mutters as Hinata sucks in a breath.

“What is that?” She exclaims, bending forward to examine the black mass of inky chakra at the seam between Sasuke’s neck and shoulder.

“I think it might be a botched seal or something. We need to find somewhere safe so I can take an actual look.” Naruto answers.

“Freak took off.” Kiba interrupts, jerking Naruto’s attention up.

True enough the strange shinobi has vanished, leaving nothing but traces of chakra and blood spatter behind.

“We made too much of a scene, I think.” Shino adds.

“You guys in one piece?” Shikamaru asks, sharp eyes trailing over them in search of injury. “We felt Kurama’s chakra and figured it was bad.”

“We felt Kurama’s and the freak’s chakra from two miles out and figured it was really bad.” Kiba corrects.

Naruto shakes his head. “Beat up and chakra deprived, but we’ll live. Other than Sasuke, Sakura took the worst hit.”
“Shika, a little help here.”

Ino is holding Sakura’s arms tenderly by the wrist, surveying the deep black and purple bruises over the backs of her forearms. Her left is the worst, dark and ugly and turning yellowish-green around the edges.

“I’m fine.” Sakura grouches. “I can do it myself.”

“Don’t be troublesome.” Shikamaru chastises, coming over and reaching to cradle her left arm carefully in one palm, then forming the hand signs necessary to repair a deep-tissue contusion.

“Worst hit, my ass.” Sasuke mutters after he’s out of earshot, glaring at Naruto even around his obvious pain. “Don’t think I didn’t see you take that fucking holocaust to the back.”

“I’m fine, jerk. It’s already healed.” He mutters.

“Liar.”

Kurama snickers in the back of his head at that. ~Twerp knows you too well.~

“Oh go back to sleep.” Naruto grumps back. “And thanks.”

~Always gonna protect you kit, whether you like it or not. And you be sure to let your sensei know that this exactly why I don’t approve of this little arrangement.~

“There was no way he’d know we’d be attacked by some super-powered maniac. Besides, you jumped in when we needed you.”

~Humph.~

“Ugh. You never let me get away with anything.” He complains aloud, teasing, and Sasuke manages a smirk.

“Not a chance.”

“How bad is it?” Naruto asks, eyes tracing the sharp curls of chakra. He can almost make out some sort of symbol twisted up in the middle, but the rest is warped beyond any sort of recognition.

“My chakra veins hurt.” Sasuke mutters sourly. “Which is stupid.”

Naruto’s surprised chuckle is half laugh half sigh of relief. “Come on,” he says, holding his friend a bit tighter despite the pain that flares across his back at the motion. “We need to get to the tower.”

“We will cover you.” Shino states firmly, taking out his little pair of mechanical insects. They look like a mix between a hornet and dragonfly, brass and silver clockwork with two sets of wings for stability, each one the size of a hummingbird. He charges them and sets them loose, no doubt to watch the area for any sign of snake-face. “In case your attacker decides to make a second attempt.”

Shikamaru nods as he finishes up helping Sakura with her bruises. “Lotus formation.” he decides, tone taking on that of command. “Shino Kiba and Choji flanking team 7, Hinata and I scouting forward, and Ino will watch our backs. Sound good?”

“Look at Nara, the man with a plan.” Kiba teases, causing Shikamaru to huff. Kiba’s smile is
genuine though and he adds; “You know what you’re doing, Shika. We’ll follow you.”

Shikamaru nods and Hinata flashes forward to join him, keeping her byakugan active. Sakura takes up Sasuke’s other arm, pulling it over he strong shoulders and looping her arm next to Naruto’s as Choji and Shino maneuver to their five and seven o’clock and Kiba takes the head at their twelve.

Ino steps behind them, and they all take off into the trees.

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A poor unsuspecting Sound team makes the mistake of getting in their way, and Naruto laughs as Hinata hands them their earth scroll, the last of the six they needed, with a soft rib about these teams needing more training.

Naruto thinks that’s the understatement of the century— the ballsy asshole that was the Oto team’s leader had stepped forward and threatened them, all nine of them, and Kiba had bent over and nearly suffocated himself laughing at the sheer idiocy of it.

Shikamaru had just been plain pissed off.

He, Ino and Hinata had proceeded to rip the Oto team to shreds in record time while team 7 watched from their place sandwiched between Choji, Shino, and Kiba; all three of which had refused to move to take part.

And since neither team actually needed another scroll, team 7 had added it to complete their collection.

“Yeah.” Naruto mutters softly, for the ears of his teammates only. “I love our friends.”

Sakura laughs and smiles, her eyes sparkling, and Sasuke’s smile is reserved, but entirely genuine.
I know I'm so terrible, but sometimes it's hard to write all these brats and their big personalities, plus work and school, but chapters don't get posted until I'm satisfied with them.

Another monster of a chapter, about as long as the last one if not longer.

Got some sand sibs and a LOT of Kakashi feels cuz I'm a sucker for those.

Enjoy!

(I regret nothing.)

Genma admits he’s forgotten some things in his life.

He’d forgotten his Shinobi ID number two weeks after he’d become a Genin and had to refamiliarize himself with a new one when he became a Chunin.

He’d forgotten his own birthday two years ago when he came home on the heels of a mission and had to refamiliarize himself with Raidou’s Disappointed Look.

He’d forgotten how terrifying Hatake Kakashi could be when he was really truly angry, and is currently refamiliarizing himself with the way the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end just at the proximity, the way the air crackles with ozone like the promise of a natural disaster.

Genma is beginning to wonder if he should scoot a couple of meters to the right. Or a couple kilometers.

“I’m sorry.” Kakashi states with perfect unruffled calm, except the chakra in the air is anything but calm. “But did you just tell me that I can’t see my own Genin?”

The Chunin looks about ready to internally combust just standing there, but he holds his ground admirably, which is more than can be said of Genma had he been in the same position.

“I understand your concern Jounin-sama, but if you go to the tower now you’ll invalidate the second exam results! If you would please just wait until the end of the test period–”

“What’s going on?”

The voice is easily recognisable as Iruka’s, and Genma’s relief is immediate– he’s always been shitty at crisis negotiation and Kakashi looks about ready to go full goddamned papa-wolf on this poor unsuspecting Chuunin.

The Chuunin looks relieved for about a fraction of a second before he seems to register that most of the kids in the exams right now are his students, and abruptly goes pale again.

“The chakra monitors cut out over sections 28-34 of the Forest.” Kurenai states from over by the control console. She’s been fiddling with the mechanics for a while– as the most technologically apt of the Jounin present– checking for faults in the regulators and chakra transcriptors. “It’s not a
problem on this end, either.” She states with finality, rising out of her crouch and wiping oil off on her thigh wraps. “Something happened on the sensing end to take them offline.”

“There was a chakra surge thirty-four minutes into the blackout.” Kakashi rumbles to Iruka, voice a hair short of a growl. “Jounin level, if not higher. My team was in the center of the affected areas, and not just mine.”

Iruka’s eyes fix on the Chuunin as he steps forward, placing his paperwork calmly down on one of the nearby tables and placing himself pointedly into Kakashi’s personal space, which is either brave or absolutely nuts. Kakashi moves to adjust his stance somewhat unconsciously, and the atmosphere thins out again.

“Rikka,” Iruka addresses the administrator firmly. “Explain to me exactly what happened.”

The kid takes a deep breath. “Due to an unknown malfunction, roughly half an hour ago, chakra screening visuals of the Forest of Death cut out over the south-central portion. We’ve been working to reestablish connection, but in the interim we’ve lost the chakra sight-signatures of Konoha teams 7, 8, and 10, as well as Taki’s team 4, Kusa’s team 1, and Oto’s team 2.”

“The foreign chakra flare was 9 minutes ago.” Kakashi snaps, interrupting. “I will not stand here twiddling my thumbs over protocol when my team is in possibly lethal danger.” The atmosphere flares thick and angry again with the words, and Iruka has to put a hand on Kakashi’s arm to remind him to check his temper. Asuma is practically vibrating on Genma’s other side, jaw clenched so tight his cigarette is practically pulp between his teeth.

“Jounin interference from any country will invalidate the exams!” Rikka snaps back, and Iruka puts a hand on his chest to keep him several paces back. It’s probably the only reason the kid is still unharmed, because Genma knows that animal stirring behind Kakashi’s eyes– It’s been a very long time since Kakashi has dared care about anything enough to want to defend it, and protective instinct runs high and feral in Hatake blood no matter how it’s tempered– If Kakashi believes his kids are in danger, nothing on this earth will stop him from getting to them; the Sandaime could stand in his way and it wouldn't matter.

“There’s interference already!” Asuma snarls, stepping forward. “If there’s a breach in the exams and we do nothing–”

“Enough.”

Iruka’s voice is low and calm, but there’s a power to it that draws the attention and focus of every eye in the room. It stills the vibration of conflict in the air, and everything quiets.

Once the room has stilled, Iruka focuses on the Chuunin administrator. “Rikka, you will go to the Hokage and file an Alert of Potential Infiltration.” His tone brooks no argument, but the kid tries anyway.

“But–”

“It wasn’t a suggestion, Rikka.” Iruka cuts in. “It’s what you should have done as soon as you were alerted to the presence of foreign chakra in the exam. Go now.”

Chastised, the boy steps away, stooping to fetch a scroll from beside one of the desks before he goes.

Iruka turns back to Kakashi. “You have better control over your temper than that.” He accuses. “Which means it was more than just a chakra spike that’s getting to you.”
“It wasn’t just foreign chakra.” Kakashi rumbles. “It was the fox’s too.”

Iruka’s eyes flash wide. “You’re sure?”

“Positive.”

Iruka’s eyes track sideways as he thinks, fingers tapping idly against Kakashi’s arm.

“I’m not going to stand here and do nothing,” Kakashi says firmly, “Exam or no exam.”

“I’m not asking you to.” Iruka assures. “They make allowances for interference on the basis of medical emergency. Physicians registered to specific candidates have even more leeway.”

“Ikari.” Kakashi surmises.

Iruka nods and turns to Genma, eyebrow raised expectantly.

Genma can feel himself go a little green at the mere notion. “What, me? No way, make him do it.” he whines, gesturing to Kakashi.

Iruka narrows his eyes dangerously.

Genma suppresses a flinch. “If I die in that office it’s on you.” He mutters.

Iruka’s response is dust dry. “I’ll take my chances.”

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Kankuro drums his fingers quietly against the point of his hip as he leans against the tower wall, resisting the urge to scratch at his puppeteer’s paint. Temari is sitting at his right, placing a slim adhesive bandage over a shuriken gash on her leg, the only open wound obtained between the three of them.

Gaara stands stick straight on his other side, his back a line parallel with the pale grey walls. He’s been completely silent since they arrived, even more eerily than usual, his presence filling the air of the room with a prolonged uneasy stillness. His eyes are far-away and glassy in a manner that makes Kankuro nervous, red hair falling over the sheen of lightless turquoise like slashes of blood.

They’re currently the only ones in the Tower and have been for a while, nearly a full hour if Kankaro had to guess; there are no clocks on the walls and no windows on this floor to judge sunlight, so it’s impossible to be accurate.

There’s been no signs of the other teams so far, not even the strange dark dressed Konoha shinobi that had been tripping up Kankuro’s instincts since the exams began. The team they had encountered and obtained their heaven scroll from had been tragically weak, easy prey, but he still can’t shake the feeling they got lucky.

Temari smacks him in the leg hard enough that he winces– she’s still finishing up on puberty and doesn’t know her own strength sometimes– and he looks down to find her smirking at him.

“You’re gonna put creases in your face paint.”
Kankuro gives her a wry half smile in return. “I know, I just… Still getting a weird feeling is all.”

“You and your feelings.” Temari murmurs back, almost fond, shifting to stand and smoothing the wrinkles out of her thigh wraps absently.

A flare of chakra and intent draws Kankuro’s attention away from his sister temporarily. “Someone’s coming.”

A bare second later the doors to the tower are thrown open, startling the Chuunin proctor on duty into leaping out of her chair. Into the space of the tower spills all nine of the strange Konoha Genin that have been giving Kankuro’s nerves a run for their ryo since test one. Most of them are surrounding a dark haired boy that held up by his teammates; a blond haired bright eyed boy and a girl with rosey ponytail. They move immediately to one of the alcoves set into the walls, laden with cushions meant for the teams to rest on while they wait for the testing period to end.

The tension in the room immediately ratchets into high gear as the nine strange Konoha-nin crowd into the relative privacy of the space, completely ignoring the proctor when she attempts to initially get their attention.

Kankuro immediately attunes his senses on their conversation, straining his ears to catch the intense and lowered voices. He scrapes together what information he’s been able to glean on them–intelligence gathering has always been a strong skill of his– and tries to piece together their conversation.

He knows very little about the team in the center– they’d been on opposite-ended gates during the start of the second test and across the room from one another during the first, so other than noting a strange proficiency at nonverbal communication, Kankuro knows virtually nothing about them.

Other than that he knows a few names; the sharp-eyed Genin with the high jagged pony-tail goes by Shikamaru, and the blonde kunoichi on his right is Ina or Ino or something similar. He knows that the bigger boy in the red armour is their other teammate but hasn’t caught his name, and the Gennin with the nin-dog on the other team is known as Kiba. Kankuro has little information on the final two, though he recognises the girl as a Hyuuga on sight– their clan is famous even in Suna.

The black haired boy in the center sits down heavily on the floor with his back pressed hard against the wall. The tendons in his neck stick out sharply in otherwise well-concealed pain, one hand clamped like a vice over the junction between his neck and shoulder. The blond boy attempts to get a look at whatever is under the injured one’s hand, but the darker boy waves him off with a growled statement that Kankuro doesn’t hear, and the two bicker quietly back and forth before blondie backs off a little, grudgingly, and cedes his spot next to him to make room for the Hyuuga girl.

Kankuro sees the veins around her eyes pulse and the skin tighten, and she speaks gently, an askance of permission maybe.

The dark boy nods and slowly lifts his hand, but Kankuro doesn’t see what’s underneath it because the Hyuuga’s shoulders block out his line of sight as she moves to examine whatever it is.

“Off, idiot.” The dark boy snaps with emphasis at blondie, loud enough for Kankuro to hear.

“Bossy.” Blondie grumbles.

“You need your back looked at, moron.” Their kunoichi teammate agrees. She’s sitting beside her darker cohort and looks mildly out of breath, the sharp-eyed Shikamaru kneeling down beside her.
“What’s wrong with his back?” The other blonde, Ino, asks. Her clear-sky eyes scan the dark, somewhat shiny material over the boy’s back. “Nothing looks scorched.”

“Armour-silk doesn’t burn.” Shikamaru explains.

Is that some kind of body armour? Kankuro wonders, filing the information away for later.

The wolfish Kiba hisses through his sharp teeth when blondie pulls the strange top over his head, and even Kankuro finds himself wincing sympathetically as it peels away from a swath of vicious second-degree burns, angry red and sickly yellow and even unnaturally green in some places.

“The hell man, what happened to your healing factor?”

“He’s suppressing it on purpose.” The dark boy answers before his blond companion can, the disapproval in his voice obvious.

The boy just sticks his tongue out childishly in response.

Their teammate rolls her eyes and tries to sit up further. “He still should have healed at least some already. The chakra must have left behind corrosive residue that needs to be purified—”

Shikamaru places a hand on her shoulder to stop her advance and raises an eyebrow. “Yeah, I don’t think so.” He says firmly. “Your chakra vessels are still damaged too close to your wrists.”

The kunoichi’s mouth tightens in stubborn defiance that Kankuro finds familiar; Temari’s lips perse the same way right before she’s about to tell some to fuck-the-hell-off.

But before she can say anything further one of the other Genin, a boy with a heavy hooded jacket and sunglasses perched on his nose despite being indoors, sits back on his heels at her other side.

“Allow me, please.” he offers, soft and polite. “Show me what I need to do and I will replicate it to the best of my ability.”

The kunoichi doesn’t hesitate long before nodding, just a second or two of indecision before she begins to walk him through a half-dozen hand signs. “The chakra wash only needs to be a few seconds long at each pass, you just have to make sure the emission is high enough to counter…” she hesitates for a fraction of a second. “You know.”

Glasses boy nods like he does. “Of course,” and moves to blondie’s side.

“Now let me see those again.” Shikamaru says to the pink-haired kunoichi, sitting cross-legged and reaching for her arms.

She grumbles but gives them over, and Kankuro notices some pretty nasty bruises painting the surface of her forearms that, oddly enough, look more than a day old.

Kankuro continues watching, bemused and wary and inexplicably fascinated as they talk and work and bicker and fuss over one another in easy sibling-like camaraderie that’s more than a little unsettling.

Kankuro knows abstractly that Konoha-nin are known for their teamwork, but this kind of inter-team trust and cooperation is not something he’s ever witnessed himself—competition between teams and colleagues in Suna is highly encouraged to develop individual strength and healthy
suspicion of others, so this kind of thing is not something the three of them are at all familiar with.

“The proctors are acting weird.” Temari says finally, peering around Kankuro to get a better look at the alcove. “What’s going on over there?”

But apparently that’s enough attention to trip some nerves, because Shikamaru turns in that moment to level an ebony eye on them, lurking on the periphery of the room the way they are, and makes a subtle gesture to his teammate in the red armour.

The bigger boy looks over at them, then pointedly steps to the side and seems to grow a dozen centimeters, shielding the majority of the alcove with his bulk and neatly cutting off Kankuro’s line of sight.

“Dammit.” He mutters under his breath. “I was getting some good intel.”

“Nevermind that.” Temari snaps. “Look.”

She shrugs her shoulder in the direction of the door, where the Chuunin that has taken and tested their scrolls is talking fast and businesslike with the one that’s been babysitting them.

The former has, tucked in his arms, no less than ten scrolls, enough for five teams when only three more have entered.

“The fuck is wrong with this test?” Kankuro mutters.

Temari hums her agreement and starts pointedly sharpening her kunai.

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“You little shits just can’t do anything by halves, can you?”

Naruto huffs. “It’s not like we did it on purpose.”

“Uh-huh.” Ryouta grumbles, unconvinced, casually unrolling a pair of seal tags from the wad in his pocket and placing a Barrier of Silence up around the little nook the Rookie Nine have packed themselves into. “Damage report.”

“We’re fine.” The Uchiha insists stubbornly.

“Wasn’t asking you, shrimp.” Ryouta counters, turning to Sakura. “Damage report.”

“For the most part, nothing we couldn’t handle, though it could have been much worse.” She admits. “Biggest problem is that whoever hit us was after Sasuke, and managed to get him with some weird kind of jutsu that’s causing him pretty serious pain.”

Ryouta narrows a glare at the Uchiha. “‘Fine’ my ass.” He grumbles as he sits, crossing his legs in the center of the alcove and pulling out his diagnostic kit. “Now, from the beginning, so that I have something conclusive to tell your homicidal sensei. What happened?”

He checks Sasuke out first while they explain, listening as Hinata rattles off her observations to
him about strange chakra’s depth and charge and nature and things only a Hyuuga could glean, all while Naruto recounts the event from start to finish, pausing every once in a while to let Sakura or Shikamaru add their pieces.

He can feel his blood pressure jacking up higher with every word, first in disbelief and then in full goddamn fury, and his chest is filling with some bizarre mixture of disbelief and protective rage; the first because the longer Naruto speaks the more certain Ryouta is that he knows exactly who attacked them, and the second because if that snake bastard gets within a 20 klick radius of these kids again he’s going to find out the hard way that they are protected.

Shiki’s voice pops up in the back of his head like a conscience would if Ryouta had one, reminding him to rein in his temper before it gets away from him.

He finishes up patching Sakura’s damaged forearms and adds a chakra cleanser just to calm his own nerves, since Naruto’s back is already healing fine and doesn’t require his intervention. He takes a deep breath through his nose, packing up what little of his supplies he had to use and tucking the kit back into his vest.

“Hey Uchiha, do me solid, will you?”

Sasuke blinks at him curiously, tilting his head a little. “Sure, what is it?”

Ryouta fishes into his hip pocket for the little glass sphere he needs. He’d almost forgotten he had the thing— it’s been more than half a decade since it’s been of any kind of use to anyone— and he makes a mental note to give Shiki another raise for reminding him the thing existed.

“I know you were pretty young so you might not remember,” he says as he holds out the glass sphere suspended between two fingers, “but do you know what this is?”

To the untrained gaze it looks like a regular old glass eye, solid polished white but for the ring of a plain grey iris and the inky dot of the pupil, but Sasuke clearly recognizes it on some level, reaching out to take it from Ryouta’s fingers.

“I think… I remember my father having shelves of them on stands in his office. But they were different, red in the iris like Uchiha eyes without the tomoe.” Sasuke says softly, eyes creased in the corners as he tries to remember. He wouldn’t be the first Uchiha to be frustrated by the fuzziness of memories recalled before the activation of their sharingan.

“That’s because this one is empty.” Ryouta explains. “The Uchiha used them to present eyewitness reports to the Hokage and various councils. It retains visual information and allows it to be projected to an audience.”

Sasuke nods in understanding. “How do I fill it?”

Ryouta shows him how to charge the retainer and how to use eye contact to link it’s chakra based memory to Sasuke’s photographic one. The process, Mnemoric Linking, is something only a fully developed Sharingan is capable of, the process of projecting memory outward in the form of a complex chakra imprint similar to how one might spin a high level genjutsu. The boy catches on fast, as Ryouta knew he would, and his only question after that is where he should start remembering.

When he’s finished, Ryouta pockets the now crimson eye and stands.

“I have to report to the Hokage now. Do not get into any more S-class fights while my back is turned, alright? And do me a favor.”
The terrible trio actually sits back and listens, which is a tad freaky.

He pulls one of his cigarettes out to put preemptively between his teeth, but doesn’t light it. “As soon as this portion of the exam is up, go see your godsdamned sensei, will you? Before he actually goes for the exam administrators with his 

“I’m going to die.”

“You’re not going to die, Aoba.”

“Lies.”

Hayate’s only response is a wrenching cough, and Aoba instantly feels guilty for whining.

“Look, I’ll do it, obviously, but I’m just warning you that there is a high probability of my death occurring down in the arena.”

“It’s not going to get you killed.” Hayate informs him dourly, working the lid off his pill bottle and pouring a pair of bright orange capsules into his palm. “Maimed at most.”

Aoba hands him his canteen with a grimace. “Thank you, I feel much better now.” he grumbles, the bite of sarcasm softened by the lines of concern on his face. “You gonna be alright?”

“Not the first attack I’ve had, Aoba.” Hayate murmurs, popping his pills and taking and drink. “I’ll be fine.”

“Want me to get Yugao?” Aoba asks, taking his canteen when Hayate hands it back. His friend shakes his head.

“No, I don’t want her to worry. She has enough on her plate right now.”

“She’s your partner, she’s got a right to worry about you.” Aoba chastises, but doesn’t press further, leaning over to glance at the papers Hayate is putting together in front of him. The little administration room is quiet, the only noise coming from the occasional soft thumping of feet down the hall outside.

Hayate points out a few key bits on the papers and begins to explain Aoba’s new duties as proctor. “So according to the rosters, seven teams made it through second portion, which needs to be about halved before the third portion. We’re doing single-round knockout elimination as a preliminary.”

“Which teams made it? Other than the Rookie Nine, obviously.” Aoba says with a careless wave of his hand, and Hayate laughs.

“Gai’s team did, as did the Sand team and one of the Cloud teams. Another of our teams as well, though one of their members dropped out, so it’s just two of them remaining.”

Aoba runs the numbers and goes pale. “Uh, doesn’t that mean that, by default, at least two of the Rookie Nine will be fighting each other?”

“You’re not going to die.” Hayate reiterates, then goes back to the sheet and continues. “Because of
the number of applicants each fight has a time limit of one hour. You have right of judgment for
ties, and can rule either a double elimination or a dual victory if both applicants show continued
promise.”

“Why the change in protocol?” he asks, flipping the roster around to skim his eyes over the Kumoteam that passed. That probably means the Raikage is going to be hanging around. Fabulous.
“There wasn’t a time limit before, and it was supposed to be an all or nothing brawl.”

“Sandaime is showing off, I think. He wants as much of a chance for a spectacle as possible, and
the Rookie Nine are the definition of a spectacle. This way there’s a larger chance of more of them
making it through, bigger fights, more to rub in A and Rasa’s face.”

“Fair enough.” Aoba allows, standing up from the table and cocking a hip against it as he gathers
the papers he needs.

But then he starts and almost slings them to the four corners of the room when Anko screams
down the hall so fast the air current slams the door to the room shut, and Aoba really did not need
that heart attack today thanks.

“What the hell crawled down her crop top?” Aoba growls.

Hayate blinks at the still vibrating door. “Not sure I want to know.”

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“Kakashi-sensei!”

The backstage of the testing arena suddenly fills with the sound of Sakura’s voice, and Kakashi
breaks off his conversation with Gai mid-sentence to turn.

He will deny to his dying breath the sigh of relief that leaves his mouth when he’s sees the three of
them making their way over to him, deny the way his muscles unlock and his shoulders dip with
gratitude.

Sakura runs up and leaps at him, and he turns enough to catch her at the curve of his shoulder with
one arm, glad for the evidence that she’s whole and healthy and unhurt. She’s a little rattled,
Kakashi can tell by the slight tremble in her usually iron spine, and knows that whatever happened,
it could have been far worse than it was.

“Sensei.”

And that Sasuke’s voice, low and calm, but there’s an uneasy tone beneath the word that sends
Kakashi’s hackles up, and Naruto hasn’t said anything at all, and that’s more telling than anything
else.

He steps away from Gai, moving to kneel before them and toning his voice low so that only they
can hear. Sakura doesn’t release her hold from around his neck so Kakashi makes no move to put
her down, instead adjusting so that she’s almost sitting on his shoulder instead.

“I am so proud of you.”
Kakashi keeps his voice quiet and clear and doesn’t repeat it, but Sasuke’s breath hitches audibly and Naruto’s eyes go a little wide.

Kakashi doesn’t say it often– he prefers to show it, to let them know through gestures and subtler things; because Kakashi has never really been good with words that mean anything, is so clumsy with the emotion that clogs up his chest that the syllables jumble and stick in his throat.

But right now he needs to say it, needs to force the words out and make them tangible. Concrete.

They need to know that what they’ve done is nothing short of incredible.

They all nod but don’t respond for a long minute, and Kakashi takes another deep breath.

“You’ve passed.” he says firmly.

And that does startle words out of them, surprised huffs of ‘what?’ and ‘but the exam isn’t over’ and ‘seriously?’.

“In light of the events that took place in the Forest of Death during that exam’s second phase,” he clarifies, “And the skill and ingenuity displayed during the unexpected conflict, team 7 of Konoha has been granted an automatic pass regardless of the outcome of the exam’s third phase.” Kakashi relays verbatim from the declaration of the council, and he’s really not so sure why all his kids look so surprised.

The decision of the exam board had been unanimous after all.

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Kakashi lurks in the corner of the room beside Shikaku as Ryouta taps his foot grumpily in the center before the curved table at which the council is seated, the Sandaime smoking irritably at the center. Ryouta isn’t for once, which is surprising because it either means that he’s somehow completely out of cigarettes or he’s too stressed to smoke, which is generally bad news for anyone within snapping distance. He’s not the only one who thinks so, if the way the exam board is leaning back in their chairs is any indication.

He’s already given his rendition of events as conveyed to him by the teams involved, primarily team 7 but also the side testimony of teams 10 and 8.

Old Homura is the first to speak up. “Are we certain of the level of individual the contestants encountered? They are only Genin after all, it’s quite possible they misinterpreted.”

“It really isn’t.” Ryouta counters evenly. “The report was corroborated by peers, and there is another factor that adds credibility to it.

“Oh?” Sarutobi queries. “And what might that be?”

“All three of them report that the attacking shinobi was wearing the face of a Kusa-nin as a disguise, and that they managed to do enough damage to remove the facade. According to their report, the shinobi had some very… distinctive clan markings.”

“What kind of markings exactly?”
“Violet.” Ryouta says grimly. “Pointed and curved over the tops of the eyes.”

All the blood abruptly drains from Sarutobi’s face.

“Please tell me you’re not serious.”

“Deadly.”

“Oh don’t be obtuse!” Madame Utatane crows. “That traitor doesn’t have the nerve to come back here, not after all these years.”

“He has more than nerve.” Ryouta snarls. “He has motive.”

“No.” Homura denies. “The children must have seen wrong.”

Kakashi wants to snarl at them that his ‘children’ have more common sense and better reasoning skills than some people in this room, but Shikaku taps knuckle subtly against his arm and shakes his head minutely.

*It wouldn’t help*. The gesture says.

Kakashi takes a deep breath through his nose and purposefully relaxes each of his muscles one by one, allowing himself only the clench of his fist hidden tucked in his pocket.

This isn’t like him– it’s not in his nature to be impulsive, to act irrationally, but protective instinct is wreaking havoc with his usually adamant control, and being stuck here unable to act grates on his nerves like an iron file.

“See, I thought you might say something like that.” Ryouta says easily, adding a vindictive edge to a grin that's all teeth, and reaches into his hip pouch to pull out something small and spherical, something Kakashi hasn’t seen outside the mission archives since the fall of the Uchiha clan– an ocular retainer. “So I brought some proof, courtesy of Uchiha Sasuke, if you'd care to have a look.”

The last part of the sentence is purposefully directed first at Homura, and then at Utatane. A scathing remark at their tendency towards willful ignorance and Ryouta’s opinion on it.

Before either council member can even respond to the implied slight against their character, Sarutobi extends a wrinkled had and makes a statement that cuts off their protests. “Give it here, Ikari. I will be the judge.”

Ryouta tosses the sphere underhanded and Hiruzen catches it at the same time he makes a hand sign.

*“Katon: Sun Flutter.”*

The Hokage’s palm alights around the retainer with golden fire that is more light than heat, bright enough to cast the walls in a soft yellow akin to sunbeams. For a moment nothing happens, the light washes into all the corners and casts lengths of flickering shadow, and then the sphere nestled in Sarutobi’s hand begins to glow like a hot coal, and Ryouta steps out of the way as the retainer flashes.

The air fills with a soft hum as light streams from the point of the iris and paints the wall opposite the Hokage with colour. There’s a pause, a stutter of green leaves and dark tree trunks tripping into motion, and the memory begins to play in a wide sheet of light for the whole room to see.
For the beginning of the memory, the council is quiet. But as the attack progresses and Kakashi watches his team counter and attack and protect each other against this overwhelming force, the silence changes.

Quite turns to hush, hush to disbelief, disbelief to awe. Hands rise to mouths in an attempt to cover surprise, Homura and Utatane share pinched expressions of confusion, Hiruzen’s eyes are focused wide and unblinking.

In that moment Kakashi knows that they see a portion of something that he has always seen, determination and strength and intelligence and a level of potential that is truly genuinely frightening.

They see three twelve year old Genin during their first Chuunin exam giving pause to a legend, a legend of power and singular strength that underestimated them and paid for that mistake, a mistake that cost him not only his pride but his chance to get at what he so obviously came for.

They see a single young Konoha team fight a Sannin to a standstill, see their ingenuity and fortitude and faith surmount the insurmountable.

It’s clear now that no one in this room had any idea what they were about to see, no inclination of the magnitude of this discovery, a revelation that has nothing to do with the potential infiltration of an S-rank missing nin.

And still they only see a faction of what Kakashi sees.

Because as Kakashi watches the memory play out, watches the way the three of them move and read each other and fight in vicious perfect tandem, surprise is not an emotion he feels.

Pride is.

Teams 8 and 10 intervene and not long afterwards the memory cuts out, leaving the room dim and charged with dumbstruck silence.

After a long moment Hiruzen begins to rattle off orders to bring the village to alert level three, and to activate team adherence protocols to track down Orochimaru if he’s still in the village, or root out his influence if he isn’t. Shikaku nods his acknowledgement and vanishes in shadow, there one blink and gone the next.

Out of the following silence madam Chinami, chairman of the exam board, moves for team 7’s immediate acceptance for the rank of Chunin.

Not a single voice dissuades her.

~<>~

“But wait, what about your test, sensei?” Sakura demands, hopping off his shoulder so that she can face him.

Kakashi blinks at the three of them, at the sudden stubbornness in bright eyes. “What?”

“We don’t care about the village exam.” Sasuke clarifies archly, like that much should be obvious.

“We still have to pass your exam, remember?” Naruto stresses. “That’s the whole point.”
And Kakashi’s brain just kind of… stalls.

Somewhere in the back of his head he remembers Iruka saying something about exclusive respect, remembers Ryouta and Anko both stating on separate occasions that his brats were terrors that didn’t listen to anyone else, didn’t care what anyone else thought, superiorly ranked or not. He’d thought them dramatic at the time, knows his cubs to be stubborn and willful and independent and had thought they’d just had trouble dealing with it.

But it’s true, Kakashi can see it in the surety reflected in their expressions— it’s obvious to them, a matter of fact. It doesn’t matter if they’ve already been handed a Chunin rank, because they don’t care about the village’s measure of their strength.

They care about Kakashi’s.

He starts a little when Naruto waves a hand in front of his face. “Kakashi-sensei?”

Terrifying indeed. He thinks.

Terrifying and stubborn and incredible and his.

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“Aoba-san looks a little nervous.” Ino giggles.

Shikamaru hums, trying to suppress the grin that wants to curve his lips.

*He probably should be nervous.* Shikamaru muses to himself. *Last time he got between two of our ‘Rookie Nine’ it didn’t exactly end well.*

“Probably just wants to get this show on the road before there’s too much property damage.” Is what he says aloud.

Choji chuckles as he leans forward on the railing, snapping a bite off an energy bar with his teeth.

The combat lottery rolls through the contestants, selecting one of the pair of lone Konoha nin, and then the Kunoichi of the Suna team. Shikamaru watches as the combatants take their stances in the arena, clocks the body language and chakra levels, notes the ease with which the Suna kunoichi swings her enormous fan to bear, and already knows what the outcome will be.

“Oh this looks like it’ll be fun.”

Shikamaru tracks his eyes sideways as Kiba comes over to plop down cross-legged beside him, the eager forward curve of his back and the excitement in his eyes a stark contrast to Shikamaru’s careless slouch.

“It’ll be over before you think.” Shikamaru mutters sleepily, eyes slipping closed. He stretches his other senses, feels where Kiba’s shadow touches his knee, where Choji’s crosses his, where Ino’s washes against the wall by his arm. Hinata’s glides towards them as she steps to kneel next to her teammate, Shino’s slashing by as he settles into a backwards lean against the railing next to Choji.

“The Suna team seems rather skilled.” Shino muses, securing his hood in place as a gust of chakric
wind rushes through the stadium. “It’s interesting to see the differences in style between villages, even in the small things.”


“Reflects where they grew up.” Shikamaru murmurs, cracking one eye open to observe. “The desert is an abrasive place.”

“Does that mean Kumo is a conceited place?” Kiba asks testily. “Because the arrogance coming off team supreme over there is so strong I can smell it from here.”

Shikamaru tracks his gaze sideways to size up the Cloud team. The one closest to him is the Kunoichi, platinum hair pulled up into a high tail and pale blue eyes narrowed in disdain as she watches the fight below them. The boy sitting at her feet could easily be her twin– he has the same silvery hair chopped short on one side and left long on the other, and the same impatient icy eyes. The shinobi that must be their team leader is leaning with one arm on the rail, his mahogany hair braided over a shoulder, a snobbish tilt to his mouth, a haughty angle to his jaw.

That’s not gonna last long.

“I hope I get one.”

The words come, perhaps the most unexpected, from Choji, who’s still leaning against the rail and pointedly not looking in the direction of the Kumo trio.

“Oh?” Shikamaru questions, soft and serious, and Choji nods, chewing through another energy bar.

“Mhm.” He says easily. “When we first came in they made fun of team 7 for ‘running to their sensei.’”

He says it so casually, like he’s talking about what he ate for breakfast, but Shino goes rigid next to him, Kiba’s eyes flash so hot that Hinata has to put a hand on his arm to keep him from jumping to his feet, and Ino’s nails click sharply against the metal blade of her nagamaki.

Shikamaru’s rage is a softer thing, quieter, and has no outward sign but for the subtle tightening of the skin around his eyes, the way his shadow seems to hum at his back.

“Is that right.”

Like the universe has answered some kind of unspoken request, the next battle match-up is Choji and the Kumo kunoichi.

Team 7 shows up as Choji hops over the railing, a pleasantly neutral smile spread over his features, and Shikamaru almost feels sorry for the kunoichi.

Sakura lets out a relieved breath. “Oh, just in time. Did we miss anyone else?” She asks as she leans against the wall next to Ino.

“Not yet.” The Yamanaka assures, checking her friend over for stress in a subtle sweep of her gaze from head to toe. “You manage to calm your sensei down?”

“Kakashi-sensei was actually pretty calm by the time we got there.” Naruto remarks as he drops down on the other side of Ino’s legs next to Shikamaru to extend the half circle he, Kiba, and Hinata are creating on the balcony. Sasuke slumps tiredly over Naruto’s legs, pillowing his head on
the Uzumaki’s knee with a groan and shutting his eyes.

“Is he alright?” Hinata asks softly.

“Headache.” Naruto murmurs. “His chakra is fighting with the chakra in snake-freak’s botched seal-thing.”

“Like an allergic reaction.” Kiba states, remarkably on point.

“Exactly like that, actually.” Naruto agrees.

There’s an adhesive bandage with another seal sketched overtop it pressed over the affected area of Sasuke’s neck. Naruto presses two fingers two it and the seal responds to him, flickering with delicate lines of chakra that flash and feed into Naruto’s skin.

“Diagnostic seal?” Shikamaru asks.

“Sort of. I’m trying to figure out how to pry this stupid thing off before it manages to set any further.”

“Stop freaking out so hard, idiot.” Sasuke growls unexpectedly, eyes still closed. “You’ll figure it out.”

“If it were a normal seal I would have already.” Naruto grumps back softly. “But the damn thing is so ingrained and convoluted it’s making my eyes cross.”

“Didn’t know your sensei was a hothead.” Sakura remarks to Ino, who’s eyebrow ticks up.

“Asuma-sensei?”

Sakura nods. “He was totally going a passive-aggressive round with the Kumo Jounin-sensei while we were in there.”

“He does kind of have a temper.” Shikamaru allows. “Are they heading out here soon?”

Sakura nods. “Any minute now. They had to be briefed for the potential infiltration of the exam.”

Kiba snorts. “Potential my ass.”

Akamaru barks in agreement, but the sound tapers off into a growl and Shino goes inexplicably tense.

“Hinata…”

The word is spoken as warning, a clear heads-up, and Hinata’s back stiffens just as Kiba sniffs the air experimentally and bares his teeth.

“Ugh, more arrogance. I swear if he starts this shit up again–”

“Kiba.” Hinata snaps, uncharacteristically sharp of her. “Don’t.”

Kiba’s anger banks back to a simmer in his slit pupiled eyes, but doesn’t go out. “I don’t see why you even make the effort to get through to him.” He mutters crossly. “It’s like having to watch you bang your head on a wall.”

Clan drama must be coming to a head. Shikamaru thinks grimly.
Naruto is thankfully too tired and too engrossed in monitoring Sasuke’s seal to much notice what’s going on, which is a small blessing, because it’s not otherwise like the Uzumaki to stay out of conflict. Shikamaru shifts a little anyway, stretching out and pulling one knee up in what might look outwardly like lazy shift, but is more intended to place himself as a physical barrier between Sasuke’s half-asleep form and the figure that cuts towards them.

He closes his eyes again to complete the ruse, tucking his arms behind his head, and feels the shadow that sweeps over the floor.

“Neji-niisan.” Hinata greets her cousin stiffly.

“Hinata. I’m to speak with you.” A cool, hard voice intones.

“I’ve already said my piece, Neji. There’s nothing more to discuss.” The cultivated apathy in Hinata’s voice makes Shikamaru’s skin crawl with the wrongness of it– Hinata has one of the biggest, most giving hearts Shikamaru has ever known, on par with Choji’s and seconded only by Naruto’s, and the resigned note to her voice is not something Shikamaru appreciates being there.

“You can only avoid the subject for so long before I’m forced to start this.” Neji’s voice chastises, imperialistic and frigid.

“And you can only repeat the same thing so many times before you realize my answer isn’t going to change.”

And Shikamaru almost smirks at that, almost gives away the surge of pride he feels for their little Hyuuga. The same steely defence and strength so obvious in her taijutsu it starting to show through in her voice.

“This is childish.” Neji snaps, and Shikamaru can’t help but lift his lashes a little to get a good look.

The frosty white of Hyuuga robes drape over the Genin’s shoulders like a layer of snow on a marble statue, the only cut to the pale skin and cloth the slash of dark bangs framing his face and the steel gleam of his hitai-ate.

Someone’s bitter. Shikamaru muses, logging the strain of the elder Hyuuga’s stance and rigid angle of his jaw away for future reference.

“Yes it is.” Hinata fires back.

The anger in her voice draws Naruto’s attention up, the emotion pinging off whatever deep rooted sense the Uzumaki uses like a second set of ears. He looks back and forth between the two Hyuuga, eyes narrowing in a manner that suggests Shikamaru’s going to need to get involved before the Uzumaki’s good intentions make the clan drama any more dramatic.

Turns out he doesn’t have to.

“Not your fight, idiot.” Sasuke murmurs, and Shikamaru is unsurprised by how easily the Uchiha reads his teammate’s behavior even with his eyes closed and his attention mostly elsewhere– stopped being surprised by it a long time ago. “Besides.” he murmurs tiredly. “She’s doing just fine all on her own.”

Naruto doesn’t answer, merely shifts his shoulders and snorts sharply through his nose, but he leaves it be while Hinata and and Neji trade calculated barbs about how Hinata’s training outside the compound is ‘extracurricular nonsense that embeds your errors’ and how Neji, prodigy or not,
has no right to tell her who she can and can't train with, and that her father should voice his opinions to her face and not use Neji as a mouthpiece to preserve his pride.

Asuma exits the arena’s backstage a minute or so into the argument just as Choji smashes the Kumo kunoichi he’s fighting against the wall like a bug.

The Jounin barks a laugh as Choji withdraws his expanded fist back to normal size, looking up at the sound to see his teacher lean over the railing with a wide grin, cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth.

“Whoa, hotshot. Didn’t even give the kid a chance did ya?”

Choji smiles genuinely, rubbing an embarrassed hand over the back of his neck.

The Kumo Jounin is staring openly at the arena, a tall, severe looking woman with close cropped pale hair styled to slant sharply over her eyes.

“You were saying something about superiority?” Asuma comments with vindictive charm to the Kumo Jounin, a continuation of an unheard conversation.

The Kunoichi huffs instead of answering and stalks off towards her Genin.

“You going to start a fight every time I turn my back?” Kurenai teases, sauntering over.

“Probably.” Asuma remarks cheerily. “Better not take your eyes off me then.”

Ugh

Shikamaru suddenly has a burning desire for earplugs.

Thankfully Kurenai turns towards the two arguing Hyuuga and narrows her eyes.

“Neji, return to your team please. This is not the appropriate time or place for an argument, there are currently better ways to spend your energy.”

Neji reins in a snapped response with a scowl– barely– and nods stiffly, sending another hard glance Hinata’s way before turning away.

Hinata is practically seething as he leaves, strong hands balled into white knuckled fists.

The lottery rolls again, calling everyone’s attention upwards, and the line-up reads *Tenten vs. Hyuuga Hinata.*

Hinata rolls to her feet, anger still tight in the lines of her shoulders and around her bright opalesque eyes, but there’s determination there too, something that hardens her anger into actual *defiance*.

“Kiba, hold on to this for me, please.” She says, unwrapping the beautiful black obi from around her waist. For a fraction of a second Shikamaru wonders if she’s going to be reckless and remove her armaments– the fight is with Neji’s teammate after all– but she doesn’t hand Kiba the obi. Instead, she folds the reinforced silk over the railing with care, smoothing out the wrinkles, and*

Hinata wrenches the Hyuuga-white robe off her shoulders with none of the same care she paid the obi, revealing the black sleeveless top of armour-silk beneath it, katsu bands stark against the pale
skin of her arms.

She deposits the garment haphazardly in Kiba’s lap, and the Inuzuka comes alive with surprised and victorious laughter. Shino doesn't bother to hide the pride in his smile as he looks to her, Naruto and Choji break into wide grins, and Ino whoops.

“Kick ass, Hinata.” Sakura demands, and Shikamaru can’t help his smile, can’t help glancing in the direction Neji stalked off.

Then he almost barks out a laugh of his own, because the elder Hyuuga looks like a slap to the face would have surprised him less.

In one move Hinata has put herself and her team before her clan, is entering the arena as an individual and not a Hyuuga.

Sasuke’s chuckle draws Shikamaru’s attention away from the entertainment that is Neji’s face, glancing down at the Uchiha’s smirk.

“Atta’ girl.” He murmurs, leaning a little closer into Naruto’s side, and that’s definitely not a coincidence.

Naruto’s grin softens a bit, still retaining it’s edge of triumph, and drapes an arm over his companion’s back.

Hinata practically trashes the arena thrashing poor Tenten. With Hinata’s rare temper riding high, she didn’t stand a chance.

“Would have been even better if Hinata had actually gone up against Neji.” Shino muses. “More satisfying.”

“I’d be more than happy to cave his face in.” Kiba growls. “But you’re right, wouldn’t be as vindicating.”

A few minutes later, the lottery calls out Inuzuka Kiba vs. Yamanaka Ino.

“Ah fuck.”

Ino laughs, twirling the arc of steel that is her nagamaki with skillful fingers. “Ready for this, dog breath?”

Kiba stands and makes an exaggerated bow. “After you, flower girl.”

“Yup” Aoba mutters below them, resigned. “I’m gonna die.”

Aoba doesn’t die.

He does almost get decapitated though.

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Sasuke feels Naruto stiffen when his name is called on the lottery. He’s set to face down one of the Kumo-nin, Akio.

“You’re worrying too much, moron.” Sasuke mutters as he sits up and blinks his eyes open. The light still stings his sensitive renina, but he feels stronger for the rest, for the temporary moment of peace Naruto sheltered for him.

“I’m not worried about the fight, jerk.” Naruto counters, blue eyes fierce. “I’m worried about you using your chakra.”

“I’ll make it quick then.” He decides. “Kakashi-sensei’s test is for us to prove a point, right? I don’t have to prove it now.”

Naruto nods, holding up a hand, and Sasuke clasps it hard, squeezing once. “I’d wish you luck, but—”

“We don’t need it.” Sasuke finishes, and despite the irritating pain and the weariness brought on by his aggravated chakra, he feels perfectly steady.

“Don’t break his face too bad.” Sakura adds as he stands, holding out her own arm, which he grips firmly. “Knowing Ikari-sensei, he’d make me put it back together.”

“No promises.”

She sticks her tongue out at him as he goes.

He body flickers into the arena almost lazily, stuffing a hand in his pocket as he waits for his opponent to join him.

The platinum haired Kumo-nin looks him up and down, obviously taking in the weary lines around his eyes and tired slant of his shoulders that Sasuke doesn’t bother to hide. He smirks, obviously taking Sasuke’s exhaustion as weakness.

“This won’t take long.” The cloud shinobi chuckles.

“Hmm.” Sasuke murmurs tiredly. “You’re right.”

The pale shinobi stalls, his confidant smile faltering at Sasuke’s agreement as Aoba calls start.

Sasuke meets his opponent’s eyes steadily, no urgency or rush in the gaze, and lifts his arm out to his side, forming a simple seal with his other hand.

The shinobi doesn't respond immediately, which is his first and last mistake– by the time Sasuke has finished priming the jutsu, the fight might as well be over.

Lightning splits and crackles over his knuckles, twining in arcs to dance up his forearm. The shinobi’s eyes fix on his fingers– Sasuke can see him attempting to track the potential path of a mid-range ninjutsu– but this isn’t ninjutsu.

It’s an elemental augmentation of \textit{taijutsu}.

Sasuke shifts, an almost halfhearted sway, and then he \textit{moves}, a flicker fast enough that he vanishes completely.
The ninja spins, too slowly to effectively track Sasuke’s speed as he comes up behind him, leg arcing out in a sweep. Akio attempts to leap out of the way to avoid it but doesn’t manage it quickly enough, the kick catching him at the ankles and throwing both his balance and his purchase out from under him.

For a whole half-second the Kumo-nin is horizontal, hovering at a flat parallel with the ground, and then Sasuke’s palm slams point blank into his opponent’s chest, hard enough to break ribs, but just shy of putting them through the Kumo-nin’s lungs.

The lightning discharges, knocking the shinobi instantly unconscious and tearing outward in a wave of angry, seething power.

The battle is over in a handful of seconds.

Sasuke steps away, gritting his teeth as the chakra use chases fresh pain through his body, but he remains steadfast on his feet, does not falter.

One second.

Three.

“Oh fucking hell.” Aoba swears. “Call! Victor, Uchiha Sasuke!”

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“That was a tad overkill.” Kakashi chastises Sakura after her match, eyes tracking Gai’s mini-me across the arena as he faces off against the unnerving little Suna-nin. It’s not looking good– Lee is talented but he’s also outmaneuvered, and his opponent has the added benefit of being batshit insane.

“Oh and Sasuke’s match wasn’t?” Sakura complains.

“Extenuating circumstances.”

“Hn.” Sasuke huffs, leaning back to back with Naruto as Sakura cleans her tools in front of them. Naruto is nose deep in scrolls and not really paying attention, eyes scanning through symbol after symbol with slightly unnerving speed.

“B-plus.” Kakashi decides.

“I’ll take it.” Sakura returns with a grin. “Besides, I still have the rest of the exam to improve my grade, right?”

Kakashi nods, flicking a glance around the arena balcony. Teams 8 and 10 are still nearby, though the victors are lazing around, either sleeping or talking quietly. Kiba and Ino have both moved on though their round, having not only drawn the fight out past the time limit to establish a tie, but so thoroughly wrecked the arena floor that they’d needed earth jutsu just to flatten it out again. Shino sits at the edge of the group, eyeing the seething Suna-nin he’d bested before Sakura’s match from behind his glasses. Baki speaks lowly with the puppeteer, a face Kakashi is familiar with due to various less-than-friendly encounters.
After he’s finished casing to his paranoia’s content, he turns and takes a seat beside Sakura. In the quasi-privacy created by the ongoing match, Kakashi reaches out to ruffle her hair.

“That disruption jutsu was very clever. What gave you the idea for it?”

Sakura smiles proudly, eyes sparkling. “It’s a derivative of Shiki-san’s jutsu, actually. Anti-resonance wave. I combined it with one of my favorite water jutsu so he wouldn’t see it coming.”

Kakashi hums, setting his jaw on his fist. “Well you’ve certainly made it your own.”

He admits to chuckling to himself at the face the Kumo team leader had made after she’d implemented it. Not matter how many hand signs he’d formed his chakra would not obey him, until he’d eventually loosed a jutsu that had quite literally blown up in his face.

Kakashi turns to Sasuke, whose eyes are closed like they’ve been for most of the preliminaries. “How’re you holding up, cub?”

Sasuke cracks an eye a little, the ebony crescent unfocused under the heavy lid. “Been better.” he admits. “Been worse.”

Kakashi nods, having expected that answer, more or less, and dips into his pocket for one of the little glass bottles Ryouta had brewed up for him. “Here. Drink this.” He passes the bottle over, clear glass filled with equally clear liquid, and Sasuke takes it without hesitation, doesn’t even question it as he pulls off the cap and takes a long swallow. He blinks at the bottle, running his tongue along his teeth at the odd taste.

“Not water, then.”

Kakashi shakes his head. “Chakra restorative. Easier on the system than a soldier pill. Three mouthfuls every hour.”

Sasuke nods, taking two more swallows and then recapping the bottle. Sakura reaches for it before he can decide what to do with it, and he hands it over without fuss so that she can tuck it into one of the pouches on her belt. He then turns his head over his shoulder, glancing over Naruto’s at the scrolls spread out in his lap.

“Take a break, idiot. You’re gonna go cross-eyed if you stare at that much longer.”

Naruto groans, but straightens his back a little and rubs at his eyes. Before he can open his mouth to protest Kakashi interrupts.

“He has a point, Naruto.” Kakashi says gently. “You’ve read that last line six times now.”

It’s not what he wants to say. What he wants to say is that this is not a burden that should fall on Naruto’s young shoulders, that he should let someone more qualified take care of the issue, except there isn’t anyone more qualified. Even Jiraiya with all his years of experience in the field of sealing can’t hold a candle to the wealth of knowledge and skill Naruto has inherited from Uzushio and nurtured in himself. Even if he doesn’t always have complete conscious access to all that knowledge, it obeys him when he needs it, and even a fraction of it is greater than that of most shinobi that call themselves ‘seal masters’.

There’s also the fact that even if Jiraiya or someone similar was more qualified to help lift the embedded seal from Sasuke’s person, Sasuke would hardly let anyone else even try.

“I’m so close though.” Naruto complains. “I’m just missing something.”
Kakashi’s response is cut off by Aoba’s voice, sharp above the noise of the arena.

“Time call! Victor, Sabaku no Gaara!”

Kakashi peers over the railing to get a look at the result. Lee looks bad, clutching one arm hard as if it’s broken, but he’s still standing, which is a relief. Tenten and Neji have to help him out of the arena regardless though, the Hidden Lotus having taken it’s toll on Lee’s young body. He want’s to berate Gai for teaching the kid something he wasn’t ready for out of favoritism, but the boy executed the technique well, so Kakashi keeps his opinion to himself. Besides, the same could almost be said of him, for teaching his own brats a jutsu that they needed the help of a Bijuu to pull off in battle.

Then again, his kids had also had the sense of self to only risk something of that level in an emergency situation.

The lottery rolls, and the match for the second-to-last battle is announced.

Akado Yoroi vs. Uzumaki Naruto

Naruto groans and taps his foot against Sakura as he rolls up his scrolls. “Swap me, yeah?”

Sakura nods and takes his scrolls from him, scooting into his place as Sasuke’s backrest and settling in with a whetstone and a couple of Kunai. Sasuke supports his own weight only long enough to allow for the swap and then slumps tiredly against Sakura’s strong back and closes his eyes again.

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Neji leans back against the wall, arms crossed over his chest, as Lee is escorted away for medical treatment. He deactivates his byakugan, having already done his own catalogue of Lee’s injuries—distal spiral fracture to the humerus, three broken ribs, twisted ankle, half dozen contusions— and refocuses his eyes forward.

“You could at least pretend to be worried.” Tenten snaps testily. Rising to her feet and dusting off her combat pants. He’d helped brace Lee’s arm until the escort arrived, so Neji’s intervention hadn’t been necessary.

“Would my being worried aid in his recovery?” He returns. “Lee has suffered worse.”

“I’ll have you suffering worse.” She snarls, taking a threatening step forward. But Gai-sensei, predictably, bars an arm at her shoulders to keep her from actually attempting to throttle him.

“Now now, it’s not the time—” he tries, but Tenten just bites out a response over his attempts to calm her down.

“I’m just about sick of your attitude, Neji. Sooner of later it’s going to bite you in the ass and I’m going to sit back and judge you for it. See how you like it.”

“You think I’m judging Lee for being hurt in battle?” Neji asks coldly.
“I think you don’t care and that’s worse. A few more minutes in that ring and Lee could have been in a lot worse shape than a broken arm a few busted ribs.” She snarls over Gai’s arm. “We’re supposed to be a team, Neji, and I’m tired of your arrogant little Solo Act!”

“Enough, Tenten.” Gai says firmly.

“Call!” Aoba’s voice interrupts. “Victor, Uzumaki Naruto.”

That startles Neji into looking over. He knows the name, the student who graduated in last place from the academy, and one of the Genin Hinata has been brushing her clan off to train with. Neji’s obviously missed something critical, because the Uzumaki is standing in the center of the arena, unfazed and entirely unharmed, one wrapped hand stuffed deep in a pocket and the other raised out in front of him, forearm crooked in a defensive bar.

His opponent is passed out on the floor in front of him.

_Yoroi Akado_. Neji recalls the name. _Known for a complex ability that allows him to absorb chakra through touch._

He activates his byakugan, studying the man’s unconscious form for information.

What he finds is bizarre—the man looks to have fallen unconscious due to several bursts in his chakra veins, even a couple of blown tenketsu… a chakra overdose?

_That hardly makes sense._

He puts away the information for later use, instead casting his gaze around the arena again, searching for the only face he hasn’t yet seen in combat. If the ninth battle is over, then by process of elimination, he knows who his own opponent will be.

The lottery rolls as soon as the Uzumaki clears the arena and someone has scraped his opponent off the tiles, and Neji looks sideways as the match is called.

_Hyuuga Neji vs. Nara Shikamaru_

Neji admits that he doesn’t have a great deal of information on Shikamaru himself, aside from that fact that he fits the stereotypical image of a lazy Nara male. As if to prove this point, Shikamaru takes his time swaying to his feet, muffling a yawn against his palm and tipping his head to the side to roll the muscles of his shoulders.

_He’s not even taking this seriously, is he?_

He vaults over the railing into the arena and Neji follows with a body flicker, placing several meters of distance between them when he lands… which still puts him practically at the center of the area, since Shikamaru is so close to the long outer wall he’s practically leaning on it. It would be good strategy if Neji thought it was intentional—it limits Neji’s own attack strategy and prevents him from flanking effectively.

“I hope you realize that I won’t be going easy on you just because the outcome of this match is obvious.” Neji says lowly as the Nara gives another lazy stretch.

Shikamaru huffs, almost amused, rubbing the long fingers of one hand into the muscles of his opposite shoulder. “You gonna keep talkin’ Hyuuga?” the Nara drawls, “Because I’m pretty sure we have a time limit.”
Neji’s already sore temper flares hot at the careless disregard, the veins around his byakugan eyes tightening in reflex. “Very well.” Neji snaps. “Let’s get this over with, shall we?” The words are derisive and caustic, and serve as Shikamaru’s only warning as Aoba calls for match start.

Neji flashes forward, launches a strike at the other ninja’s head right out of the gates. He’s not expecting to connect, only to chase Shikamaru from his corner.

He does neither.

Shikamaru avoids his strike by millimeters.

Neji’s fist lodges in the wall, wrist nearly flush with the curve of Shikamaru’s neck beneath his jaw, plaster and stone chips scattering over the Nara’s shoulder. There’s no reaction, he doesn’t even so much as fucking tense, and as the dust clears, the Nara opens one burnished eye, completely uncowed by the presence of an enemy well within his guarding distance.

It’s not an evasion, it’s a fucking taunt.

Neji’s so stunned that for a fraction of a second he doesn’t even move, his brain grasping for context where there is none.

“Over with?” Shikamaru drawls, and then suddenly he’s dissolving into the shadow behind him, the darkness sliding away from under Neji’s arm and coalescing behind him, and Neji spins, dislodging his fist from the wall as he turns. Shikamaru reappears from the shelter of his shadow, the darkness dripping away from him like water, the subtle gold of his earrings flashing bright in contrast.

“Come on, Hyuuga,” the Nara rumbles, something hard flashing in the Genin’s dark eyes, something like a challenge. “You didn’t actually think I’d make this easy on you.”
Dear Readers,

Heya, long time no see. So here’s the thing, I’m really not actually sorry it took me this long to update, mostly because I’m in my final year at University and just finished week upon week of projects followed by hellish finals, and I won’t apologize for putting my very expensive education in front of updating fanfiction, even if I did leave off on a cliffhanger (whoops). That being said, so many of you mad wonderful commenters are so understand and supportive, like HOW? So thank you for all the amazing comments and shit it seriously kept my spirits up this last month and a half.

Next up is the finals and semifinals of the third exam so THAT shit should be real fun.

ENJOY ANOTHER 20+ PAGER

(I REGRET NOTHING)

---

*How in the Nine Hells is he moving like that?*

Neji takes another deep breath, trying to calm his temper before Shikamaru manages to trip it again.

More than thirty minutes into the match, and Neji still hasn’t managed to land a single blow.

Shikamaru is the definition of a slippery bastard; he’s fast and he knows it, but he doesn’t settle for simply ducking Neji’s attacks. Sometimes he’ll counter them or simply bat them aside, each time with such a minimal exertion of energy and efficiency of movement that Neji doesn’t actually know how he’s doing it.

The arena is a mess of broken stone tile thrown up by Neji’s Palm Rotation and Heavy Palm strikes, not a single one of which has made any kind of contact. Shikamaru obviously isn’t stupid enough to get within the range of his Sixty-Four Palms, outside of that first few minutes meant to rattle Neji’s equilibrium, and his shadows make him extremely evasive at long range.

“What’s the matter?” Shikamaru taunts from the periphery of Neji’s striking distance. “Getting a little winded there?”

Neji grits his teeth, gripping hard to his composure. It’s a false facade though— for all the wide range and obvious power of his jutsu, the Gentle Fist taijutsu demands a great deal of chakra to preform.

“How in the Nine Hells is he moving like that?”

Neji returns, throwing Shikamaru’s earlier words back at him, in an attempt to regain some mental ground.

But the words garner a response opposite to their intended purpose; the Nara smirks, a cut of a smile that only pulls at one side of his mouth, that flash of challenge firing off in his dark eyes.
“Gotta catch me to shut me up, Hyuuga,” the Nara goads, cocking his head to the side, “And you haven't managed that yet.”

Neji lunges sharply forward again, leading with a heavy palm that again cleaves through nothing but air as the Nara ducks it sideways and leaps, tucks his body into a neat whirl and lands nimbly at Neji’s 4 o’clock, fingers flicking through signs.

The Nara spins and kicks out and a wave of fire follows the movement, dark violet and searing hot, arcing out in a roaring flood; Katon: Black Fire Surge.

Neji has no choice but to counter with the full defence of his Palm Rotation, twisting his body and his chakra into the complex defensive technique to counter the rush of flame. The fire parts around him, crashing against the walls and breaking on the stone tiles, but the flames stick, linger in patches on the ground around them like napalm, even as the main body of the jutsu dissipates.

Neji doesn’t rest on his laurels; he can’t if he wants to have any chance in hell of catching his slippery bastard of an opponent, honing in on Shikamaru only to have him leap away again, dodging his advances with enviable agility and a careless sort of grace that is really starting to piss Neji off.

“Will you just stay still?” He snarls in frustration, and much to Neji’s supreme surprise, Shikamaru does.

The problem is that so does Neji.

Neji freezes face to face with Shikamaru, immobilized at a crouch, mirroring the Nara’s own posture. Shikamaru’s fingers are curled into an unfamiliar hand sign, and when the Nara straightens, Neji is forced to mimic the movement.

Neji fights the phantom hold, outrage mixed with the faintest edge of panic as his normally formidable strength does nothing against the strange power controlling his movements. Shadow Possession.

Neji kicks himself for not noticing the set up for what it was– the scattering of still flickering fires around the arena are more than enough to cast thick, heavy shadows and bolster the presence of Shikamaru’s own.

The Nara shifts a little, stretching out his back and humming thoughtfully. Neji feels his spine straighten against his will, despite how much his every muscle is tensed against it.

“Ouch. I’m sensing some control issues here, Hyuuga.” Shikamaru drawles.

Neji decides to indulge in the direct approach. “The second I’m free Nara, you’re dead.”

Shikamaru just snorts. “Empty threats now, Neji? ‘Cuz this looks like game over to me.”

“What?”

Shikamaru just smiles, lazy and slow with a confidence edging in on smug. “Time’s up, Hyuuga. Checkmate.”

Before Neji can even begin to try and contemplate what that means Aoba’s voice cuts his thoughts short.
“Time Call! Tie; dual victory! Favor; Nara Shikamaru!”

Neji’s eyes flare wide, realization striking, and he grinds his teeth hard. You’ve got to be kidding me.

Shikamaru shifts and releases his hand sign, the unnatural force of control sliding away like the slink of Shikamaru’s shadow back towards its master.

The Nara steps out of the conflict with the same ease as he’s done everything else, words coasting over the air between them so quietly Neji almost misses them.

“That tunnel vision of yours is gonna get you killed at some point.” He murmurs neutrally as he turns away, and it doesn't sound like the threat it implies, or even a warning; almost like they haven’t spent the last hour fighting at all. “Might want to broaden your view before someone does it for you.”

He’s gone before Neji can even think to contemplate a response.

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They start off for home at a civilian pace, which quickly irritates Sasuke— who starts to vehemently curse the stupid seal under his breath. She and Naruto know it’s because he doesn’t like feeling weak, feeling **vulnerable**, and so Naruto distracts him with theories about how the thing might work and how the way Sasuke’s chakra is reacting to it is a good sign, and Sakura absently takes his vitals with a loose hand around his wrist.

Naruto stalls as they turn a corner towards the compound, obviously sensing something. His eyes land on a familiar figure outside the dango stand down the street. “Hey, Hinata!”

The Hyuuga looks up, blinking moonstone eyes, and smiles brightly. “Naruto! Are guys heading home?” She asks kindly, jogging towards them. Her white clan robes are still absent, making the embroidery on her obi stand out all the more against her armour silk.

“Self imposed curfew,” Sakura explains, “Since that snake bastard might still be lurking somewhere in the village.”

“Going somewhere?” Sasuke asks, noting the duffle slung across her shoulder.

Hinata smiles sheepishly, embarrassed. “I’m uh, staying at the inn tonight.” She admits. “For the sake of my sister and Neji both, it’s best I’m not home right now.”

“Then inn? That’s not exactly safe on a night like this.” Sasuke says sternly.

Hinata shrugs. “It’s my only option at the moment, and I brought all the proper barrier seals and alarm tags. Normally I’d ask Kiba if I could stay with him, but his mother and my father were on the same genin team.” She smiles again, a little wry. “I won’t put him in a position like that.”

Sakura hums in understanding, giving her arm a squeeze. Hinata leans into it a little, which is quite a step up for her— touch based comfort is not something common in the harsh social structure of her clan, and it had taken her a while to warm up to the idea.

“Yeaaaah, nope.” Naruto says suddenly, a declaration completely without context, and Hinata blinks at him.

“What?”

Sakura laughs and sidles up to her, swiping her duffle and draping an arm across her shoulders in a gesture of support. She knows the decision behind the grin on Naruto’s face, agrees without even needing to say so out loud. Sasuke is the same of course; even exhausted as he is the two still exist in terrifying tune with one another, thoughts obvious even when they remain unspoken.

“You’ll stay with us then.” Sasuke clarifies. “It only makes sense.”

Hinata looks both floored and flustered by the statement, like she hadn't really thought of it but recognises that she probably should have. “A-are you sure? I wouldn’t want to impose…”

“You kidding? We have more space than we really know what to do with anyway.” Naruto insists. “And we’d way rather you stay with us than an inn, so long as you don’t mind ninen fur everywhere.”

“She’s on a team with Kiba, idiot.” Sasuke points out.

Naruto sticks his tongue out at him. “At least I’m not the one who has to clean all the beds as soon as I can lift a brush again.”
Sasuke bristles. “We were attacked by an S-class missing nin. That doesn’t count.”

“Bet’s a bet, jerk. It totally counts.”

The two dissolve into bickering, as is par for the course, and Hinata giggles.

Thank you guys.” Hinata says again, because she feels it’s worth repeating as she crosses the threshold of the Hatake main house. “You didn’t have to do this.”

“We said it’s no trouble and it’s not.” Sasuke reminds her plainly, dropping immediately onto the couch in the living room and shutting his eyes, listing sideways until he’s lying on his back.

Hinata eyes him worriedly, but Naruto assuages her anxiety with a toothy smile as he sets his scrolls down on the table. “He’s alright, just needs some shut-eye.”

And she’d expected this to be awkward, even if only a little; she’s usually only in the Hatake main house when it’s filled with people, with friends and senseis and the assorted Tokujo and Jounin they can bully training tips out of with subtle threats, puppy eyes, and the promise of good food.

But it still feels like home in a way she’s never been able to equate to the cool sterile halls of the Hyuuga compound; the air holds a warmth to it that seeps in through the skin, the fur rugs and carvings adding character and softness to the efficient corners, the broad windows and wide clear doors bringing in the beauty of the nature around them to blend with the natural browns and greys and whites of wood and stone and paper.

It’s radiant with the energy and personality of team 7—she sees Naruto in unfurled scrolls spiderwebbed with annotations and notes, in the handful of empty ramen bowls scattered on the counter and left abandoned on the sink, in the array of odd artifacts and books in every nook. She sees Sasuke in the assorted weapons leaning against the walls or laid out amongst jars of metal oil and whetstones, in the kata and design scrolls rolled out over the coffee table, in the colourful feathers she spies peeking out of the edges of well worn historical accounts. She sees Sakura in rolls of salve-layered gauze and jars of medicine, in chakra point diagrams what would look at home in the Hyuuga archives, in the hairline fractures in the edges of the tables from the tap of too-strong fingers.

She’s worried about it being awkward for the first few minutes after Sakura sets her up in the guest room and shows her where she can find a bath and a snack and a quiet place for her evening exercises, stepping over ninken darting through the halls as they get ready to change house patrols.

But the nervous energy and strange social hiccups she expects never come. Team 7 fold her into their nightly routine with an ease she doesn’t quite understand, and they spend over an hour sitting around Sasuke in the living room and talking over strategy for the exam between conversation about favorite foods or places to train and interesting ninjutsu. And the more they talk, the more relieved she is that she doesn’t have to face any of them in the first round of the exam tournament.

A soft rap on the door causes one of the ninken to bark an alert.

“I got it.” Naruto calls, hopping nimbly to his feet and heading for the door to undo the traps. Hinata looks up from her absent game of Shogi to follow his progress, but turns back to the board.
at Sasuke’s insistence, so that she won’t miss the move he makes. Sakura has dibs on the winner, watching the proceedings as she brushes out the fur of the smallest of their sensei’s ninken.

“Iruka-sensei!”

The declaration brings around the attention of every head in the living room this time, and Hinata beams when she sees her favorite teacher– after Kurenai-sensei– step into the room, Naruto hanging happily off his shoulder.

Iruka’s smile is bright and indulgent, and he bears the extra weight of the Genin with good grace despite the plethora of bags draped over his arms.

“I came to make sure everyone was doing alright.” He says as he adjusts the bags on his arms.

“Sakura, sweetheart, could you come help me with this?”

“Yes!” Sakura chirps immediately, depositing Bisque under Sasuke’s arm and darting to Iruka-sensei’s side.

Iruka hands them all over to her without hesitation, and Sakura holds them one handed while she uses the other to peak at what’s inside. Whatever the contents are make her squeal with delight, and she darts off into the kitchen. Iruka laughs, lifting his eyes, and spots Hinata by the coffee table.

“Oh, Hinata! Are you spending the night here this evening, my dear?”

She nods, a reflexive flush dusting her cheeks.

Iruka inclines his head back. “Wise, I think.”

He stoops to kneel down next to Sasuke and Naruto drops off his shoulder, skirting sideways as Iruka-sensei presses the back of his hand to Sasuke’s forehead. He hisses a breath through his teeth at the temperature, and Hinata sees Naruto suppress a flinch.

“Ryouta said you might have a fever.” Naruto hops up to sit on the back of the couch as Sasuke sits up to lean against the armrest.

“I’m fine.” The Uchiha grumbles crossly, obviously uncomfortable with all the attention, and Hinata figures an audience probably isn’t helping things.

“I’ll go make a cool compress.” She declares, and eases to her feet. She thinks she recalls seeing some hand towels in the linen closet down the hall when Sakura had gotten her a spare fuuton.

To her surprise, Naruto hops into motion when she does. “Lemme help.”

It takes her aback mostly because Naruto’s spent the whole of his time since the incident with the strange snake shinobi hovering over his teammate’s shoulder, irritation and concern practically coming off him in waves.

She nods, trying to keep her flush down. A crush several years in length is a hard thing to completely shake, and sometimes it still creeps up on her; like right now, watching the Uzumaki’s golden hair fall a little in his eyes, bright things that still retain their sapphiric luster despite the weights behind them. His heart is in them like always, concern and faith chasing circles, but stirring behind them is a drop of cold and genuine fear, something that Hinata can’t ever recall having seen there.
They retrieve the towels and the bowl for the compress in relative silence, and while they’re testing the water temperature in one of the bathroom sinks, Hinata works up the nerve to speak first.

“He’s not just sick, is he?” She murmurs.

Naruto blinks, but doesn’t do her the disservice of asking what she’s talking about. He doesn’t respond right away either, chewing his lip as he turns his hand back and forth under the streaming faucet.

“What he has? I’ve uh, seen it before.” Naruto says quietly, pausing to worry his lip again. “And last time I saw this kinda thing happen, it almost ended really badly.”

“What is it exactly?” Hinata asks. “What’s happening to him?”

Naruto takes a deep steadying breath before he responds. “The seal on him is some sort of… augmentation construct. It’s trying to feed a some weird kind of chakra into his system, and he’s rejecting it.”

“Isn’t that a good thing though?” Hinata wonders. “That his body is fighting it?”

“Well yeah, sort of.” Naruto grumbles, upset frown still pulling on the lines sweeping his cheeks. “But it’s not just his body fighting it, it’s his chakra , and the fight is what’s making him sick.”

“You’re talking about chakra corruption.” Hinata murmurs, hand coming up to her mouth.

Naruto nods, flexing his fingers and pulling them out from under the stream of water. “It’s not usually something super serious for regular ninja, and it’s easy enough to get over with rest and stuff, but that thing on him is pumping chakra as fast as he can fight it off, and–”

“And the more he fights it the more corruption there is, and the more it clogs up his system.” Hinata interrupts gently, before he can get too worked up.

Naruto deflates visibly, shoulders hunching. “Yeah.”

Hinata smiles kindly and takes his hand– cold from too long under the chill water of the faucet– and rubs it between both of hers, chafing the skin warm again. “So, what all do we know about it? Besides the fact that it’s feeding in foreign chakra?”

Naruto hums as he thinks, gears working. Hinata waits patiently.

“Shikamaru thinks it was probably designed to overwhelm his system; flood over into his main chakra veins and root in from there.”

“Why didn’t it?” Hinata asks, leaning over to fill the bowl with cold water and the shutting off the faucet. She doesn’t move after that though, waiting for Naruto to finish out his thoughts.

“It’s only half a seal for starters,” he murmurs, “I think the armour silk protected him some. The bastard also underestimated the shit out of us.”

“Sasuke’s stronger than he was expecting,” Hinata agrees.

Naruto goes back to chewing his lip, sharp teeth drawing red. He licks the blood away absently, and the wound is gone as soon as it appeared. “He can’t fight it forever. I need to pry it off somehow.”
“Then you will.” Hinata declares, putting all her newfound confidence behind the words, thumping a loose fist into the front of his shoulder. “If anyone can figure this out, it’s you. I know that, and more importantly, so does he.”

She gives him her brightest smile, and he takes a deep, steadying breath, and smiles back.

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Iruka steps away from the kitchen counter when Akino barks for his attention, leaving the rest of dinner in Naruto and Hinata’s capable hands. Sakura’s gone back into the living room to keep an eye on Sasuke and prevent him from getting too bored, but Iruka is confident he can duck out for a bit without anything exploding. Hinata tends to be a steadying influence still, despite her newfound rebellion.

“Door.” Akino clarifies once he’s closer, and Iruka gives the ninken a nod of thanks before heading over to undo the locks and traps.

He should probably be more surprised than he is when he cracks the door open to find a pair of Genin on the doorstep, overnight bags slung over their shoulders.

“Good evening Iruka-sensei.” Shino says politely, adjusting his duffle strap. “I hope we’re not interrupting anything.”

“Heya teach!” Kiba barks cheerily, echoed by Akamaru’s yip of greeting from his sweatshirt. “We hear this is where the party’s at.”

Iruka swings the door wide and turns immediately back into the house. “Hinata! Your team is here!”

He hears a squeak and a clatter as something hits the floor, and Naruto’s laughter follows Hinata out of the kitchen as she runs for the entryway. Kiba and Shino duck immediately in to greet her, dropping their bags by the door.

“What are you two doing here? Shouldn’t you be in for the night?” Hinata frets, but Shino only smiles and Kiba laughs, and Akamaru licks what looks like a smudge of rice porridge off their Hyuuga teammate’s chin.

“A little bird told us you were staying the night here, so we’re crashin’ here too.” Kiba informs her as he unzips his jacket, freeing Akamaru to leap free and speed off into the house, Urushi hot on his heels and then Uhei as an impromptu game on ninken tag kicks off in the hallways.

“A little bird?” Hinata repeats, temporarily confused, and then she flushes red with indignation and turns toward the living room. “Sasuke!”

“I regret nothing.” The Uchiha’s disembodied voice sounds from inside, followed by the bright cackle of Sakura’s laughter.

Naruto’s head peaks in from the kitchen. “Oh, hey guys! Iruka-sensei, the porridge is done.”

Iruka snorts, nudging the Genin further into the house. “Alright. Best open everything I brought for hot pot as well. I have a feeling we’re going to need it.”
Sure enough, team 10 shows up at the door less than an hour later, like some universal law that needed correcting.

“Hi, Sensei!” Ino says happily, holding out a takeaway bag decorated with colorful flower patterns and stylized shuriken. “We brought green tea cakes.”

“Dinner first,” Iruka says without thinking, “We’re having hot pot.”

He’s never seen Choji move so fast in his life.

He’s expecting far more chaos that what actually occurs— he was anticipating one broken wall at least– but the Rookie Nine are unusually sedate tonight, all quiet conversations and steady arguments and thought out discussions. They devour most of his hot pot within the first half hour of sitting down, which Iruka had expected. He’d eaten himself into a coma on ramen after his own exam, so he’d been fully prepared for nine furious appetites with an array of meats and vegetables and rice.

Iruka’s no babysitter, so he leaves the kids to their late night antics and curls up on the couch to grade papers with Pakkun and Uhei, both of whom offer sound advice on his markings in exchange for ear scratches and his body warmth.

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Kakashi comes home tired and paranoid, instincts running him wired, to Iruka tucked into the corner of his couch, marking quizzes.

Apparently the Genin have multiplied while he wasn't looking, because of the four warm bodies on the couch with him, two of them are human and only one of them is his.

Iruka looks up as he approaches but doesn’t speak, his eyes tracking back down to his papers as Kakashi pulls his Jounin vest off his shoulders and unclips his scroll belt. Bull lifts his big head and snorts greeting from the foot of the couch, but he’s obviously on watch because the rest of his dogs are very clearly asleep.

Sasuke’s head is pillowed on the crook of Iruka’s knee, Hinata curled up with Urishi on the couch’s opposite end. Shino sleeps sitting up against Bull, Kiba snoring on the floor to his right in even pace with Akamaru and Shiba both. Naruto is passed out against the base of the couch, Sakura dozing sprawled over his legs parallel with a dreaming Ino. Shikamaru naps leaning against Choji’s unconscious side, supported by a mountainous pile of what looks like every one of Kakashi’s throw pillows.

Once Kakashi has finally divested himself of most of his active-duty gear, Iruka puts down his pen and waves subtly for his attention, fingers curling around the gestures of shinobi sign.

_Leftovers in the refrigerator._

Kakashi nods, bringing his own hands up to sign back.
Thank you. You didn’t have to do this.

He ends the gestures with a sweeping hand to indicate the state of his livingroom as a whole, nine Genin and eight ninken well fed and sleeping soundly, most of the house miraculously still standing.

Iruka rolls his eyes, his returning signs a little fiercer, the gestures sharper.

Don’t be stupid.

Kakashi throws his hands up in surrender and treads into the kitchen to reheat his leftovers.

When he returns Iruka is in the process of tucking away his grading materials and nudging Pakkun awake, giving him a few quick signs. The pug yawns widely and scrambles out from his comfortable slot beneath Iruka’s arm, leaping off the couch to tread out of the room and down the hallway.

Kakashi steps over the still slumbering bodies and gives Bull’s head a rub as he passes, before perching carefully at the edge of the couch. The shift in weight stirs Sasuke slightly, but the Genin just rolls over and settles again, uncaring of the change in surroundings.

Something pangs beneath Kakashi’s lungs at the display of trust, at the fact that the orphaned Uchiha feels safe enough here, in his home, to discount the world and rest despite recent events bearing down on the entire village.

He looks from the young Uchiha to Naruto and Sakura curled not far off, perfectly within reaching distance, which is no accident. It’s hard to remember sometimes that with all their strength and intelligence and diligence, they are still only kids.

Protective instinct is a high-riding Hatake-bred trait, something so intrinsic to the clan blood that it even-paces the Inuzuka’s pack-based mentality, and even goes a step further into animal territory. And it’s almost alarming how quickly these three kids have become his entire world, because he aches with that instinct, feels it down to the marrow of his bones, and never more potently than right here in this moment.

The missions over the last few months, long and short, from border patrols to smash-and-grabs, have brought them all together as a team; but it’s all the little spaces in between that brought them together as a family, and for this little mismatched pack of his, there is nothing he wouldn’t do.

It scares him sometimes, just how far he knows he would go to protect them.

He’s pulled from his thoughts when Pakkun trots back into the room, dragging with him an entire pile of blankets several times larger than he is. Kakashi waits for him to yip for the assistance of someone with opposable thumbs, but he doesn’t, instead half-climbing the blanket hill to grip the top one in his teeth and dragging it down, pulling it carefully through the maze of bodies too Shikamaru and Choji, where he proceeds to very carefully settle it around both boys.

Movement on the couch alerts Kakashi to Urushi’s wakefulness, and the gold-furred ninen hops primly off the couch to select a blanket from the pile, dragging it slowly back onto the couch and tucking it carefully around Hinata and Sasuke before curling back up against the Hyuuga.

Uhei hops up to pull a comforter around Shino and Kiba, Shiba and Akino together tuck several blankets around Naruto and the girls, and Guruko tiptoes over to present a still mostly folded
blanket to Iruka with a tail wag. Iruka accepts with a signed thank you, a head scratch and a grateful smile, but doesn’t unfold it.

**I’ll keep watch.** Kakashi signs, and starts to stand.

But Iruka’s puts a hand on his shoulder, easy and without pressure, and Kakashi sits down again.

**I’m keeping watch.** Iruka counters, and even the way he signs it leaves no room for argument. *Be with your Genin. You’ve done enough tonight.*

Without another gesture Iruka stands, stepping carefully out of the room with Guruko on his heels. Within minutes his ninen are all back to snoring, and the room is still once more. Kakashi allows himself another moment before he settles into Iruka’s vacated spot, pulling one knee up on the couch at Sasuke’s back, a protective tick he indulges in.

Against all odds, shoulders braced between the back of the couch and the arm, he falls asleep.

When he wakes up again, with a crick in his neck just shy of dawn, all three of his Genin have somehow migrated on top of him, Naruto and Sasuke unconscious and curled up into his sides, Sakura slumbering happily away on his chest with no care for any kind of personal space. One of his largest comforters has been dragged up over the pile of bodies, likely by one of his ninen, or maybe Iruka.

Kakashi just moves Sakura’s head to his not-so-dead arm and goes back to sleep.

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Sasuke wakes unhappily to soft but urgent nudging, pulling hazy consciousness together from what must have been sleep of the goddamn dead. He groans and rolls over, trying to bury his head in the back of the couch.

His attempt is met with a rusty laugh. “Oh I don’t think so, cub. Time for breakfast.”

And that’s Kakashi-sensei, so that means he has to get up, which sucks. He could have told anyone else to fuck off, or at least jabbed Naruto or Sakura in the ribs in vengeance.

He growls a little more, just to make his displeasure clear, but sits up, digging his palms into his eyes in an attempt to get them to actually function. Now that he’s awake he can hear voices coming from the kitchen, hushed in respect for the still mostly slumbering room. Naruto is still asleep next to him, on the other side of their sensei’s legs.

Sakura is already awake though, and because she is a horrible person she takes the comforter with her when she slides off Kakashi-sensei’s chest with a yawn, dragging the thing like a cape.

“Rude.” He hisses after her, and she sticks her tongue out at him from where she stands on the other side of Ino, splaying the comforter out over her arms like a royal mantle and bowing cheekily.

Sasuke looks down at their still slumbering teammate, smirks, and pushes Naruto off the couch
straight into Ino.

The resulting ball of mayhem smacks into Sakura’s shins and sends her off kilter, and because Sasuke is also a horrible person, ensures that she lands square on top of the blonde Yamanaka.

The shrieks wake the whole living room.

Kakashi rolls his eyes at the lot of them, but it’s worth it for the way Sakura swears and Ino steams red for a whole fifteen minutes.

“That was a jerk move even for you.” Naruto informs him once he’s back on the couch, after Kakashi leaves to assist whoever’s talking with Iruka in the kitchen.

“Hn.” he responds, stretching into his bond teammate without care. Naruto doesn’t mind, he never does, even when Sasuke drops back over his legs to stretch out his spine.

“So.” Naruto starts, nonchalant. “I figured out how to get the damn thing off.”

Sasuke blinks, sleep addled mind needing handful of seconds to catch up. “Yeah?”

Naruto nods, tilts his head. “You’re not gonna like it though.”

“How did you figure it out?” He asks, because the seal needs to come off whether he likes it or not, so that doesn’t really matter.

“Kurama helped walk me through it backwards. I can only take it off the same way it was applied.”

Sasuke freezes mid-stretch. “You’re joking.”

“Nope.” Naruto states, popping the ‘p’ wryly, and gnashes his teeth to emphasize his point.

“Ugh.”

They decide without words that breakfast comes before anything else, so they trail in after the tail end of the rookie nine to find the kitchen jam-packed with people. On top of Sakura and Kakashi-sensei and teams 8 and 10 are Kurenai and Asuma-sensei sitting side by side at the table, Iruka and Genma cooking away at the stove top, and Ikari-sensei flipping through files at the breakfast counter.

Sasuke pushes in to sit next to Sakura at the breakfast bar— who’s peering sideways unrepentantly at Ikari-sensei’s files and notes— and Naruto squeezes in on his other side next to Kiba.

Breakfast quickly gets loudly out of hand, resulting in a total of two food fights, with an attempt to start a third that is thwarted by Iruka-sensei’s suggestion that they knock it off before they spend the rest of the day cleaning the kitchen top to bottom chakraless.

“You kids remember that the third portion of the exam has some extra rules and regulations, right?” Asuma-sensei says once they’re all settled down and digging into seared salmon and miso soup and furikake rice.

“We need mentors or something, right?” Shikamaru says absently, picking the eggs out of his rice and depositing them in Choji’s bowl.
“They’re not required, exactly, more like suggested.” Genma drawls with a wave of his chopsticks, mouth half full. “Even with the respite period cut down to two weeks instead of three, that’s a lot of time that can be used to hone skills you might need for the finals.”

“Who are you up against?” Kurenai asks team 8, and Kiba immediately blanches, casting a nervous glance at Sakura sitting down the breakfast bar. She smiles sweetly back, and the Inuzuka abruptly turns the colour of curdled milk.

Kurenai laughs. “Well that answers that question. Shino?”

The Aburame looks up from where he’s allowing his beatles to indulge in a dish full of sugar solution. “Ino and I will be competing in the finals, sensei. It should be very interesting and I find myself looking forward to it.”

Ino smiles and blushes a little at the unintended compliment. “Right back at ya, bug-boy.”

Kurenai looks between them with interest and nods approvingly, then turns to their Hyuuga, lacing her fingers underneath her chin. “Hinata?”

The young clan heir has to finish chewing a too-large bite of her cinnamon roll before she responds. “I’m fighting with Choji!” She says brightly, obviously pleased about it, and Choji grins, throwing a palm her way. Hinata beams and smacks it hard enough with her own that the sound rings through the kitchen, but Choji doesn’t even flinch.

Asuma chuckles. “Better bring your A-game to that fight, big guy.”

Choki fist pumps the air, giant grin unrepentant across his face. “You know it!”

“Sasuke and Shika have the Suna kids.” Kiba informs the table. “That creepy Gaara guy and that Temari chick.”

Shikamaru shrugs and Sasuke doesn't look up from his food, too engrossed in draining his miso soup to care much about restating the obvious.

“Naruto gets to duke it out with Neji.” Sakura points out, and their teammate’s only response is to stick out his tongue at her and eat half his salmon filet in one bite.

Iruka ruffles his hair as he as he walks by, having finally put together his own plate, and rubs his knuckles over the Genin’s head in light admonishment.

“Anyway, we’re not here just for Iruka’s cooking, you know.” Genma adds. “We’ve all agreed to train at least one of you little hellions.”

“Really? Like full combat training?” Sakura asks, voice going up a full octave as she stares hopefully in Ikari-sensei’s direction.

The surgeon rolls his eyes. “Yeah yeah, firecracker, you and the Nara are with me.” He grumbles, reaching for his coffee cup and taking a long draw. His gunmetal eyes are drawn from what was likely another in a line of sleepless nights.

Shikamaru perks up at that, looking a little more awake and casting an interested glance the surgeon’s way.

“Hinata? You’re with me kiddo.” Asuma rumbles kindly.
Their Hyuuga nods and dips her head in a polite little bow. “I look forward to it!”

“Sasuke,” Kurenai says, and he looks up from his food at the sounds of his name. “I thought you could train with me, how does that sound?”

Sasuke only needs to think about it for a quarter of a second before he nods firmly. “I’d be an honor to learn the Demonic Illusions from a true master.”

Kurenai smiles, and for a second the pleasant expression wavers, transforms, and in its place is the terrifying face of a Noh— with a mouthful of grinning fangs and tangled dark ropes of hair and black pits for eyes. Another flash and the mask of illusion is gone again, Kurenai’s graceful features back in place just like that.

Sasuke is very much looking forward to training with her now.

She turns to Ino as well, setting her chopsticks across her bowl. “Ino honey, Hayate wanted to teach you, but he doesn’t think he’ll be well enough in time, so he gave me some regimens to add to your training with me.”

“Aw, he didn't have to do that!” Ino exclaims.

“You can go visit him and thank him in person, then.” Asuma tells her.

“He’s in the special treatments wing, room 431.” Ryouta-sensei informs absently. “Don’t bother the nurses or the other patients and you can visit anytime before 9pm.”

“Yessir.” is Ino’s chipper response, directed at both senseis.

Genma reaches over and taps Choji on the head with his knuckles. “I’ve got you and the blonde terror over there.” He announces, gesturing towards Naruto, who grins.

“Sweet!”

Genma turns to Shino then. “Rai ain’t here, but he says you two talked about learning from him?”

Shino nods, his shades flashing in the morning light. “I expressed interest in his poison weapon techniques and specialty jutsu after seeing him perform some in a squad demonstration.”

Genma nods. “He’ll be here around noon, he’s just been dealing with a Shinobi’s Worst Enemy all morning.

“Paperwork?” Sakura wonders.

“Politics.” Iruka-sensei corrects. “But very good guess.”

Kiba looks around, obviously confused about being the only one left out, but his worry is assuaged when Kakashi-sensei sets a hand on his head to ruffle his fluffy hair. “You’re running with me, kid.”

Kiba’s relief is visible, followed by poorly concealed excitement. “Well my chances of not getting completely trashed went up from zero.”

Sakura gives a catlike stretch and grins, cheshire. “You better put up a good fight with our sensei at your back, Inuzuka.”

Kiba doesn’t balk, returning the animal smile with one of his own. “Hell yeah! You better be ready
Half an hour after breakfast, Sasuke’s shoulder is seal-less and Kurama is laughing at him.

Naruto is off washing his mouth out with a fire treated chakra solution, and Sakura is taping a gauze pad over the bite mark.

“I’d heal it with chakra, but Ikari-sensei says you shouldn’t have too much foreign stuff in your system until the corruption has run its course.” She explains sympathetically.

He nods, waving off her apology. “I know. Thank you.”

Kurama’s shade is still curled around them, despite his jinchuuriki being in the next room over.

~I don’t know why you got so flustered over it.~

The beast chuckles, tails rustling behind him.

~You humans and your social constructs.~

“Oh shut up.” He snarls, but the tailed beast just snickers some more at his expense.

Sakura laughs a little herself as she finishes up with his shoulder and moves over to the little bowl filled with dark purplish condensed chakra; the deconstructed remains of the botched seal, where Naruto had spat out the chakra and writhing constructs he’d sucked from Sasuke’s skin like poison.

“That shit put up a fight.” she muses. “Who the hell knew seals could move on their own like that?”

“It just means it was a living seal, like Naruto’s. Meant to be permanent.” Sasuke explains. “They can react and respond to chakra impulses and stimuli.”

“Ooh, so like how Naruto’s seal turns invisible without your chakra, Kurama?”

~In a sense.~ The great beast rumbles, ~This half-done curse seal was only aware enough to be reactive, incapable of complex responses to input. It was hardly a true living seal, and certainly not to the extent of our altered eight trigrams.~

“Nifty.” Sakura muses, holding the bowl out towards Sasuke. “Care to do the honors?”

He gladly sets the bowl on fire.

Kurama absently fans the flames with a breath of wind chakra, and Naruto comes back to the tailed beast batting the flaming bowl between two of his tails out of boredom as it burns down.

“That was the nastiest thing I’ve ever tasted in my life.” He mutters, still running his tongue around his mouth like he’s trying to chase the taste out with it.

“Don’t be a baby.” Sakura teases, but hands him her open can of black tea.

Naruto takes a drink, swishing the liquid around his mouth before he swallows, and then hands back the can. “Thanks.”

He sits down with them and Kurama moves to include him in the circle of his shade-body, letting
loose a yawn. Even though most everyone in the house knows about Kurama and his closeness with his jinchuuriki, Kurama doesn’t tend to show his larger shades much around anyone but the three of them, and only when behind the relative privacy of a closed door or a sheltered glade.

“You know how you’re going to go about your fight with Neji?” Sasuke asks. The fights are a ways off, but Naruto still has yet to meet Kakashi-sensei’s qualifications for passing, same as Sasuke.

“I’ve got a pretty good idea.” The blond says, bright and easy, leaning back on his arms. Sasuke doesn’t ask. He doesn't want to hear what Naruto plans to do, he wants to see it, so he nods instead of voicing a question. “Ikari-sensei says I might have only one hard fight in me, given the limited recovery time I’ve got to get over this shit.” He gestures grumpily at his shoulder, and Kurama huffs.

~Don’t push it too hard. ‘That shit’ can be deadly if you don’t take it seriously. If you get drained too low, back out. No excuses.~

“Yeah yeah.” Sasuke grumps.

“Be careful with that Gaara guy too.” Sakura adds. “He’s that kind of crazy that makes him really unpredictable. Lee’s fight almost got nasty.”

“He’s hiding something, too.” Naruto adds, a bit unexpectedly, looking up to meet Sasuke’s dark eyes with his bright ones. “I’ve been getting… unnerving feelings from him.”

Naruto immediately has the whole of his attention. “Unnerving how?”

He tips his golden head side to side, searching for words. “Unstable.” he decides. “Dark. Cruel. He’s also jamming my senses somehow, but I don’t think that part is on purpose.”

Sakura’s eyes go a little wide. “Jamming them? Jamming them how?”

Kurama rumbles unhappily. ~We’re unsure. We cannot get a read on his deeper chakric energies. I don’t like it.~

Naruto nods, running a hand through his hair. “One thing I can tell for sure though? Dude’s in a lot of pain.”

Sasuke hums, pulls a curled flower shuriken from his sleeve with two fingers and begins to play it over his knuckles. Naruto catches his eyes again though, before he can get to deep into strategizing, head tipped to the side, blue eyes flickering. He doesn’t say be careful out loud. He doesn’t have to.

“I know, idiot,” is his low response, but as always the last word is too soft to carry any real heat, too fond to be an insult at all.

Sakura hums around an easy smile and steals his shuriken, spinning it around her pinky finger. “So…” she digresses, giving Kurama’s nose a scratch as the big beast begins to doze off. “We’ll be training apart for a while.”

Naruto nods, familiar determination hardening the blue of his eyes into sapphires. “Genma-san says that if I can keep up with it, he’ll teach me Ryuu no Ibuki taijutsu.”

And just like that it’s contagious, the atmosphere shifts, and where once was uncertainty, solid drive takes its place. Sakura straightens and nods minutely, showing off the proud shelf of her
shoulders and steel in her spine. “I’ll learn those disruption and resonance jutsu straight from the horse’s mouth.”

Sasuke shifts, lets out a breath and nods in turn. “Those somatic illusions are as good as mastered.”

And there’s that grin of Naruto’s, self sure and confident, like he’s convinced the world would shift to make it true. Knowing him? It might.

He sticks an arm out, fingers splayed. “Better believe it.”

Sasuke reaches out first, grips Naruto’s arm behind the wrist. Sakura completes the triangle, gripping Sasuke’s wrist as Naruto shifts to grip hers in turn. It’s a promise, something Naruto and Sasuke started but was always Sakura’s too, a vow and an oath that they no longer need to speak aloud to reaffirm.

*Like none before.*

And unbeknownst to the three Genin sheltered in the circle of his tails, Kurama makes a vow of his own.

*This I protect.* He swears, feeling the promise settle into the fabric of his chakra, ripple along his tails and make its home between his teeth and in his marrow.

*The world may break and eternity may shatter, the sky may crack open and the oceans may blaze, and I will protect them still.*

He smiles to himself on the outside of their moment of strength and promise, fangless and soft. *The kit really is wearing off on me.* He decides. *Sage help the sorry fools that try to stand in their way.*

Shikamaru knocks on the door a little later, and Naruto shouts for him to come in. They’ve been sorting through seals from the library of them Naruto has been creating; of the ones he’s mastered and understands enough to use in combat without fear of instability or rebound. Sakura’s forearms are a new map of curling augmentation lines and tiny complex mandalas of concentration seals. The tops of her shoulders are painted with defensive chakra blocks and genjutsu traps, and the base of her neck where the vertebra jut out bears the latest edition of one of his sensory enhancers.

Sasuke’s shirt is off, revealing the broad winding configurations of a chakra filtration seal that will hopefully help speed up his corruption recovery. Sakura is currently pouring over a copy of it while Naruto finishes the intricate sweeps of the chakra network, working the edges into the periphery of the chakra vessels at as many small points as he can. Sasuke’s eyes are closed while he works, body relaxed in light meditation while Naruto pushes and pulls patterns of chakra over and under his skin.

He comes out of it though when Shikamaru walks in, straightening his shoulders and blinking his dark eyes open. Naruto doesn’t stop what he’s doing though, too engrossed in weaving together the patterns of the seal to even look up, and knowing Sasuke will speak for him if he needs to. The Nara has an armful of familiar looking scrolls, dark grey and framed with silvery metal, the Ido-
senshi clan symbol peeking out from between them.

“Yo,” he begins, addressing them, and then to the big shade of the tailed beast, “I’m not interrupting nap time, am I?”

Kurama flicks an ear and snorts, but doesn’t answer, so Naruto does it for him, eyes still fixed on the spread of black over Sasuke’s skin. “Naw, he’s just dozing. If he actually wanted to sleep he’d do it in the seal space.”

Shika nods easily, striding to stand over Sakura’s shoulder and scan his sharp eyes along her new seals. Sakura grins and lifts one arm to show them off.

“Nice…” he murmurs approvingly, reaching out to tap the one on the back of her wrist, the fan-like points of it spreading out where it meets the back of her hand. “That’s the channeling complex?”

“Yep.” Sakura agrees. “Means I can skip a step with most of the prominent healing jutsu, makes them work a hell of a lot faster.”

“Seconds can make all the difference,” he agrees, tracing the outside edge of the seal with a fingernail. “Looks kind of like a lotus flower.”

Sakura blinks, retracing her eyes over the seal, head tipped to look at it from another angle. “You’re right, it totally does!”

Shikamaru shrugs, his smile a slim curve. “Spend enough time with Ino and you start to see flowers in everything.”

“You want a set?” Naruto asks as he finishes up Sasuke’s seal and sits back a little, letting him shift and get a feel for the mechanisms. “Won’t take me ten minutes.”

“You don’t mind?” he asks. “I could use them, given I’m training under Shiranui’s worst nightmare.”

Sakura snorts a laugh at that.

Like some kind of gate guardian Kurama sweeps his tails out to the side to allow Shikamaru into their little circle.

Sasuke eyes the scrolls in his arms. “Those the weird katas you were working through?”

“Yeah, figured out why they were bugging me.” Shika answers, setting them down in a stack between Sasuke’s hip and Sakura’s knee as he sits next to Naruto. “They’re types of *Nagareru* tajutsu.”

Sasuke tips his head. “‘Flow’? I’ve never heard of that.”

“It’s not exactly a common practice.” Shikamaru explains, rubbing the back of his neck. “I only even recognised what it was because my clan uses a version of it. I’ve been learning it secondhand from my father since I could walk.”

Sakura’s expression twists in confusion. “That long? How long can it take to learn a tajutsu?”

“It’s not exactly a normal tajutsu.” The Nara says as he reaches for the scroll nearest him and unfurls it.

“You said ‘practice’.” Sasuke points out. “Like a lifestyle.”
“Because that’s kinda of how it applies.” Shikamaru informs them, pointing out parts of the kata while he speaks. “It’s not a taijutsu in the sense of moves and fighting styles, though it does have a potent effect on how you move when you execute any kind of taijutsu, especially combinations. ‘Flow’ in this case refers to the progression of one movement to the next, from one state to another.”

“Like a taijutsu within taijutsu?” Naruto wonders, leaning over to follow Shikamaru’s finger as it traces over the Kata’s script.

“Sort of.” He allows. “But it’s not just something that you do in combat. It’s more like a state of being, so intrinsic to motion that once it’s mastered you don’t even consciously recognise that you’re doing it. My clan’s version of it is *Kuro Nabiku*, Black Flutter.”

Understanding dawns behind Sasuke’s dark eyes. “So the way Nara move isn’t just genetic.” he surmises.

Shikamaru shrugs. “It’s kind of a combo of natural predisposition and mimicking the older members of the clan growing up. It’s not so much taught as it is absorbed.”

“How very Nara-like.” Sakura decides.

Shikamaru huffs and redirects attention away from himself. “Anyway, even though the type is the same, these scrolls are from a different level entirely. These are for *Sōjō Kōka Nagareru*, Synergistic Flow.” Shikamaru rolls the scroll open to a different portion, from descriptions to diagrams of the heart and breathing exercises that look to work into some kind of fine motor control motion. “These scrolls are introductory versions of the techniques, and start at the bottommost tier of mastery. They’re extremely valuable, and would take a long time to master. Years even.”

Sakura straightens eagerly at the idea of a challenge, and Naruto and Sasuke both lean in around the Nara for a better view of the scroll.

“They’re *that* high of a level?” Sakura asks, but her voice is too high to convey anything other than riveted interest in the idea.

Shikamaru’s interest too is evident, his shoulders forward, his eyes bright and attentive as he nods and speaks. “I haven’t brought it up with anyone other than Shino yet, but I think all of us should look over and chose a version to start training. Choji, Ino and I can make copies of the originals, depending on who chooses what.”

“But don’t you have your own version of it mastered already?” Sasuke asks. “Not that I’m opposed or anything.”

Shikamaru digs a hand through the other scrolls instead of answering immediately, selecting one by memory and unfurling it to show a hands-span worth of reinforced paper. “Like I said, these are way more advanced than even my clan’s *Nagareru*. I have my eye on one already, so long as all of this is cool with you three.”

“Duh.” Naruto say with a grin, Sasuke’s grunt of assent following right after. “Whats ours is yours.”

“Come on, Shika.” Sakura teases, tucking a friendly arm over his shoulder. “Smart guy like you should know that by now.”

Shikamaru rolls his eyes, but there’s a smile fighting for control over his mouth.
The sun pulls strange and heavy through the clouds as Baki watches it set over this foreign land, over the tops of alien trees through heavy air too humid for his tan, leathery skin. He doesn't like how clammy it makes his usually dry palms, or how much extra oil he needs to protect the bits of iron in his poison weapons from rust.

“Hey, Baki-sensei?”

He turns to face his young Kunoichi charge, standing in the doorway to his room, framed by unfamiliar light. “Yes, Temari?”

“I don’t like it here.”

Baki smiles wryly, a slim slope of his mouth that pulls at the lines beginning to etch age into his face. “I know.”

She steps into the room, casting a glance out the same window Baki had been gazing through. “Where is Gaara?”

“Roof.” Baki answers as she comes to stand beside him. “I don’t recommend disturbing him at the moment. Kankuro?”

“Out like a goddamn light. I don’t get how he can sleep in this shit.” She grumbles, tugging at the collar of her mesh shirt, the only thing besides her thigh wraps and shorts that she’s still wearing over her dress basics. The rest she’s surrendered to the heat and humidity, her thick sandy hair pulled from its usual four tails into a single bun.

“Moon country is worse. Demon country more humid still. You’ll get used to it.”

“Yes sensei.” She replies, cocking a hip against the windowsill, a grumble still crouched behind the affirmation.

They stay like that for a while, staring out the window at the horizon, until the reds and golds fade into the navy and purple of dusk.

“I’m thinking of pulling the mission.” Baki murmurs, breaking the silence softly.

Temari’s eyes blow wide as saucers. “What? But what about the invasion, the Kazekage’s orders? What—”

Baki cuts her off with a soft hand to her shoulder before her volume reaches levels high enough to disturb her brothers. Gaara in particular needs all the rest he can come by, in whatever form that takes. His eldest charge stills, drops back into silence, and looks to him expectantly.

“It has become too dangerous to proceed. And Raza’s orders have become… inconsistent.” Baki drops his hand form her shoulder when she relaxes minutely.

“That old bastard has never been consistent.” She snarls lowly.

“I’ve worked under your father for most of my life, and I know that for all his unpredictability, the man is not reckless. Continuing now, in an enemy village on high alert with unknown cause,
“would be.”

“He’s no father of mine.” Temari snaps reflexively.

“He is your Kage nonetheless.” Baki reminds her patiently, and again she deflates.

“Yeah.” She mutters. “I know.” She fiddles with the sleeve of her shirt for a moment, thinking. “I thought that Kabuto guy seemed shifty about the whole thing.”

“You have good instincts for people.” Baki observes. “And I agree with you. Things were already complicated with Hatake involved, but now…”

Temari blinks at him, not recognising the name. “Who now?”

Baki doesn’t respond right away, eyes trained on the still darkening sky. “Do you remember, during the preliminaries, seeing a masked Jounin with silver hair?”

Temari nods immediately. “Yeah, he was one of the senseis for the Leaf Genin.”

“He’s an old enemy.” Baki explains. “And not someone I’d like to cross given a choice in the matter.”

“He’s better than you?” Temari asks disbelievingly. “No way.”

Baki blinks, feeling inordinately flattered and needing a moment before he actually answers her implied question. “We’ve never actually fought each other in one-on-one combat, so I am unsure, though we did speak briefly during the peace negotiations.” Baki chuckles wryly, remembering. “He’s quite possibly the biggest pain in the ass to deal with on an open battlefield that I’ve personally ever seen, and I was in the squad that had to face down Ino-Shika-Cho during the war.”

And he knows that light of interest that fires off behind Temari’s eyes, knows what she’s going to ask before she does when she hops to sit up on the window sill, one foot swinging idly like the child she’s never been. “Have you told us that one?”

Baki hums, pretending to think it over. “You know what? I don’t believe I have.”

He loses himself in the tale, careful not to embellish or undermine, and Temari listens rapely, analysing every tactic he mentions, imagining every move and jutsu. She’s captivated until the moment she isn’t, and Baki smiles privately as her eyes drift shut and she dozes off, temple pressed against the window pane. He keeps talking softly, gently lowering his tone until he trails off, and the only sound left is Temari’s steady breathing. He waits a while longer, watching the moonrise over the thick canopy of the fire country trees, tracing the bars of light it’s shine washes across the walls.

He then shifts upright and tucks an arm around his eldest charge, pressing her to his chest as he lifts her gently from her resting place. She’s very nearly too big for it at fifteen, all strong bones and lean muscle and long limbs. He remembers when this was easy, when she was hardly six and already had the determination and drive of a seasoned warrior, her eyes as bright and sharp as badland stars, a heart as unrelenting as the harsh heat and shine of the desert sun. She used to love ‘scouting’ sitting astride his shoulders and seeing as far as she could, pointing out anything and everything of interest to her young mind.

Kankuro had been calm even as a child, with none of his sister’s fiery temper, fluid where Temari
was firm, a cool oasis of clear-headedness and open focus. Baki had pegged him as a puppeteer from the start and he’d been right; from the time he was nine he’d proved capable of prodigal battlefield awareness and the ability to split his wide focus between many subjects.

And Gaara…

He lays Temari down beside her brother and leaves a blanket within reach in the unlikely case she will grab for one, and makes his way to the roof.

His youngest charge sits at the edge, legs crossed, sand whirling around him in soft circles. Over the years Baki has developed the ability to judge Gaara’s mental state at a glance, can tell through body language and the temperament of the chakra sand just how much of who he’s speaking to is Gaara, and how much is Shukaku.

Gaara is almost alarmingly himself at the moment, the madness of the tailed beast only a lingering baseline. Shukaku has been… not calm exactly, but hesitant to show itself; almost as if the beast is wary of something.

“Baki-sensei.” Gaara says quietly, emotionless. “Are you going somewhere?”

“Yes, gathering information.” He replies. “I’ll be back before sunrise”

Gaara nods slowly.

Baki inclines his head in turn. “Your siblings are asleep. Will you keep watch?”

The sand around him ripples protectively in response to Gaara’s nod of assent “I will.”

The ‘I’ is a comfort over the usual ‘we’, another sign that Gaara is more himself than usual, that the madness is being uncharacteristically kind tonight.

Baki doesn’t linger any longer, body flickering from the roof into the shelter of the nearby trees. He finds a perch midway up a hickory and brings one hand up in a concentration sign, stretching his senses across the unfamiliar village. The chakra signature he’s searching for is distinct, and even though it’s been years since he last sensed it he remembers it with blinding clarity; the tingle of threat over the ends of his nerves, the taste of ozone on the back of his tongue, the bite of danger that jolts down his spine like the weight of a predator’s gaze.

He hones in on it, tracking it through the streets and into the dark of the surrounding forests, and hopes he isn’t making a fatal mistake.

<>

Baki does not step foot on the Hatake property.

He sees the edges of the boundary and toes the lines, stays well clear of the sprawling building cradled in lush waving grass. He is not here to trespass or infringe, so he parks himself on a boulder a good twenty meters from the property line on the far side, and waits.

He’s hardly been meditating ten minutes when he hears a rustle in some nearby shrubs. He pointedly doesn’t tense, keeping his posture loose and relaxed, forearms resting on his knees, legs
crossed over the mossy stone.

A ninken trots unbothered from the undergrowth, a dark brown pug with droopy eyes and a flat face, with a blue vest and a Konoha hitai-ate. It stops short of the boulder to shake a few dead leaves from its short coat and then hops up onto it, sitting down opposite him and scratching carelessly at an ear with a back leg.

"Apologies," the pug says drolly, "But the boss is gonna be a minute. You mind waiting on him? The pups aren’t quite asleep yet."

Baki shakes his head and relaxes minutely. "Not at all. I have all night if necessary."

"Good to hear." The pug agrees in monotone. "Are your own pups asleep?"

Baki blinks, taken aback a little before he realizes that the ninken is attempting to make small talk.

"Two out of three." Baki says slowly, not really seeing the point but having nothing else to do while he waits. "One on watch."

He feels comfortable enough letting that kind of information leave his mouth, since there is very little that can truly threaten Gaara, even in enemy territory.

The pug nods. "Can’t be easy here, what with all the water in the air."

"My eldest agrees with you." Baki says without thinking, forgetting how it sounds, but he’s been teaching the three of them for so long that sometimes he forgets that they aren’t actually his.

The pug just nods again, either misunderstanding the slip or simply choosing not to draw attention to it, and the rumble the ninken gives off sounds like something just to the left of approval. "We got one that can’t stand it either, hates the rainy season something fierce. Bit of a temper about it too."

"That certainly sounds familiar." Baki agrees and then continues, seeing an opportunity; "I have to admit, I didn’t take your ‘boss’ for much of a teacher."

"Neither did he, being honest." the pug grumbles.

Baki nods again, allowing a slip of a smile. "That too, sounds familiar."

Again that grumble of almost approval, and the pug trots forward and sits just shy of Baki’s knees. He lifts a paw. "Pakkun."

He takes the paw and shakes once. "Baki."

Baki holds idle conversation with Pakkun for another half an hour, discussing nothing of consequence, until the pug suddenly stops, floppy ears twitching. "Alright, that's my cue. Don’t fight or nothing alright? You’ll wake the pups right-quick."

Baki nods. "That is not my intent."

Pakkun snorts, satisfied, and disappears in a puff of smoke.

The air is silent for a long moment, and then Hatake Kakashi steps out from the shelter of the trees.
He’s not dressed the way Baki saw him at the preliminaries; he’s mostly in shinobi basic wear, a black high-necked sleeveless shirt and pants, hands stuffed into his pockets. Despite his relaxed posture Baki isn’t stupid enough to think the man can’t shift from civil to deadly in the space of a blink.

“Well…” Hatake drawls. “This is a bit unexpected.”

For a moment adrenaline rides high in Baki’s blood– the last time they’d crossed paths in a less than friendly manner he’s just watched the man turn the entirety of a battlefield into nothing more than a smoking staticy crater. And to make matters worse he’s a Hatake, and the last time Baki had seen him he’d been alone with nothing to lose; reckless, aggressive, a true berserker in the classical sense.

If what Baki witnessed during the preliminaries is any indication, if the body language and protective drive in his eyes was genuine, he does have something to lose now, and that makes crossing him more treacherous, not less.

After all, a wolf is far more dangerous when it has something to protect.

Baki has to remind himself that it is exactly that protective instinct that drove him here in the first place, in the hopes that the two of them just might have some common ground to stand on.

He would not have come here if he did not fear for the wellbeing of his charges.

“I apologise for the intrusion.” He says neutrally.

“There wasn’t one.” Hatake counters, his voice low and inflectionless. “If you had trespassed on my home in the middle of the night with the village in the state it’s in, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

The words are stated more like idle fact than actual threat, but Baki reads them as such anyway; he expected nothing less given the circumstances. He nods.

“So…” The Konoha Jounin says slowly. “I assume you didn’t come all this way for conversation with my ninzen, riveting as it must have been.”

“I came here hoping for an exchange of information.” Baki says immediately, not bothering to parse words. “My Kage has been acting… uncharacteristic, and reports have been vague.”

There’s a long drawn out moment of silence where Baki is prepared for Kakashi to leave, to take this potentially critical information straight to his Kage, but it appears Baki judged him correctly; after a moment the Konoha Jounin hums turning over the information, and then returns in kind.

“Rasa hasn’t been seen outside of his rooms since the start of the second portion of the exam.” Kakashi allows. “His guard, too, have been uncooperative.”

Baki swallows, chewing over the critical words he’s about to speak. The next few moments hold Baki’s future suspended between them. If he’s made the correct choice, if he can garner this once-enemy Jounin’s understanding and cooperation, he will have fulfilled his duty as a teacher. If he’s made the wrong one, he will have failed in his duty as a Ninja. It goes against every teaching the Sand has ever pressed upon him, in village over self, in mission over comrades.

But his students are his village, their well being his mission, and if he fails the Sand as a ninja, then at least he will not have failed them as a teacher.
“I have reason to believe that the man wearing the garments of the Sand Shadow may not actually be Rasa at all.”

The Jounin’s eye flickers, not suspicious but interested, and in an oddly forward display of nonexistent camaraderie Hatake moves to sit on the boulder across from him, bare feet crossed over stone.

“I doubt you would have come to a foreign ninja for information unless the reports you've been getting have been… disturbing. I assume you want information on the reason for the village’s current state of alert in exchange for the details of whatever orders have made you so suspicious.”

“I don't recall mentioning any orders.” Baki says carefully, not denying the assumption, which is as good as affirmation.

Hatake hums. “No, I suppose you didn't.”

There a long moment of silence after that as the silver eyed man seems to think over another response. Baki waits instead of posing one of his own questions, resisting the urge to chew at his cheek as the silence stretches on.

“Your eldest.” Hatake asks suddenly. “The one that hates the fire country humidity. What was her name?”

For a moment Baki is too baffled by the strange question to speak, but there's something behind the careful blankness of the Jounin’s eyes that he recognises, that strange glint a half step away from approval.

“Temari.” He answers.

Hatake nods. “She and Sasuke do have that in common.” He muses.

And just like that, they step onto common ground.
OKAY SO HOLY SHIT I'M BACK
AND NOT DEAD
AND GRADUATED
AND LIFE MOVES AT A NORMAL PACE AGAIN

SO
FIRST OFF, A CANNOT BELIEVE SO MANY OF YOU STUCK BY THIS SO
ADAMANTLY AND
KEPT.
COMMENTING.
ITS BEEN A YEAR FOR THOSE OF YOU THAT HAVEN'T NOTICED
HOW ARE YOU ALL THIS GREAT IT DOESN'T MAKE SENSE

Special scream at those of you that took me at my word when I said I would never
abandon this story, because it's true, its my fix-it feel good piece of my soul and here's
another 15,000 words of it.

Happy Fukin Holidays
I Regret Nothing

“Easy, kid. You take this shit too fast and you’ll knock yourself right out.”

Naruto nods in place of any kind of verbal response, since his lungs still feel like over inflated
balloons. He hasn't had to bend over to catch his breath like this since the last time they had to
chase down Kakashi-sensei for being late for training, which hasn't happened since before the
move in.

Its weird to think about, mostly because living together like they have been is so intrinsic to him
now it's like they've always done it, like they've always existed as a unit, always lived and breathed
and fought together.

He knows on some level it should feel stranger than it does.

Choji smacks him companionably on the back as he sucks in air with his hands on his knees, and
Naruto can finally see straight enough that the glint of light off Genma’s senbon comes back into
focus. The Tokujou stands easily with his hands stuffed in the pockets of his shinobi sweats, arms
bare in his sleeveless top. He’s got no other equipment unless Naruto counts the ever present
senbon between his teeth, no weapons, no shoes, just bare basic dress.

Naruto and Choji are both equipped the same way, sleeveless tops and sweats and nothing else.
Everything unnecessary had been left warded outside the training ground, far beyond the forest of
yūgure no take that dominate the breadth of training ground 22.

The tall thick pillars of the Dusk Bamboo cast the forest in fluttering half-shade, the filter of the
sun inconsistent through the swaying leaves. The plants twist in patterns of butter yellow and navy,
an oddly beautiful combination of hues and the source behind their prettier name.

Over the course of his training with Genma, Naruto has discovered that they have another.

*Bastion Stalks.*

“Shit Choj’,” Naruto mutters once he’s gotten back enough breath to get words out of his chest. “You make this crap look easy.”

The Akimichi shrugs as Naruto straightens, thumping a fist into his own sternum. “Big set-o-lungs, plus I started this before you, remember?”

“And Akimichi are, as a general rule, naturally stable in both personality and fighting style.” Genma informs them drolly, hands still dropped carelessly in his pockets as he ticks his senbon sideways. “You don’t have that one-up, Blondie. You’re all over the place.”

“I know, I know.” Naruto mutters, trying to stretch out his back and shoulders while he recovers a little. His ribs are sore as hell already from all the forceful expanding and contacting, and his lungs are still very much on fire.

He knows it’ll be worth it now though.

He’d been right about Genma using breathing techniques for more than just spitting senbon at supersonic speeds; looking at the muscles of his arms and the wiry leanness of his build, he bets that most people take Genma for a speed based fighter like Kakashi-sensei. And sure, he’s fast, but that’s not the main reason why he’s dangerous.

The stretch of the training ground at Naruto’s 3’o’clock is proof enough of that.

Bamboo stalks lay cracked and splintered, the steel boughs scattered across the mossy earth like pick-up sticks. It looks like an elephant charged through the glade instead of a man, and Naruto really wants to be able to do that.

“You’ll get the hang of it.” Genma assures, stepping across the open space to tap a knuckle against Naruto’s sternum. “Remember, there’s a sweet spot to every breath, once you find the trick to that, the rest is just practice.”

Naruto nods and takes a deep breath, testing the stretch of his diaphragm. “Again.” he decides. “I’ll get it right this time.”

Genma’s mouth arcs in a grin, and the Tokujo gives his hair a fond and thorough ruffle. “Don’t know how to quit, do ya kid?”

Before Naruto can respond to that Genma freezes, his hand stilling mid muss. He turns, not dropping his hand, and takes a deep breath.

On a normal person, the movement would be completely innocuous, a preparation for a shout maybe, but otherwise harmless without the typical hand signs that precede a breath based katon jutsu.

Naruto knows better.

A single sharp exhale and the senbon in his mouth rockets into bamboo swath to Naruto’s right, almost immediately followed by a yelp and a thud, as whoever was hiding perched at the tops of the stalks comes crashing to earth.
Kurama uncurls at the back of Naruto’s thoughts with a growl when the now uncloaked chakra signature registers in Naruto’s senses. ~Oh you have got to be shitting me.~

Choji blinks in the direction of the thump, head tilted a little. “Who is that?”

“Just a worthless old pervert.” Genma growls, but his body language belays his words; he drops his hand from Naruto’s head to his shoulder, and shifts so that he’s half standing between him and the new arrival. Choji picks up immediately on the subtle protective cues, and steps back to stand on Naruto’s other side.

There’s a groan from the shelter of the bamboo. “That’s no way to treat an old man. What’d I ever do to you?” The stranger grumbles, and an older guy in clogs appears from between the boughs rubbing at his ass, with long overly fluffy white hair and a strange headplate.

“The hell do you want, old-timer? We’re trying to train here.” Genma mutters drolly, but again the tone doesn’t match the genuine hot-metal scent of anger coming off him, bitter with hinted undertones of disappointment and disdain.

The guy holds up both hands in placation. “Hey now, I wasn’t trying to interrupt anything.”

“No, just creep on it.” Genma fires back. “Now I repeat; what do you want, Jiraiya?”

“You have a what ?” Sakura hisses across the table, the sizzling steam rising off the barbeque plate spitting as if in reflection of her mood.

“A godfather, apparently.” Naruto mutters, poking haphazardly at his beef selection as it cooks away. Kiba reaches over and turns Sakura’s portion for her, since she’s distracted, before going back to poking at his own.

“That’s ridiculous.” Sasuke mutters from beside him, picking through one of their appetizers.

Naruto huffs hard. “That’s what I thought… but Kurama says he’s the real deal. He was one of my father’s instructors or something.”

“Then where the fuck has he been exactly?” Kiba snarls, waving an arm so wide Shino has to raise a hand to block the Inuzuka’s wrist from colliding with his tea glass.

“Hell if I know.” Naruto grumbles, carding his fingers through his hair.

“Genma-senpai clearly isn’t his biggest fan.” Choji adds. “Didn’t even let him talk to you before he sent us for break. There’s got to be a good reason for that.”

Naruto sighs heavily and scrubs his nails over his scalp again. “This whole damn thing is just confusing as hell.”

Sasuke flicks him in the forehead, forcing his head back reflexively and his shoulders upright from their slouch. “Doesn’t matter.” he says blithely, when he has Naruto’s full attention.

“What?” he grumbles, rubbing a knuckle over the spot.
Sasuke looks him dead in the eye, black on blue, and says with conviction; “It. Doesn't. Matter.”

Naruto holds the stare for a moment longer, understanding coming easily as it always does between them, and nods. “I know, just makes shit complicated.”

“It doesn’t have to be.” Sasuke fires back, and elbows him with a gesture that indicates his meat is burning. Naruto removes it and places a few more slabs.

“So I ice him out? I don’t even know him.”

“Don’t have to. Doesn’t matter.”

Shino watches the exchange with interest, wondering at the dynamics of it. From an outside view it’s only half a conversation, and he truly cannot tell if it’s an offhand discussion, a deep emotional exchange, an argument, or some bizarre combination of all three.

“Are their conversations always like this?” He asks Shikamaru, who has neglected to talk much so far, as Shino has.

The Nara raises an eyebrow. “If you mean ‘half-formed’, then yes.”

“They’re very close.” Hinata remarks from between them. “I think Sakura-chan is the only one who really understands them when they’re like this.”

“I agree with Sasuke.” Shikamaru says suddenly, lowly, out of context.


“Whoever this ‘godfather’ of his is? I don’t think I’d give him the time of day.” he decides, passing a plate of short ribs Choji’s way, and one of seared tenderloin and grilled vegetables towards Ino, who’s currently attempting to calm Sakura's destructive temper with sweet tea and girl talk; like how many ways they know how to decapitate a full grown adult.

Choji grunts disapprovingly. “Kurama had to tell Naruto who he was, you know. The old man never said a word about it.”

“What's with all the secrecy anyway?” Kiba mutters. “Not just this, it was like this about his parents too. It’s like somebody put a ban on straight answers.”

Shikamaru shrugs. “Nothing to be done about it. It’s like Iruka-sensei said, a shinobi’s worst enemy…”

“Is politics.” Shino finishes.

Shikamaru nods, taking a bite of his barbeque, but he remains quiet and watchful for the remainder of their lunch, and Shino gets the feeling there’s a glacier of feeling resting beneath what Shikamaru chooses to show.

Then again, he reminds himself, that’s hardly a change from the usual.
“Am I in trouble or something?”

Jiraiya queries, legs crossed over one of their breakfast chairs. He smells vaguely of jasmine soap and peach blossom, though he’s still grimy and disheveled from travel, which means even though he seems to have spent a great deal of time near a bathhouse, he’s yet to actually take one.

Kakashi sighs and sets a cup of steaming green tea at on the counter in front of him. “If Iruka had been the one to catch you here, you would be.”

Jiraiya’s eyebrows tuck up into his shaggy white hairline. “He come around here often, kid?”

Kakashi rolls his eyes so hard Jiraiya’s surprised they don't actually pop out of his skull. “Not for the reason you’re thinking.”

The sage throws his hands up in surrender and goes to pick up his tea, blowing softly. “What’s Umino’s problem with me?” He asks, failing, as he usually does, to read the tension in the air, the subtle pull of stress along Kakashi’s shoulders as he turns back across the kitchen. He smacks his own teacup down onto the opposite counter with more force than necessary, the sound bringing Jiraiya's attention towards him sharply.

“I’ll give you three guesses and the first two don’t count.”

There’s more anger in the statement than he intended, and Jiraiya has the grace to flinch like he’s been struck.

“...I’ll admit I walked into that.”

Kakashi sighs again, decides not to dig into the wound right now. “Where have you been, exactly?”

Jiraiya grimaces, drops a shoulder in a half-shrug. “Been around, ya know, not as far out as the sagelands this time, dropped in a little more local.”

“So spying.” Kakashi surmises.

“Of course.”

“Anything I ought to know?”

The old man tilts his head, a wish-wash gesture that means he’s hedging his answer. “20 Questions?”

Kakashi rumbles, mildly irritated. “I get to start.”

Jiraiya concedes to that easily enough. “Fair. Ask away.”

“Kiri’s current political state.” He demands.

Jiraiya almost snorts tea up his oversized nose. “Not going easy are you?”

Kakashi cocks his hip against the counter across from him and crosses his arms, eyebrow raised. Jiraiya coughs nervously.

“Well to start, I’d say the climate is about as stable as wet rice paper and as calm as a sack of cats.”
Kakashi’s second eyebrow joins his first.

The sage sighs and takes a long sip of tea. “Yes, it’s that bad. Has been for a while now, ever since their last Kage dropped off the map, the vultures have been ripping each other’s throats out for his throne. Almost a dozen ‘Kage’ have been on and ripped off in the last few years. That changed a few months ago though.”

Kakashi’s focus sharpens. “How so?”

But Jiraiya ticks a thick boned finger back and forth. “Uh-uh, my turn, wolf.”

Kakashi snorts, shoves one hand into his pocket and sets the other at his hip. “Then ask.”

Jiraiya pauses before he does; it’s not like Kakashi to be this obviously agitated– he feels like he’s missed some sort of elephant in the room, and he knows he’s been gone for a long while, neglected some things he really shouldn't have, but nothing, so far as he knows, that would garner this kind of reaction. The fact that it’s seeping out into the lightning-brats behaviour around all the Anbu layers means what he’s missed is probably less an elephant and more a whale.

“What's provoked the change of scenery?” Jiraiya asks, letting a hand sweep the room. It’s clean but obviously lived in, far more so than the kid’s apartment ever seemed, warm in a way Kakashi’s personality usually doesn’t allow for, especially given the home’s dark history. He hardly recognises the place now.

“I needed more space.” Kakashi drawls, purposefully vague. “How so.” He repeats with emphasis.

Jiraiya huffs and takes a sip of his tea before answering. “One of the more tenacious candidates for Mizukage found some unexpected backing, by one of the old Shichinintai no less. With the way things were looking when I left, they either have that whole bag of cats wrapped up in a neat homicidal little bow by now, or it’s all rubble.”

Kakashi’s reaction to that piece of information is unexpected; his mouth pulls up in one corner beneath his mask, and he huffs something that might even be a laugh if it tried a little harder.

“What’s so funny?” He demands.

“Is that your question?” Kakashi fires back.

Jiraiya makes a face, lowballs his next askance in retribution. “Umino live here with you?”

Kakashi’s returning answer leaves him off kilter. “No.”

Jiraiya sits up, casts a long look at the living space behind him, notes the scrolls and stacks of paper, the weaponry and open books. “Bullshit.”

Kakashi gives him a dead-eyed stare that indicates anything but. “That is the second time I’ve answered that question. Do I need to inform Sarutobi senility has struck you first?”

“Hells, you too, huh?” Jiraiya grumps at the jab. “First Shiranui snipes me, then Shikaku scares the damn hair off my head, and then Yuhi slams my nose in a door.”

Kakashi shrugs, uncaring and unrepentant. “Kurenai’s never liked you.”

“That’s not the point, it’s like the whole damn village wants my head on a pike.”

The eye smile Kakashi gives him in return lacks all sincerity and is, frankly, chilling. “Funny how
that works isn’t it?” he hums. “How long are you here for?”

Jiraiya sets his head in his hand, elbow planted on the counter as he eyes the tension in the kid’s frame. “Long enough to give my report and check on the kid, if I ever get the chance. The old-timer wants me to look in on the seal too, make sure it’s holding.”

“How long are you here for?” he hums. “How long are you here for?”

“Hmm.” Is the brat’s only response, and Jiraiya narrows his eyes at him. Kakashi ignores him, doesn’t elaborate.

“Alright then, how many Gennin Packs has the Hokage thrown at you while I’ve been gone?” He teases with a grin, trying to lighten the mood some from the distinct dip and right turn its taken off the track. The stories of Kakashi’s rather spectacular string of failed academy students almost always prove to be entertaining in some form, but it seems that this day is just destined to fail to meet Jiraiya’s expectations.

“Just the one.”

Kakashi’s response is simple and short, but somehow the words carry a kind of gravity he doesn’t quite understand, heavy with meaning despite the deliberate lightness of Kakashi’s tone, and one by one, things begin to click into place.

Jiraiya straightens, gives the room another sweep of his gaze, takes in everything small and large, remembers the date of that bloody night, counts back the years on mental fingers...

“Ah.” Kakashi drawls, tone patronizing. “Now he gets it.”

“Wait, the Sarutobi gave you…”

“Mhm.”

“Even after the…”

“Yes.”

Jiraiya turns toward the door, turns back. “Does that mean…”

Kakashi taps the kitchen clock with a knuckle. “In sixteen seconds.” He remarks coolly. “You’re in Sakura’s chair.”

The last statement is presented with all the weight and finality of a goddamned death sentence, and Jiraiya has been making fun of the brat for long enough to know that Kakashi doesn’t make threats, he makes promises.

He leaps up from his perch just as the door to the Hatake main house thuds open. He doesn’t hear the patter of feet however, and promptly jumps when three bodies appear in the kitchen without warning, chakra running high, and Jiraiya well and truly gets it.

Kakashi’s Genin team consists of a stern-faced and ridgid looking young man, dark haired and fair skinned and clearly Uchiha; a kunoichi with rosy hair and hard-set shoulders; and… Naruto. Uzumaki Naruto.

Jiraiya is suddenly, painfully reminded why he’s been such a coward.

Naruto is hardly a kid anymore, thirteen now, but even so the brat doesn’t even look his age; the rest of his shoulders is easy, the confidence in his own body is clear, both hands resting the the
pockets of his simple training pants. His eyes are clear blue, almost Minato’s but not quite, a shade and a half too dark, with a ring around the outside that—while he doesn’t remember being present in Minato’s eyes, had been very clear in Kushina’s. His hair isn’t quite the same either, still bright and gilded yes but also richer somehow, maybe traces of red in the right light.

The boy meets his eyes and frowns slightly, blinking in slight confusion, and his stance shifts warily.

“Who the hell are you?” The kunoichi barks at him, a hand planted on her hip, green eyes sharp. There’s something in her posture that pings off a very old and ingrained set of survival instincts, though at the moment he can’t fathom why she makes him so damned nervous that he nearly flinches.

“Cubs, this is Jiraiya.” Kakashi introduces mildly, even as Jiraiya’s eye tracks back towards Naruto, wonders how the kid can look so much like Minato and yet so incredibly different—

Kakashi kicks him in the back of the ankle. Hard.

Jiraiya sucks in a breath but just manages not to yelp, casting a glare sideways at the wolf only to be met by a hard stare in return.

“Jiraiya is going to stay for dinner.” Kakashi declares. “And we’re all going to have a little talk.”

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Naruto has never been in a silence this damn loaded before. It’s like he’s standing in a room wallpapered in exploding tags and hung with trigger wire— one wrong move might set the whole thing off.

Sakura and Sasuke flank him, their silence stony after nearly an hour of heated arguments and rushed explanations. Kakashi-sensei has clearly elected to stay out of the matter almost entirely, only stepping in when it’s required to keep things from getting physical, mostly on Sakura’s end.

As it is she’s broken two sets of chopsticks trying to finish her udon, and Sasuke…

Well. If looks could kill.

Naruto himself hasn’t talked much, just asked the occasional question, and unlike his teammates, he’s not actually angry with Jiraiya, he’s confused.

The emotional cocktail radiating off the old man is so layered and complex it’s starting to give him a migraine; shame— both musty-old and acidic-fresh— grief, wonder, sweet-citrus joy mixed with the bitter tang of failure. The old sage is conflicted, for a lot of reasons he hasn’t said, but if Naruto tracks the questions he dodged and not the ones he answered, it begins to paint a pretty clear picture.

“He blames himself, doesn’t he?” he asks Kurama, who’s been curled up close with his consciousness all day. “For not being here when my parents died.”

~He blames himself for a lot of things, kit. Not that it forgives much.~

“Why though? Why did he leave, then?”
~Fear, I imagine.~

“That's not an excuse.”

~No it isn't.~

Naruto looks Jiraiya over again, takes another breath through his nose to judge. Below all the complex waves of negative emotion Naruto can sense genuine concern and interest in his well being, and while Naruto isn’t interested in having a godfather— he has two parents already far better than this old pervert could hope to be— the guy is one of the legendary Sannin.

“So the old man sent you here to check on my seal?” Naruto asks, promptly taking a bite of his Udon after the question leaves his mouth.

Jiraiya hesitates in his answer, eyes skittering over his teammates and Kakashi-sensei in quick succession. “Just a peek.” He admits after a few seconds. “To makes sure your ‘passenger’ is still snug.”

Sasuke tenses next to him and Sakura snaps another pair of chopsticks. Naruto ignores them both for now, even as Kurama chuckles in the back of his head.

~ Boy he in for a surprise. ~

“I have a condition.” Naruto says bluntly.

“A condi—” the old man starts, confused, but cuts off sharply with a hiss when Kakashi kicks him hard under the table.

Sasuke looks sideways at Naruto, a question in his eyes after he notes the lack of anger in his friend’s.

Naruto shrugs, smiles crookedly. “It doesn’t matter, right?”

Sasuke blinks, then smiles softly and huffs out a breath. “Of course.”

Sakura snorts to their left. “That’s the truth.” Then she turns back to the Sannin. “I’d take what you can get, you old pervert.”

Jiraiya smiles, strained, and holds up his hands in surrender. “Alright, you win, kid. What do you want on my end?”

Naruto looks sideways at Sakura, then back at Sasuke, and then meets the Sannin’s eyes straight on.

“My dad’s signature jutsu, Flying Thunder God. I want you to teach it to us.”

Jiraiya looks like he’d have been less surprised if they’d smacked him in the face with a carp.

He gapes, mouth opening and closing repeatedy. “You’re thirteen how do you even know that that is ?”

Kakashi clears his throat pointedly.

Jiraiya eyes him, alarmed, then turns back to Naruto, tone placating. “That’s an S rank jutsu, kid. I can’t even make it work consistently— hell, only two people in the world ever could, and both were Kage.”
“But you know the mechanics of it, right?” Sakura counters. “You could teach us the basics of how it should work?”

Jiraiya balks. “I mean I could yeah, but you’d need at least journeyman’s experience in sealing to even understand the basics.”

“What’s your point?” Sasuke demands, crossing his arms archly and sitting back in his chair. “If sealing knowledge were the issue we would have asked for that.”

Jiraiya’s face screws up at the implication, attention snapping to Kakashi again for an explanation. Their sensei just shrugs, waving a hand dismissively. “Don’t look at me. This wouldn’t be the first time they’ve pulled off an S-rank.”

Naruto leans across the table, grinning like a fox in a henhouse, and Jiraiya’s attention snaps back. “So,” he asks, deceptively mild, with all the toothy edge of a predator. “We got a deal?”

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The night before the final rounds of the exams, Ikari-sensei runs a final diagnostic on Sasuke’s chakra systems. They’re sitting out back on the deck facing the garden, chakra lanterns lit to drape the space in soft multicoloured lights.

Kakashi-sensei and Iruka-sensei are on the other side of the porch, discussing the exams and village status over warm cups of tea while Iruka-sensei does his grading.

Sasuke sits shirtless next to Naruto, Ikari-san and Sakura talking lowly while the surgeon runs the assessment jutsu over Sasuke’s back. It showcases the assortment of seals etched over his skin, the dark shimmering lines reflecting the colours in the spectral lights.

For Naruto, wearing the wrappings over his arms and hands is a necessary habit, so they’re present now, the seal lines in them reflecting an entirely different spectrum. Sasuke trails his eyes over them as he leans back, irises tinting faintly red to take in the complexes of chakra too delicate for normal senses.

Naruto grins and clicks his tongue. “I told you jerk, it’s a surprise.”

Sasuke huffs, but his eyes slip back to their normal ebony just as easy. “Hardly fair, you’ve already seen mine.”

Naruto’s grin brightens, eyes sparkling. “Hell yeah I did, that dash of lighting in your taijutsu? That Kumo-nin’s lucky not to be breathing out of a tube.”

The Uchiha shrugs lazily. “If I hadn’t held back he’d have broken more than his ribs.”

Naruto snorts. “If you hadn’t held back he’d be dead. Where did you get the idea? Kakashi-sensei?”

Sasuke nods, turning to look back out at the gardens, eyes scanning the smattering of trees that hug the cliffline just before it drops off. The view is spectacular—this far away from the village the stars are a bright river of light above their heads, and even the lanterns don’t dim their shine much.
The height of the cliff face means that the sight stretches all the way to the horizon, where the river of celestial bodies disappears behind the dark edges of the mountains.

“You’re up first tomorrow.” he adds.

Naruto nods, “Yep, and you can wait that long for my surprise, jerk.”

“Hn.” Sasuke hums, and then turns to look at him again. “It’s your fight with Neji. The one where you’re making your point for the test.”

Naruto’s smile turns sly in response. “You bet it is.”

Sasuke’s returning smirk has an edge of teeth.

Ikari-sensei interrupts their moment with a frustrated growl, drawing the attention of both boys towards him.

“Well that doesn’t sound good.” Sasuke drawls.

Ikari-sensei snorts harshly. “Ease off the salt for two seconds, shrimp, this is serious.”

“How serious?” Naruto demands immediately, directing the question at Ikari and Sakura both. Sakura answers.

“Corruption levels in his system are still above acceptable usage levels for ninjutsu.” Her tone is frustrated and concerned in equal measures, and she gets up for a few steps to settle in on Sasuke’s other side, reaching automatically for his wrist. “Twenty-eight percent.”

“Shit.” Sasuke growls, but still gives his wrist over without thought, and she checks through his routine vitals easy as habit. Naruto leans in a little closer, eyeing the spot where Sasuke’s cursed seal rested only two weeks ago. The scar from the bite mark where it was removed is still pink and raw, and despite there being no danger of chakra confliction in Sasuke’s system anymore, he’s chosen to let it heal naturally.

He’d been dodgy about the actual reasoning behind the decision, but Sakura had let it go easily enough, so Naruto hadn’t pressed.

*If I’d figured it out sooner he would’ve been recovered by now.* He can’t help thinking, but its like Sasuke senses the thought before it even finishes going through his head, and for an alarming second Naruto wonders if he can actually read his mind.

“Don’t even start.” he snaps.

Naruto scowls. “I didn’t say anything!”

Sasuke just rolls his eyes. “You didn’t have to, dumbass, it’s all over your face.”

“He’s right.” Sakura pipes in unhelpfully. “You got the thing off in the first place, and this shit would have been a lot worse without the filtration seal.”

Sasuke smacks his leg sideways and then turns to lean back against Naruto’s shoulder in an easy shift, the posture familiar and grounding. He closes his eyes, uncaring of the other people around them. “I’m fine, idiot.” he murmurs. “The rest is just details.”

Naruto concedes the point with a smile both irritated and fond, and Sakura smiles smugly right back at him, teeth flashing like a shark’s.
“Ryouta? What’s the verdict?”

The question comes from Iruka-sensei, who, along with Kakashi-sensei, has made his way over to them, teacup still cradled in one hand.

Ikari sits back as he finishes resealing his supplies. “Technically he’s cleared for competition, if he avoids using ninjutsu.”

“What would happen if I did use it?” Sasuke asks, opening his eyes to watch the surgeon, but not sitting up from his lean. “Theoretically.”

Ikari-sensei raises his eyebrow as if to say ‘theoretically’ my ass. “Your symptoms would return with a vengeance.” he says sharply, “your body is still trying to clear the crap out with fresh chakra. Use up too much and the corruption will crawl right back up through your vessels and muck everything up to hell.”

“Will he have to drop the match?” Iruka asks, pragmatic and concerned. It’s Kakashi who answers.

“That’s up to him.” He declares, gentle but firm, and locks eyes with their Uchiha. “You know the risks by now, Sasuke. What do you want to do?”

Sasuke’s eyes go steely. “I want to fight.”

Naruto is surprised not at all.

“Then ninjutsu is your last resort.” Kakashi’s tone brooks no argument whatsoever, and Sasuke nods firmly.

“Yes, sensei.”

“Kakashi…” Iruka starts, but their sensei stops him with a gentle shake of his head.

“He’s an adult, and responsible enough to make the decision. It’s his choice.”

Even though the comment is soft, not meant for Sasuke at all, Naruto notices he flushes a little with pride, blinks a little too fast in embarrassment.

Iruka huffs and glares half-heartedly, but doesn't argue further.

“All that being said,” Ryouta points out, eyeing Sasuke, “I see any sign of Blackvein or coagulation, I’m pulling you, end of story. Clear?”

Sasuke rolls his eyes again, because he’s a shit like that, but nods consent. “Yeah, whatever.”

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Iruka-sensei and Ikari-san leave not long after, both citing early morning responsibilities, and Sakura ribs Ikari to get some of his paperwork done before the world ends; his reply to which is a shuriken she promptly snatch out of the air and throws right back at him. The surgeon catches it over his shoulder without looking and turns to send her a glare, half fond and half exasperated. When he turns away again, his parting words are almost grudging.
“Show ‘em what you're made of, squirt.”

“You better be watching me you old coot!” She calls after him. “I’m gonna tear that ring apart!”

The corners of Ikari’s mouth quirk up a little. “Then that will be the least surprising thing I see tomorrow.” He counters, and then ducks out the door.

They don’t go to bed just yet though, even with the exam finals so close. Instead, Kakashi-sensei douses the chakra lanterns and turns off the light in the kitchen, and the four of them sit together on the flat boulder by the cliff edge in the soft drape of darkness, watching the stars.

Sakura lies back with Naruto at Kakashi-sensei’s feet, and together they point out constellations and arcs of light, noting navigation points and lines, tracing their own shapes in the scattering of celestial bodies. Sasuke is tired, so he’s leaning tucked against Kakashi’s side, head on his shoulder with his arms crossed and their sensei’s arm around him in easy support.

They’ve discovered he gets like this when he’s not feeling so hot, when the corruption makes him nauseous or fatigued. He doesn’t act much different in public, but when it’s just the four of them, or sometimes even just them and the other rookie nine, he picks one of the team to rest on. Usually it’s her and– more often– Naruto, but Kakashi-sensei is by far no exception.

“Whatcha thinkin about?” She asks Naruto after a long while of silence, just staring at the sky.

“The look on Hinata’s face before the prelims.” Naruto answers in his normal blunt honesty. It still makes her warm inside sometimes, that he doesn’t see the point in hiding anything from her, that he trusts her with all his thoughts in their rawest form. She likes helping him work through them; Naruto sees and feels things differently than she does, from different angles and perspectives. Some of it’s because he can sense emotion so easily, like a scent in the air he’d told her once, some of it’s because he’s so accepting and non discriminant of the world at large. Makes it easy for him to see the big picture of things, meanings and ideals and how they all fit together, but harder for him to work out details and practicality.

Sakura sees things more black and white, more action than intent, and she gets social clues and workings better than he does. It makes them a fantastic operational team– she can point out details and aspects he misses in the overarching scheme, and he can broaden her perspective when she starts slipping into stubborn hammer-and-nail tactics in which she is the hammer and all the things around her narrow down to nails. That usually only happens when she’s ticked off though, and Naruto’s good at pulling her out of that kind of funk too.

“That all?” She asks.

He shakes his head. “Seen that look before. Used to wear it a lot.”

“Before us?” She wonders.

He nods again. He isn’t looking at her, he’s still looking at the stars, arms crossed into a cushion beneath his head, but he doesn’t look upset, just contemplative. “It’s the kind of look you get when no matter how loud you scream, you know no one’s going to listen.”

Sakura nods, understanding, even though her temper flares a little. Hinata doesn’t deserve that, and Naruto certainly didn’t either.

She looks back at the stars too. “You gonna make them listen?”

Sakura huffs, but her grin is as wide as it gets. “Think you can make the stubborn ass change his tune?”

“Hinata makes him nervous.” Naruto says. “She’s trying to change things, things he’s convinced can’t change, but he’s bitter at his clan too. Problem is he won’t step down off his pedestal long enough to know what it’s like to fight for something from the ground up.”

Sakura nods. “Hinata said he’s caught up in his ‘destiny.’ I think he’s just pissed that he’s a ‘prodigy’ and Hinata isn’t, but because of their stupid branch family shit it doesn’t matter.”


“Shika’s pretty smart.” She agrees, which ends up being funny, because Shika’s pretty smart like the sky is pretty big. She looks back at her teammate. “If anyone can knock some sense into him it’s you.”

Naruto does turn to look at Sakura now, beaming her a smile. She shoots one right back.

His smile softens, returns to contemplative. “I don’t think he’s as much of an asshole as he lets on anyway.” he says idly.

“How do you figure?”

“Remember that reaming Tenten gave him? After Lee got carted off by the medics?” Sakura nods to indicate she knows what he’s talking about. “He was radiating worry the whole time, right up until Gai told them he should make a full recovery.”

Sakura blinks in surprise. “He didn’t look it. At all.”

Naruto nods. “I know. If I didn’t have an extra sense I wouldn’t have noticed. But I could smell it clear across the arena.”

Sakura shrugs. “Okay, so he’s not a complete asshole. You’re still gonna kick his ass, right?”

“Duh.”

Sasuke listens to his teammates talk right up until they fall asleep, as comfortable lying back on the rock as they would be on a plush futon. It is, as Sasuke has found, all about the company.

There’s an idea that’s been chasing it’s way around his head over the last few months, growing and rolling around in his chest, day after day. It’s settled at the bottom of his throat now, pressing for him to say it out loud, to confirm either the fear or the hope.

He remembers his father, stern hands on his shoulders, eyes that looked past or through him as much at they looked at him. He remembers his mother, whose kindness and comfort came often, but was practiced and distracted, hollow around her duties and her oldest son.

Kakashi doesn’t put his hands on the tops of his shoulders, he puts them on the sides, not holding, but steadying, giving strength, not forcing it. He never looks past Sasuke, his eyes stick, hold, whether it’s for chastisement or praise. He acknowledges, looks Sasuke right in the eye every time. He says what he means, good or bad, but there’s no lecturing, no expectation. He corrects, he
guides, and never says a word of praise that hasn’t been hard won. His comfort is never empty words, its nods or quiet questions or a ruffle of his hair.

Sasuke has been realizing over the course of months and months, that Kakashi is a better parent to him than both his birth ones had ever been. He still misses them, but he no longer aches for a mother and father he can hardly remember. He no longer needs them; in Kakashi and Naruto and Sakura, he has something better.

It's a frightening, private thing, something he thinks, hopes, his sensei will understand.

“Kakashi-sensei.”

His teacher turns to look down at him, single eye bright and unassuming in the sparse starlight. “Hm?”

“We’re a family, right?”

Kakashi stills completely. He looks down into his student’s face, and Sasuke’s expression is expectant, hopeful even, and Kakashi’s ribs constrict with emotion.

He’s considered them his for a long time already, his to care for, his to teach and guide, his to protect. But that word, family, has been taboo in his mind for far longer, something he’d found and lost so many times he stopped daring to wish for it.

But then again, he’s not the only one here who had a family and lost it.

If Sasuke– trauma filled and once so bitter with loss he could hardly breathe around it– can look to him and say that word without flinching, earnest and hopeful, then the least Kakashi can do is the same.

“In every way but blood.” he murmurs, and he means that, with everything that he is.

Sasuke nods once, quickly, like he expected the answer but needed to hear it spoken aloud. His eyes grow glassy, misted with tears he’s always been too stubborn and proud to let drop. He curls a little closer though, an elbow from his still crossed arms digging into his ribs, but Kakashi would rather leave it until it bruised him than move an inch.

And then Sasuke says, soft as a whisper; “Who cares about blood anyway?”

Kakashi tightens his arm around his charge, squeezes as hard as he dares, and feels his own eyes cloud and burn. “Whatever happens tomorrow,” he murmurs, his voice as steady as he can make it, “I’m proud of you.”

Sasuke doesn’t answer but he curls in further, tucking his head under Kakashi’s chin.

He doesn’t mention the dampness he begins to feel against his shirt, he just dips his head and holds even tighter.

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Tenten finds him outside Lee’s hospital room.
He hasn’t actually gone *in* of course, the stubborn ass, but he’s leaning against the wall just outside, stiff as a board to the left of the doorway.

“You could actually go inside, you know.” She points out. “Like a normal human being.”

Neji snorts and doesn’t answer, but he does peek a little into the room, like he’s been thinking about it. Or waiting for an excuse.

Tenten rolls her eyes and shoves what’s in her hands into his chest. “Gai-sensei says we need to stop bitching at each other.”

Neji almost drops the package for the sheer weight of it, and knows immediately what he’s holding despite the colourful green and gold wrapping paper. “New limb weights? Gai-sensei’s idea, I assume.”

Tenten huffs, heavy and put-upon. “Mine actually. Just sign the damn card.” She hesitates for another half second, and then adds; “I’m sorry I called you a self-righteous prick.”

Neji sighs, and it’s like air released from a balloon. He hates fighting with Tenten, as often as it tends to happen. They’re both strong willed, both impossibly stubborn, but he respects her like he respects few others in his life, and he’d much rather have her at his back than at his throat.

“I’m sorry I called you an over-sympathetic fool.” He returns, accepting the olive branch.

The corner of her mouth ticks up a little, and he acknowledges that as the victory it is. She smacks the back of his shoulder with the front of her own when he turns, a show of the physical form of comraderie she knows irritates him, that also serves to crowd him towards the actual doorway. “Come on Neji, we should to make sure he hasn’t tried to hand-walk out of bed yet.”

Lee is, of course, unnecessarily ecstatic to see them. He has also, according to the on duty nurse, attempted to climb out the window no fewer than six times despite his still rather severely damaged ankle and the fact that his arm has only just managed to set properly.

“I feel just as youthful as ever! I wish to see our fellow ninja display their vigour for life!” Is his excuse, when Tenten has to wrestle him back into bed a seventh time.

“There is nothing youthful about broken ribs, Lee.” Tenten argues back.

His returning pout is positively heartbroken.

Neji manages to distract him with upcoming lineups for the final portion of the exams, which are set to start in a few hours. Neji himself has already made his preparations, despite Tenten’s accusations that he’s not taking this seriously.

“I’m aware of Uzumaki’s track record.” he defends. “Such a repetitive failure won’t exactly be much of a threat to my victory.”

“Pretty sure that what you said about your last fight, too.” Tenten snipes, and Neji suppresses the urge to flinch.

Frustration and shame burn through his veins like a shot of adrenaline, still so fresh in his mind even two weeks past the event. His fight against Shikamaru had been absolutely *humiliating*. To spend so much time and energy only to never land a single blow, to reach the end only to realize
that the Nara had be playing him from the start …

He’d known Nara were intelligent, naturally gifted tactitions, but they were also supposed to be lazy, underachievers, not prone to purposeful engagement in one on one combat when their talents lay elsewhere, in battlefield control and subterfuge.

But Shikamaru…

He can still remember the flashes of fiery challenge in his eyes, the careless skill and incredible speed, a focus that was anything but lazy.

It still infuriated him, just thinking about it.

He has to take a deep breath through his nose before he can respond calmly. “This is different.”

“Sure it is.” Tenten mutters sarcastically, reclining back next to Lee on his hospital bed. Lee makes room for her happily, eating through another cup of hospital rice pudding, which of course Lee would enjoy.

“I won’t be caught unprepared this time, Tenten.” He insists.

She hums, disbelieving, and then holds up a hand to him, fingers curled, pinky extended. Neji eyes it with distaste.

“No.”

Lee makes a disapproving noise. “It’s a serious oath, my friend.”

“What’s the matter?” Tenten goads, wiggling her finger at him. “Too childish for the big bad Hyuuga?”

Neji groans but reaches out, curling his little finger around hers. The way she and Lee beam makes it worth it, somewhat.

“Bring your A-game Nej’.” Tenten demands.

Neji nods.

Lee drops his pudding and reaches around, somehow managing to wrap his pinky around both of theirs. “I would expect nothing less from my rival!”

Neji turns to him, fighting a smile. “If I also promise to give you a play-by-play when we return, will you promise to stay in bed?”

Lee bobs his head exuberantly. “On my honour!”

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“This is a lot of hype for an exam.” Sakura notes as they enter the stand-by area of the arena, arms tucked behind her head.

“The third stage serves as more than just a test for the participants.” Kakashi-sensei informs her as
they make their way towards the curved bleachers. “It’s a chance for the host village to showcase their abilities to those attending.”

“So it’s both showing off and a method of deterrent.” Sasuke concludes, hands stuffed deep in his pockets. Kakashi-sensei’s hand on his shoulder would have startled or irritated him if it had come from anyone else, but the brief and gentle squeeze is familiar instead, and conveys their sensei’s approval and affirmation in a way words would never be capable of.

Kakashi nods. “As such, not only will the Kage’s of the participating villages be attending, but several of their guards and captains.” He gives Sakura’s back a pat. “Do try not to step on anyone’s toes too badly, yes?”

“Yes sensei.” They both agree simultaneously as they enter the stadium.

Kakashi nods again, satisfied.

And then something changes.

In the thin slant of shadow cast by the archway, in the shallow slice of liminal space between the empty calm of the waiting area and the bright roar of the stands, Kakashi leans down, tone dropping from warm and casual into something steely, something low and icily calm; “Wide Awake.”

Sakura and Sasuke both still completely, frozen between one step and the next, thoughts halted in their tracks. For a long second the moment stretches through mud, one second made to feel like twenty, and the words register fully.

Kakashi-sensei straightens, they pass from shadow into light, and the moment breaks. Time restarts.

Sakura speaks first, careful to keep her posture and tone casual and bright. “Why would he tell us that now, when Naruto is already down prepping for his fight with Neji?”

“Because Naruto can sense trouble coming long before its starts. And because he’s still a terrible liar.” Sasuke counters, and makes a point to finally take a breath.

*Wide Awake*.

It’s a trigger word, one of several Kakashi has taught them over the course of their training, meant to convey the state of an entire situation in only a few sly syllables. They’re unique to the four of them, meant to help integrate team seven into the ninja arts of secrecy and subterfuge, and used as a method to keep each other safe in delicate and precarious situations.

The meaning is clear. *Danger. Caution. Nature of the threat is unknown. Watch every approach.*

Sakura turns to lean back casually on the railing, smiling like he said something funny, bringing a hand up as if to stifle a laugh. She’s by far the best of them at this, at subtle distracting cues to divert attention and shield spoken words from lip readers, and without knowing her, seeing the upfront brashness of her attitude, you’d never expect it. “We should warn Shika and the others.”
She giggles. “We need as many sets of eyes as we can get.”

“A united front.” Sasuke agrees, keeping the movements of his mouth minimal as he speaks. They don’t know the extent of the threat, but given subtleness and suddenness of the warning, he’d bet that Kakashi-sensei either doesn’t know much, or can’t tell them much, the later of which is far more likely. Sasuke tracks back through their conversation, the way he’d mentioned the politics of the exam; try not to step on anyone’s toes he’d said.

*Tread carefully*, he’d meant.

The situation is precarious. Two foreign Kages are present in the stands, both of which were once bitter enemies of the Leaf. Not to mention the slippery missing-nin that might still be lurking around in the shadows, a man they’d found out after the preliminaries was a Sannin with a hell of a bone to pick.

And speaking of Sannin…

“You know where the hell the old man got to?” he asks, and Sakura’s immediate scowl tells him exactly what she thinks about the topic.

“Anko-san is on pervert watching duty. Something about wanting to be able to drag him in if Orochimaru’s head pops up from between the floorboards.”

Sasuke nods. “Not much to do now but watch and wait.”

They drop the facade then, as casually as they brought it up in the first place, and scan the stands for their friends.

The arena is already filled to bursting with civilians, hundreds of Konoha natives and huge pockets of people from the surrounding civilian settlements under the Daimyo, all come to gawk at the tournament. For many, tournaments like this are their only glimpse into the life of the shinobi, into the culture of the strongest military force in the Land of Fire, and they treat the event with awe and respect, wide-eyed in the strange surroundings. But to the the natives of the village it’s akin to a celebrated sports festival; people bet and rally behind their favorite participants, take sides and shout encouragement or jeers.

It’s clear when the announcements begin that Neji is the favorite for this match, for reasons that still make Sasuke’s blood boil even now. Sasuke’s anger in this is a quiet thing, a heat simmering in his veins, slow burning and deep. Naruto had brushed their hatred off his shoulders like dead leaf matter and dust, shown the strength and veracity of his heart and forgiven.

Sasuke will not.

Sakura only notices his fury now because she shares it, though she controls it better, understands it better.

But there are times when Sasuke’s fury in this knows no reason.

_They know nothing about him. They know nothing about who he is, what he’s had to do, what he’s had to overcome, what they’ve made him overcome. They don’t deserve to walk the same ground as he does._

He takes smug satisfaction in knowing their ‘understanding’ of Uzumaki Naruto is about to be flipped upside-down and thrown in a blender.
Sakura brings him out of his thoughts with a tap to the shoulder, and he looks up when Sakura holds out a clear glass bottle, the liquid inside shimmering softly in the light. “That time again.” She sing-songs.

He groans, but takes the chakra cleanser anyway, unscrewing the lid and taking three long swallows. Sakura takes it from him when he’s done, and takes his vitals again while they settle in and wait for the match to begin.

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“Are you still hung up on losing to bug-boy?”

Kankuro turns to glare at his sister over his shoulder, and resists the urge to stick his tongue out at her. He’s allowed to be grumpy about it if he wants– he’d been looking forward to testing out his skills against the array of new competitors, to analyzing the difference in styles and techniques found in Konohagakure.

And then he’d gone up against one of the ninja in black. *The Rookie Nine,* as they’re called here. He’d had his suspicions about them since the start of the second phase of the exam; the way they held themselves, the way they walked and spoke and interacted, with a flavor of presence and *confidence* so out of place it was almost funny. Their cumulative success in the first session of the exam could be easily enough passed off as home-field advantage, but then the way they’d talked together later, the way they’d been addressed, particularly by ninja of higher rank, indicated there was something far more than luck and familiarity at work.

And then there was the incident in the deadly forest, the conversations he’d overheard in the tower and picked up though his puppets later. They’d been attacked, attacked by someone whose name the Leaf-nin seemed fearful to even mention, and Kankuro’s attention had been readily and thoroughly captured.

He’d prepared after that, been sure to keep his eyes open and his senses razor sharp when he’d entered the arena against the shade-wearing Genin in black, against Aburame Shino. In the end it hadn't mattered.

Shino’s tactics had been masterful, Kankuro is self-aware enough to admit that much.

A combination of water jutsu and acid had eaten through the metal mechanics of his puppets, burrowing insects weakening the wood. He’d kept his distance from both puppet and master, fallen for none of his traps, and executed fine hewed sensory illusions that had disrupted his reflexes just enough to be fatal.

He likes to think it was a close match, but he also has a sinking feeling his opponent had been holding back a little.

Amburame had been cool and calm, hadn’t gloated or jeered with victory. He’d bowed, respectful and polite, thanked him for both the honor of the battle and the *challenge* specifically, and offered to use his woodworking beatles to repair some of the damage to his puppet.
Kankuro had declined, partly out of surprise at how offhandedly genuine the offer seemed, and partly out of pride; his puppets are his, painstakingly constructed and modified by his own hands. He’ll fix them the same way.

But Aburame had taken it in good grace and left without another word, not a goad or remark left in his wake, and Kankuro had taken leaf-nin for a lot of things, but not polite.

Temari leans against the railing next to him. His lack of answer is answer enough, so she indulges in a teasing poke to his ribs. “Don’t look so glum, there’s always next time.”

“Not really what I’m worried about. Besides,” He straightens, scanning the stands until he finds who he’s looking for. “I get the feeling winning or losing was luck of the draw.”

Aburame is standing across the participant section of the stands, at the shoulder of his Hyuuga teammate. Despite the heat he’s still wearing a long sleeve jacket with a collar that comes up past his chin—Kankuro suspects it has something to do with his bizarre Kekkei Genkai—and he’s helping his other companion with some of his equipment—straightening harnesses, checking fastenings and the like. The other boy submits to it with ill grace, fidgeting and inevitably extending the process, but Aburame is patient, focused, and bats his fellow shinobi’s hands away when he attempts to undo his work. This must be par for the course given the way their Hyuuga is giggling behind her hand at the display, and not for the first time he’s fascinated by the dynamic between the shinobi in black—they defy one of the first rules the Sand ever taught him about strength—that attachment is weak, that teammates are useful tools to accomplish tasks, but nothing compared to the mission itself.

But it seems Konoha boasts some of the strongest young shinobi he’s ever seen, and not only do the ninja in black clearly care for one another, but they also seem to have no qualms openly showing as much—normally such a thing would be a broadcasted weakness, a display of what can hurt you. But it’s not as though the ninja in black don’t seem to understand that; it's more like disregard, like faith, like a taunt. It’s not that they don’t know it can be used against them, it’s that they don’t care.

We’re not ashamed of what we love. Is what it seems to say. Try to take it from us, and you’ll see just how strong that love makes us.

“Match is starting.” Temari informs him, and Kankuro repurposes his attention, directing it towards the center of the arena. The fight is between Uzumaki Naruto and Hyuuga Neji; the older Hyuuga not counted among the ninja in black.

“So,” Temari gestures to the participants and crosses her arms again. “What do you think?”

Kankuro tips his head and rubs his chin as he surveys the two shinobi while they wait for the proctor. Hyuuga Neji’s prelim fight had been memorable—a bout to the time limit that had given Kankuro a good impression of his admittedly impressive abilities. But Uzumaki Naruto…

“To be honest? I have no idea how it might go. I missed the bright blond’s match entirely.”

Temari groans. “You too?”

“Must have been short.” Kankuro affirms, then narrows his eyes. “His teammate’s match was short too.”

One of Temari’s eyebrows arch. “The dark haired one? Uchiha, right? He almost put a guy through the floor.”
Kankuro nods. “Could go either way, especially if Uzumaki’s level is similar.”

He almost doesn't notice when Gaara comes to stand a foot to his other side, and his little brother is both quiet and withdrawn, inward turned and intense, the madness a low-key itch across Kankuro’s skin, and from the darkness of the bruises underneath his eyes, he’s has been sleeping even less than usual.

He’d been with Baki-sensei until now, as close to his side as Gaara’s sand augmented ‘personal space’ ever allows him to be, and he wonders if Gaara’s worsening insomnia has anything to do with their rather abrupt change in plans.

He’d never tell Temari this, but he’s… glad they’re no longer attacking this village. He likes the atmosphere here and for all its flaws (too damp, too clear, too soft around the edges), he likes the camaraderie, the ease, even the green that creeps up every corner and drapes the space between every building.

He does not want a war with this place.

The proctor shows, a lean man with shoulder length hair and amber eyes, a long steel senbon held in his mouth like a toothpick.

He starts the match.

To Kankuro’s mild surprise, the fight goes quickly out of Uzumaki’s favor.

The Hyuuga is a great deal faster than he looks, and unlike his last fight, he seems to have the speed to keep up with blondie step for step.

And he is not pulling his punches.

Uzumaki isn’t bad, that’s not remotely it– he blocks or dodges the majority of the blows that come his way and even returns with a few of his own, but the Hyuuga’s hits are devastating, he can practically feel the release of yang chakra with every blow, and no matter how strong you are, no one can take that kind of pressure for very long.

And then things start getting weird.

The match has been going on for nearly twenty minutes, and almost every voice in the stands rings for Hyuuga Neji as though the dark haired shinobi has already won.

But something isn’t right; Uzumaki has taken at least two hits so far that should have knocked him out for the count– that shoulder is definitely dislocated now if it wasn’t before– but not only is Uzumaki still standing, he’s still fighting, and there’s something in the way he moves and counters, something in his eyes even at this distance, that makes the hair on Kankuro’s arms stand on end.

“Hey Temari.”

“Hm?” His sister looks up from the fight, head tilted.

“Blondie is clearly getting his ass kicked, right?”

Temari blinks, confused by the question. “That’s obvious enough.”
Kankuro hums and nods, rubbing his chin, and then leans forward over the railing. “Uh-huh. So tell me something.” he nods his head towards the clashing ninja. “Why is moonshine the one that looks nervous?”

Temari’s double take would be funny under other circumstances, but in a few seconds she sees the same thing he does– the Hyuuga’s wide-eyed stare as they break apart again, the subtle tremble in his arms, the hesitation in his stance.

And when blondie’s head lifts, he’s the one smiling.

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“Will you just stay down?”

Uzumaki straightens, works his jaw, and spits a mouthful of blood to the side. Then he merely smiles, grim, red staining sharp teeth.

It doesn't make any sense.

He’s outmaneuvered, outmatched, Neji’s been beating him into the ground for the better part of an hour. His knuckles and palms ache from it, the muscles in his arms burn, his chakra vessels are beginning to protest the strain of so many high level attacks in such quick succession.

And still, Uzumaki stands.

He hasn’t said a word the entire fight, just fought, and stood, and fought, and stood again.

It’s unnerving, the way Uzumaki is looking at him, unruffled and unafraid despite his numerous injuries, cool and calm and alert. It’s making Neji’s skin crawl with unease, a seventh sense that warns him something isn’t right.

And then almost as an afterthought, in Neji’s long moment of suspicion and hesitation, Uzumaki reaches with his working arm, and with two clinically precise motions, relocates his shoulder.

He hardly flinches as he does it, only a brief crease of pain around his eyes and a clench of teeth, and his pain tolerance must be astounding, because Neji knows he’s given the other Gennin at least four cracked ribs and another dozen contusions, but the way he’s moving gives away very little of that truth, hasn’t even slowed him down.

“Get it yet?” Uzumaki suddenly asks, and after so long without a word the question actually startles him.

“Get what?” Neji fires back.

“Why it matters.” Naruto returns immediately, and for a second he’s lost, doesn’t understand what it is the Uzumaki is trying to say.

But then Neji remembers something Hinata had told him, in a lull after one of their worse fights. He’d told her he didn’t want her relying on people who would not take her anywhere, who would not further her abilities, and Uzumaki Naruto’s name had come up.

“You have no idea how much he inspires me.” Hinata had told him, angry and cold. “I used to
believe what you do, that the clan will always be what it is, that it will always beat down the many
to raise up the few. She’d paused to let the words echo, to let the silence give them weight. “He made me believe that anything is possible so long as you keep going, that anything I wanted I could have if I only wanted it bad enough, fought for it hard enough.” And before Neji could say anything about that, warn her not to be naive, that some things were fated never to be changed, she interrupted his thoughts. “He made me believe it, and then he proved it.”

She hadn’t spoken another word to him for the rest of that evening.

Is this what she meant?

He’s suddenly ludicrously angry at Uzumaki, for putting those thoughts into Hinata’s head, for encouraging her to believe in something that will only lead to disappointment, for opening her up to so much future hurt.

And as well as Neji conceals the anger Naruto clearly senses it anyway, with a tilt of his head and a too-knowing glance.

Neji grits his teeth, turns the tension in his face into a harsh, mirthless smile. “You still think you have a chance of winning this?” he taunts. “You’re even dumber than I imagined.”

“I don’t think anything.” Naruto returns, steady, impossibly calm. “I will win.” The blond boy tilts his head, hair fanning a bit over his eyes, the movement animal-like and curious. “You still don’t get it, I guess.” He mutters, almost to himself, and then his words sharpen, turn taunting. “Come on Neji, you’re the smart one after all. The prodigy. Or does this failure get something you don’t?”

Neji snorts, but that seventh sense is pinging even harder now, like a alarm in the back of his mind. Danger. Danger.

“Enlighten me, then, if you think you know something.”

And Uzumaki smiles.

Neji’s skin tingles with immediate apprehension, with the warning of an unseen threat, and Naruto reaches for the beginnings of the wrappings winding down his arms.

“It matters.” Naruto says firmly. “You can hit me all you want, beat me down all you want. That doesn’t matter.” The motions of his hands are deft despite bruises and broken knuckles as he tugs at the loops of black silk that keep the wrappings down. “But you’ll never keep me down. And that? That matters.”

The wrapping comes loose at the ends and Neji’s byakugan tighten reflexively at the chakra he can suddenly sense underneath.

“Because I have something to fight for, Neji.” He continues. “Something I believe in.” The wrappings unravel as he speaks, and Neji’s eyes widen to saucers. “Do you?”

The chakra beneath the bandages is impossible, curled into fractals like ghostly crystals folding in on themselves in kaleidoscope patterns, shimmering with the distinct branched signature of concentrated lightning and the graceful swirls of wind beneath, knotted together with Yang chakra so dense it’s practically solid. It emanates off patterns etched into the Uzumaki’s skin, swirls of black ink in unrecognizable glyphs, almost like…

Almost like seals.
More complicated and powerful and potent than anything Neji has ever contemplated might exist.

Naruto straightens, rolls his shoulders, and flicks the wrappings with a sharp movement of the wrists. They unravel completely, coasting through the air around him like coiling snakes, suspended in motion on the radiating chakra, reacting to it with seals of their very own.

“You’ve gotten your hits in Neji.” Naruto tells him lowly. “My turn.”

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Chakra pulses around Naruto, concentrated, alive, reaching and feeling like nerve endings awaiting stimulus, dancing around the seals woven into the armour-silk wrappings. The two halves of the jutsu curl close but do not touch, waiting attentively for the order to become whole.

With the sharp curl of his fingers into fists, he gives it.

The chakra reacts instantaneously, sliding to move along the patterns of the seals within the silk, melding close. The armour silk twists, conforming, enfolding the chakra in sleek black, shaping it until it takes on its intended form.

The result is a single length of long twining chain, links as thick around as his wrist, gliding around his arms and shoulders like Tenne ribbon.

Chūkū Kusari.

Hollow Chain. The name is simple, straightforward, belays very little of what the technique is capable of. The chains solidify, not only aware but also hair-pin sensitive; fine-tuned to the tiniest twitches of the muscles in his arms. It’s the result of months and months of painstaking tuning and harmonization, of micro-adjustments and movement and practice practice practice. He’d only truly finished them last week, after a burst of inspiration hit while he was helping Sakura train her new anti-resonance jutsu. Now every seal and atom of chakra sing together like a symphony, flowing into one another like building music.

Naruto takes a single moment of stillness, draws a deep breath and holds the pressure of it in his chest.

Because this is more than just a technique to him. Its many things; memory, homage, promise. This technique has been a half formed idea in his head since he returned from Uzushio, ever since he’d seen Kurama’s first hand memories of his mother’s chakric chains– pure energy, powerful and devastating.

But these are not his mother’s chains.

The form they take may be reminiscent of her, the seals may gleam to reflect his Uzushio ancestry, but in substance they pay respect to a different set of teachings, to a different set of parents.

The chakra condensation that makes up the core of the technique is something he learned watching Kurama. The weave of lightning through the seals that allow for their reactivity and responsiveness is something he learned watching his sensei. And between all of them, his teachers, his parents, his ancestry, his friends, he’d found something that clicked.
He’d found his ideal weapon.

Offensive and defensive, a way to create distance and to close it, a way to block chakra and to channel it.

Kurama had smiled at him when he’d finally finished it, when Naruto had shown it to him, overflowing with pride and success and relief. The smile had been soft and ferally proud, and he’d said, harsh voice brimming with fondness;

~Perfect for a protector.~

Naruto releases his held breath.

Neji is arrogant but he isn’t stupid– his battlefield awareness is razor sharp and he’s only stunned for a few seconds before he’s moving again, a reflex offensive to try and take Naruto off guard. And sure, Neji is fast, but Naruto’s not playing around anymore.

He still aches head to toe, pain throbbing through every limb, but it’s a distant thing now; Kurama’s burning presence makes pain a familiar and manageable thing.

Naruto’s muscles tense and the chains react, ruled by his adrenaline, so attuned to him that they pulse in time with his quickening heart. His Hollow Chain is a weapon in the same way his limbs and his chakra are weapons– it’s as much a part of him as flesh and bone, as blood and breath, as articulate as his own fingers and as reactive as his own nerves.

Neji closes in but it’s too late, the chains are already arcing to defend him, snaking around his arm just as he brings it up to block the Heavy Palm Neji aims at his ribs. The chakra washes around the chain links like water, broken up by a substance harder and heavier than steel, but Neji is only shook by it for a moment, turning to aim another strike.

He assumes Naruto will continue guarding.

But Naruto is done holding back.

Before Neji can even complete the motion Naruto swings his arm wide, forcing the Hyuuga back with strength he clearly wasn’t expecting, and returns the attack in kind. He raises his arm sharply, and the chain swings off his forearm, arcing hard right towards Neji’s unprotected hip. It screams with momentum, and the Hyuuga sees it coming in time to dodge– barely.

The weighted tip of the chain cuts upwards crosswise, misses Neji’s collar by a handful of centimeters, but judging by the way his eyes widen as it passes and the way the air current almost tears a fold of his robes right off his shoulder, he understands exactly just how close it had been.

Neji tries to close distance again as soon as the chain arcs past him– smart, since the momentum makes it deadly at a distance– but Naruto’s accounted for this too. His fingers flick through signs, his first real jutsu since the start of the match, and he closes his fingers around the portion of the chain still wrapped around his other arm. Chakra sings along the length of it, sliding along the seal lines in twisting curls, gaining momentum at every link. He leaps back into the air as Neji gets close and spins, flipping the chain in a long arc at the ground.

It misses Neji by a wide margin, but Naruto hadn’t been aiming for him in the first place.

The earth jutsu he’d charged into the chain reacts the second it makes contact with the rocky floor of the arena, and sets off a rumble that chases through the entire stadium. It's the only warning Neji gets before the ground erupts around him, the jutsu’s power amplified after passing through the
augmentative seals set throughout Naruto’s Hollow Chain

*Doton: Jagged Quake.*

Sharp peaks of rock tear through the ground like tissue paper, and Neji is so wholly unprepared for the violent upending of his footing that when he leaps to avoid the serrated edges of the jutsu he does so right into Naruto’s waiting trap.

The chain whips around as fast as the thought crosses Naruto’s mind, coils around Neji’s body like a cobra, and Naruto turns, pulls hard, and hurls him right to earth.

The crash echoes like a thunderclap, sending rock shards ricocheting in every direction. One zips so close by Gemma’s ear it flutters his hair, but the Tokujou doesn't even blink as he peers across the arena into the crater in which Neji lies. Naruto can see him counting in his head, watching as Neji coughs hard, struggles once against the chains still tangled around his arms, and lies still.

Genma nods once, and holds up a hand. “Hyuuga Neji is unable to continue! Victor, Uzumaki Naruto!”

For a half beat there's nothing but pure, unbroken silence.

And then the crowd *explodes*.

Naruto isn’t paying attention to the sounds around them though, whether the noise is jeers or cheers or exclamations of outrage. His ears are ringing too loudly to differentiate, and even if he could tell, it wouldn't matter either way.

He stands at the edge of the crater and recalls his chains with no more than a soft tug of his wrist. The *Chūkū Kusari* unravels slowly, uncoiling from its vice around Neji’s torso and slithering back to Naruto, sliding softly to curl around one arm, drape across his shoulders and curl down the other into its resting state.

Genma is about to raise a hand to call for a medic but stills when Neji coughs and sits up under his own power. He blinks moonstone eyes in confusion and blindsided anger, and then turns his opalescent glare on Naruto.

“Why did you do that?” He hisses, struggling to his feet too fast and sliding around on the broken gravel beneath him in the process.

Naruto rubs the back of his neck and tries to look casual, probably fails. “I dunno what you’re talking about.”

“Don't play stupid with me now *Uzumaki*.” Neji snarls, stumbling from the crater on shaky legs. Naruto reins in his first instinct to offer help, knowing that Neji would incorrectly interpret the gesture as pity. So Naruto just shifts his weight and slides his hands into his pockets instead.

Neji is panting when he finally manages to stand, drained of chakra and still reclaiming his breath from his impact with the ground. His hair is everywhere and he's shaking badly– it's obvious he tried to discharge a jutsu in the confines of Naruto’s *Chūkū Kusari* and discovered just how bad an idea that was– the chakra would have made it about skin level before it surged back in on itself after coming into contact with with the seals on the outside of the chain links. It's a backfire that reacts reflexively to any chakra that isn’t Naruto’s– which is actually rather problematic, since he wants to eventually use this technique in concert with Sasuke and Sakura’s jutsu as well.

“You did something.” Neji accuses through his teeth. “Before I hit the ground. You cushioned the
Neji isn’t wrong– Naruto had channeled a burst of water chakra through his chains before impact, which had disabalized the spikes of rock from his *Jagged Quake* into sand on contact.

Naruto shrugs, meeting Neji’s angry glare with a flat look. “Wasn’t trying to kill you Neji.” he murmurs, tilting his head. “Just make a point.”

Before Neji can respond Genma pointedly interrupts them. “Hyuuga, hospital. Now. You need a medic Blondie?”

Naruto shakes his head, gesturing to the stands where Sakura’s pink hair can be seen at the railing. “Got one, thanks.”

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It has been a very long time since Kakashi has seen Sarutobi’s eyebrows quite that high up his forehead, longer still since he’s seen the dropped jaw to match.

The Kage’s balcony is high up, suspended above the main stands by a story, but the distance doesn't seem to have played down the sheer awe generated by Naruto’s match at all– it's silent around him, around the roar of the stands below, Kage and teachers speechless both.

Kakashi tries not to grin hard enough to be seen beneath his mask.

Along with the Hokage and Kazekage is the Raikage– A had apparently chosen to hang around even after all his participating teams had been eliminated, which is unlike him by Kakashi’s judgment. He’s never been the sort of man to be anywhere unless he stands to gain something from it.

Alongside them are the Jounin instructors of all the participating teams that made it past the second exam, including a spare few that have chosen to keep their teams around for learning purposes. Two of the Jounin present are from Kumo, the first a broad shouldered, dark skinned man with hair woven into hundreds of small braids, all thrown into a loose tail. The second is the tall, pale haired woman that had been rowing with Asuma during the preliminaries.

She’s been casting increasingly probing looks Kakashi’s way since the match started, and now that it’s over her gaze feels like a burning drill in the back of his skull. Baki, who’s standing to the ‘Kazekage’s’ right, just sends him a *look*. Kakashi only shrugs subtly in response, and eyes the two kunoichi standing behind Baki instead.

The Kazekage’s guard consists of two straight-backed women in the cold steel-masked garb of the *Arechi no Hogosha*, wasteland warriors of vicious renown and the honored protectors of the Wind Shadow. They’d be an absolute pain to fight if things explode the way Kakashi thinks they might, so it’s a good thing Baki had managed to convince the dangerous lionesque warriors of the same thing he’d convinced Kakashi.

He gives it until the finals before things truly go off. If it takes that long.
“Kakashi.”

Dipping his head, Kakashi closes his eyes and bows forward slightly, and important show of respect in the politically charged atmosphere.

“Hokage-sama.”

Hiruzen’s old gnarled hands are bone white against his chair arms, still strong enough to crack the lacquered wood, and he’s blinking fast, as if trying to clear a vision from his eyes. “It would seem young Naruto has more of his parents in him than I initially suspected.”

The emotion that jolts through Kakashi at the words is a complicated one, part ache and part anger. On one hand, he understands wanting to see something of Minato and Kushina in someone else, a glimmer of them living on in their only son. On the other, he wants to curse Sarutobi for being so terribly blind.

“With all due respect, Hokage-sama,” Kakashi says lowly, his voice pitched so that only the old man will hear, “Of all the things special about Naruto, his parentage is rather low on the list.”

And maybe it’s the way he says it, a tight reprimand crouched behind the words, that makes Sarutobi start sharply the way he does.

He looks chastised, and Kakashi didn't think that word could apply to Sarutobi, the God of Shinobi, to a Kage twice over with more than a half century of service under his hitai-ate. Though he schools his expression quickly, the blood takes longer to return to Sarutobi’s wrinkled face, leaving a sickly sheen around his eyes as he speaks. “Indeed.”

Kakashi straightens again, leaving the old Kage to his thoughts, but he can't help thinking that despite the new lines forming grooves across his forehead, Sarutobi’s eyes have never looked quite so clear.

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Shikamaru tugs a strap a bit straighter on Ino’s belt, the only aspect of her equipment that's not already immaculate. She’s practically glowing with energy and excitement, her fingers tapping giddily against the shaft of her Nagamaki, and Shikamaru finds he isn’t worried. So instead of saying ‘be careful’ or ‘fight smart’ he smiles a little, squeezes her arm once, and tells her; “Have fun.”

Ino beams and throws her arms around him, narrowly missing the tip of his ponytail with the sharp edge of her staved blade. He huffs with the force of it, his arms coming around her reflexively.

“Easy blondie. You're stronger than you look.” He mutters, but hides his wider smile in her shoulder and squeezes back.

“You're not fooling anyone, beanpole.” she giggles, and leans back to punch him lightly in the abdomen, the blue of her eyes sparking in the same shade as the sky overhead. “Wish me luck?”

Shikamaru shakes his head. “You don’t need it.”

A wide grin shows off the white of her teeth, and she leaps up to reach over and smack Choji’s fist
with her own.

The Akamichi’s smile takes up his whole face. “Go get ‘em, flower girl.”

Ino smacks a kiss to Choji’s cheek and takes off towards the arena entrance, shining like a miniature sun instead of a human being. Shino’s going to have his work cut out for him.

Choji jostles his shoulder gently once she’s danced out of sight. “Ready when you are.” is all he says, easy and quiet.

Shikamaru nods. “Grab Hinata and Kiba for me? I’ll meet up top with Trouble One, Two, and Three.”

Choi snickers and heads off to find their fellow rookies, hands shoved deep in his pockets.

Finding the monster trio is easy– their chakra signatures are bright and distinctive, and shine even clearer in his senses when all three of them are together. They’re tucked in a corner of the benches near the railing a good distance from the other chunin exam participants watching the fight begin down below, and as Shikamaru gets closer he understands why team 7 has been given such a wide berth.

They’re arguing. Loudly.

Except maybe arguing isn't the right word, since ‘argument’ implies that the confrontation is two sided and not just… well, Sakura yelling at Naruto.

“Freaking knuckleheaded moron, I swear all that chakra is starting to fry your godsdamned brain– and yes you can tell Kurama I said that. Dumbass boys, I honestly can’t believe you right now, there are more ways to make a point then getting your ass kicked I mean seriously Naruto what was even going through your thick skull–”

Shikamaru wisely waits until she starts to slow down before he inches too close– by the look on Naruto’s face this has been going on a while– Sasuke, who is leaning back against the railing, seems to have tuned her out long ago and has clearly taken a page out of Shikamaru’s book– eyes closed and breathing even.

He’s not asleep though, Shikamaru can see the minute quirks of his mouth as Sakura lays into their blond, little flashes that betray his entertainment with her increasingly creative blue-streak of insults to Naruto’s intelligence.

Which is blindingly ironic, considering the same fight Sakura is calling Naruto an idiot in thirty different ways for is the same fight that had proved to everyone watching, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Uzumaki Naruto possesses a brand of genius without equal.

Though it’s quite clear that Sakura’s irritation has far more to do with the Uzumaki’s numerous injuries than anything else, and even as she lectures her hands move with practiced efficiency around his shoulder and ribs, fingers alight with concentrated blue-green chakra.

“Should I come back later?” Shikamaru asks when she stops for breath.

“No.” Naruto says quickly at the same time Sakura snaps, “Yes!”

Shikamaru throws his hands up lazily, not about to get involved, and backs up a step, because
Sakura is the obvious threat of bodily harm, and he’s not and has never been stupid enough to cross her. *Sorry Naruto*.

Thankfully Sasuke cracks in eye open to defuse the situation. “Come on Sakura, he’s had enough, he gets it.”

Sakura growls and pounces on Naruto, ruffling his hair with a vicious noogie that has the Uzumaki squawking. “He’d better get it!” She growls. “Just because he normally has a giant fluffy demon to heal his every scratch doesn’t mean he can just let himself get knocked the hell around by an angry Hyuuga *dumbass*.

*It worked though.* Shikamaru thinks, and narrowly avoids saying it out loud. Naruto’s injuries had been an unavoidable part of backing Neji into a mental and emotional corner, a side-effect of forcing the Hyuuga to see that Naruto’s strength had absolutely nothing to do with any cosmic force resembling *fate*.

“Alright, alright, get off me!” Naruto squawks, and Sakura does so, if only partly, draping her arms forward over Naruto’s shoulders and sticking her tongue out just shy of his left ear. Naruto elbows her lightly in the ribs and the two begin to bicker playfully.

Sasuke waves Shikamaru over and gestures for him to take a seat on his other side, which he readily accepts despite the brewing tussle.

“Got something for us?” The Uchiha asks blithely as he sits, his tone implying he means *us* in the broader sense, the rookie nine rather than just team seven.

Shikamaru nods, ducking a stray elbow and straightening again before he answers. “What news do you want first, the long game or the short?”

“Long.” he says readily, and Shikamaru is unsurprised by his answer.

He hums, inclining his head. “Only so many paths the game can take now. I’ve stacked things in our favor, but we’ve chosen our stance on the board.” Shikamaru takes a moment to rub at his neck in faux laziness, tilting his head to level his gaze at the Uchiha, steady and serious. “The old bastard’s thrown the pieces, and black moves first.”

Sasuke’s eyes flash, and his returning smirk shows enough teeth to be a borderline snarl. “Good.” he says lowly. “I’m sick of sitting around anyway.”

“ Its Naruto’s move to make.” Shikamaru reminds him. “He’s the king on this board.”

“And the dangled prize.” Sasuke mutters, the humour vanishing from his face, turning his cutting smile into jagged frown.

Shikamaru tilts his gaze to even their eyes again. “If you’re having second thoughts…”


“There’s still time to explain, if you’d rather.” Shikamaru assures, and he means that. There are two people outside his team that can understand the convoluted trips and twists and contingencies of the plans and strategies his mind is capable of conjuring. Sasuke is one. Shino is the other.

But Sasuke shakes his head again. “You said it would work smother if we didn’t know. I trust that too.”
Shikamaru nods, doesn’t do him the disservice of asking if he’s sure.

There’s a few moments of relative quiet after that, as Sasuke watches his teammates wrestle with a fondness Shikamaru now knows him well enough to see on his face.

“What about the short game?” Sasuke asks suddenly.

Shikamaru tilts his head back and forth, debates the value in softening his words, figures there’s no point, and says; “Kazekage’s dead.” without preamble.

Sasuke’s eyebrows creep up his forehead. Sakura and Naruto stop their wrestling match to stare at him. Shikamaru shrugs nonchalantly and dips into his pocket for one of Choji’s snack bars.

Naruto blinks for a confused second or two, eyes tracking up to the Kage’s balcony and back down again. “So wait, then who’s wearing the hat?”

Sakura figures it out first, without Shikamaru having to say anything.

“Oh you’ve got to be shitting me.”

Choji finds them not too long after that, Hinata and Kiba in tow, and Shikamaru gets everyone more or less on the same page moving forward.

Shikamaru’s already created six contingency plans for shit blowing up in a file in his brain he’s elected to label ‘Shitty Sannin’ by the time Ino and Shino find the seven of them, and Shikamaru feels instantly guilty for missing the last half of Ino’s fight lost in his own head.

Ino’s far from upset though, and more than happy to give him a colour commentary of the events after they see off Choji and Hinata to prep for their own fight. She covers the entire event with rapid-fire enthusiasm that Shikamaru would find irritating coming from anyone else, and Shino nods along, interjecting when helpful but otherwise content to listen as well, thought throughout the entire saga Ino neglects to tell him who actually won.

Ino blinks at him owlishly when he asks, head tilting curiously. “Wait, you don’t know? Did I not tell you?”

Shikamaru gives a single slow blink to indicate his answer, and Ino’s smile turns sheepish. “Sorry Shika, sometimes I forget you’re not the mind reader. You make it pretty easy, in my defence.”

Shikamaru raises an eyebrow and Shino does Ino the favor of explaining for her. “Hinata, Ino, Choji, and I made a… pact of sorts, before the start of this exam.”

“Raise Hell and Bow Out, basically.” Ino finishes. “We kicked each other’s asses with enough flair to awe the judges and then forfeited simultaneously.”

“It caused quite an uproar.” Shino comments simply. “I am genuinely surprised you missed it.”

It’s Shikamaru’s turn to blink owlishly, and Ino snickers. “Must have been pretty deep in that head of yours, Shika.” She laughs, and punctuates her point by tapping a knuckle between his eyebrows.

“It means neither of us will move on in the tournament, but the judges would be brain-dead not to promote us, and we managed to keep our cards close to our vest at the same time too. Another wild card in your strategy deck, right?”
Shikamaru smiles and snorts, rubbing at his forehead where she bopped him. “I’m actually surprised I didn’t think of that.” He murmurs, then, louder, “So Hinata and Choji…?”

“Are doing the same, yes.” Shino answers.

Shikamaru huffs fondly. It’s good to remember that nothing is ever set in stone, that his friends can still surprise him in the best of ways, winding trails of predictions be damned. It reminds him that there’s no such thing as a no-win scenario— because if Shikamaru has learned anything being around them, being with them, it’s that even if there is no path ahead, no way forward, it doesn’t matter.

Because even if they can’t find a way, they can sure as hell make one.
These Demons

Chapter Notes

ITS FINALLY DONE
THIS IS GETTING A BIT RIDICULOUS THIS STUPID THING IS MORE THAN FOURTY PAGES THE SIZE OF A SMALL FIC ALL BY ITSELF
I HOPE EVERYBODY LIKES ASS KICKING AND BOYS
*COUGH*JIRAIYA*COUGH* BEING DUMBASSES BECAUSE THATS LIKE 40%
HAVE FUN

I REGRET NOTHING

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Sakura steps into the ring across from him, Kiba can’t help a nervous swallow.

She’s not one of their three demons for nothing— the muscle wrapped around her arms is corded, lean and defined, and doesn’t even begin to demonstrate the true extent of her physical strength. It also doesn't help that maturity-wise she’s several years ahead of him, already beginning to show signs of the growth-sprouts and hikes in physical power that grace Kunoichi long before they grace Shinobi.

Kiba has every right to be more than a little nervous, thank-you-very-much. He takes a moment to thank every deity he doesn't believe in that their demon sensei’s rulebook prevents Sakura from using the reinforcement latices that allow her to level whole hillsides in one blow.

Which would be more reassuring if she couldn’t still easily muster strength enough to crush his skull.

Sakura smiles at him chillingly, cracking her knuckles beneath wicked metal cestuses. “What’s the matter Inuzuka? You're looking a little pale.”

Kiba grins back, but it’s all bluster, one hundred percent. Sweat drips cold down the back of his neck, at the same time anticipation sends lightning firing across his nerves. This is going to be hard, and as scary as the idea of fighting Sakura is, he thrills with the challenge of it. It’s not often he gets to test his strength against strength incarnate and see where the gauge falls.

And Hatake Kakashi is one hell of a teacher– he’d always known team seven was made of monsters, but somehow he’d forgotten team seven included their silver sharp-eyed sensei, whom Kiba had quickly discovered, was a monster among monsters.

“She’s biggest weakness is speed.” he recalls from one of their nightmarish training sessions.

“She’s the strongest fighter of my cubs, hits the hardest, but it takes a while for her to find her momentum. You’d better hit hard and hit fast, because once she finds that momentum? The fight might as well be over.”

So instead of doing what he would normally do, instead of responding to the taunts with banter of his own, he skips all that and goes straight for the jugular.
Literally.

He lunges, fingers splayed wide as he swipes at her, the tips of his nails aglow with a brand new jutsu, fresh from his training with the silver demon. It’s an old Hatake clan taijutsu, something Kakashi himself could do since before he could talk, but took Kiba three whole days to fully understand.

Reikoku Kagizumei

Savage Claw

The chakraic talons extending from the tips of his fingers are razor sharp and glacier cold, an extension of his body and a manifestation of pure predator focus. The animal part of Kiba’s brain surges to the forefront as the attack connects—the chakra sparking off the metal of her wrist brace as Sakura raises it in counter—and Haruno shifts her stance, squaring her shoulders.

The fight begins.

Sakura bats away his first attack and aims a crushing strike at his chest, but Kiba bows his back into a severe curve to avoid it, disengaging to flip back out of striking range and leaping at the Kunoichi from behind.

They’re both brutal fighters, close combat for the two of them is as easy as breathing—so for long minutes they just have fun with it, clashing off each other with moving blocks and devastating strikes. Kiba manages to get a few hits in but they’re all superficial—gashes across her blocking arm and opposite shoulder, one lucky cut across her cheek. Fighting Sakura feels like throwing kunai at a brick wall; sure, the attacks do damage, but they’re glancing scars at best and do nothing to undermine the strength of the foundation itself.

It’s exhilarating: the longer they fight the more animal comes to the surface of Kiba’s mind, and the easier it is to use the Hatake jutsu. He looses one without thought—energy scythes that curve off his hands as they move through the air, arcs of light that fissure the air apart as they arc down.

And that one does do some damage, cutting into the flesh of Sakura’s side and upper arm, and Kiba leaps back, prepared for her counter.

She doesn’t respond though, at least not right away.

Akamaru yips a warning from inside Kiba’s jacket, and Kiba grunts his reply. His nin-dog leaps from his jacket and Kiba makes a familiar set of hand signs, activating his beast clone jutsu. Akamaru appears as his doppelganger, crouched and ready.

With Akamaru doubling his firepower, they’re a force to be reckoned with.

But halfway through his assault, Haruno Sakura finds her stride.

The change is instant, and terrifying, and so sudden Kiba thinks he might actually hear the click. Or bang in this case.

She knocks him back, spins, and drives a high kick into the ground that breaks up the cobblestones and sends a chakra shockwave out that sizzles through Kiba’s blood and sends his own chakra surging back on itself. It’s painfully disorienting, enough so that he barely dodges her fist as she comes careening at him like a missile, and it takes every animal instinct in him to dodge the chain
of blows she fires on him; she’s relentless, so powerful her strikes create shockwaves like sonic booms that make his ears ring, one after another echoing the fierceness of their master, and Kiba is missing death centimeters at a time.

Akamaru diverts her attention for a full second with an attack from behind, and with the opening Kiba manages to put some distance between himself and Sakura. He could start up another offensive, strike hard and fast and hope he gets lucky. But really, at this point, he knows it won’t do him much good.

Kiba straightens out of his crouch, rolling his shoulders to facilitate their shift back to more human structure, and it’s a testament to their friendship that Sakura immediately straightens too, defensive stance dissolving into a casually cocked hip as she sticks one hand in her pocket. They’re both smiling, and Kiba is still so giddy with adrenaline that he starts to snicker, blowing out a heaving breath. It must be at least somewhat contagious because soon enough Sakura is raising her other hand to her mouth to stifle giggles, and then they’re just standing there in the middle of the arena, clock still running, laughing like idiots.

Kiba hears murmuring break out in the stands, confusion and surprise, and sees Genma-senpai roll his eyes in the corner of his vision.

“Well shit,” Kiba rumbles, rubbing the back of his head. “Figured this might happen. You and I need to spar more often.”

Sakura’s smile is wide and pleased. “Anytime dog-breath. You’re getting pretty fast on your feet.”

Kiba flushes a little at the compliment– it means a lot coming from her– and turns to Genma with an arm raised, remembering last-second that the clock is still running. “Oh yeah, I forfeit.”

Genma snorts. “Little shits, the lot of you.” he mutters, and then raises his hand. “Forfeit, Inuzuka Kiba! Winner, Haruno Sakura!”

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Temari attempts to go into her match without expectations. It’s hard for her sometimes; Kankuro calls her judgy, the little shit, but he’s not wrong– she’s always had a hard time changing her opinions once she has them formed, but her gut rarely leads her in the wrong direction, so she sees no harm in going with it.

Except it’s currently fucking failing her.

Nara Shikamaru gives nothing for her to go on. Everything, from the lazy dip of his shoulders to the uneven set of his mouth, is unassuming and chameleon-esque, shifting constantly like a mirage off hot sand. There are no hard lines for impressions, no judgments to make in the curve of his eyes or the tilt of his head, no patterns to suss out in the way he shifts his weight from one hip to the other.

It’s annoying as shit.

There’s only a sparse minute before the fight begins and she’s already impatient for it to start. She’d watched him carefully during his fight with the Hyuuga, but even then she could tell he was hiding things, letting slip only what he couldn’t avoid showing off. It’s a principle of intelligence
that this dark clad Shinobi seems to understand far better than most.

*Knowledge is power and I give you none over me.*

She’s been itching to fight him since she found out he was going to be her opponent, itching to force him into showing what he’s capable of.

The proctor calls start, and Temari doesn't waste any time. She whips her fan from behind her back, and unleashes a long range wind style attack designed to scatter defenses; *Fuuton: Grinding Gale.*

And *damn* is he fast– one second he’s standing there, stance lazy and loose, hands stuffed into his pockets like he’s out for a godsdamned walk in the market, the next he’s fucking gone, nowhere to be seen in the shatter of rock Temari’s jutsu tears up.

And then sure as shit *there he is*, standing on his toes at the top of one of the upturned chunks of rock, hands still carelessly deep in his pockets.

He whistles once, low like he’s vaguely surprised at the force her jutsu conjured up. “Impressive.”

Temari practically sees *red*. One word and he’s fucking *messing* with her like he messed with the Hyuuga, *goading* her, pushing buttons to see which ones set her off. She takes a deep breath, banks the rage in her blood to a simmer. That’s good, she can use that. She was always an angry kid, and Baki-sensei has been helping her channel that anger through constructive outlets since the first time she’d lost her shit during training and thrown a punch at him.

She knows Nara Shikamaru is a long-range fighter, it was obvious in his fight with the Hyuuga that he’s most comfortable at a distance, but she needs to be careful– that shadow jutsu of his is dangerous, and she can’t afford to let it creep up on her. If she can just goad him into fighting close quarters…

She flicks her fan open again and twirls it like a *mai-ogi* dancer, releasing another wave of jutsu, hiding in the chakra an array of exploding tags that scatter in the powerful wind. They catch in the fissures of the rock and explode, sending debris flying everywhere. Temari brings her fan back up to protect herself from the carnage, stone shards bouncing harmlessly off the steel-lined canvas and ironwood.

*“Ouch.”* She hears as she lifts her fan, and *no fucking way*.

That attack was omnidirectional and *powerful*, meant to shred even the thickest defenses– she’s used it to take full blooded Jounin off guard, to show how dangerous she was at any range, but *particularly* mid-to-long range. Simple. Effective.

The bastard has a scratch. A jagged cut to the cheek. That’s *all*.

He wipes the blood away almost absently, idle and slow. Unconcerned. Temari thinks she understands the extent of the Hyuuga’s blind fury now.

“That jutsu wasn’t very nice.” the Nara comments. “You always start off this intense?”

And there goes Temari’s temper.

It turns out drawing Nara Shikamaru into close quarters combat is not the sound strategy she thought it was. She barks at him to stop talking and put his jutsu where his mouth is, but he doesn’t
seem to be taking her even remotely seriously until she accidentally steps on a nerve.

She’s trying to get a rise out of him, trying to induce a fraction of the fury in him that his blithe and pointed comments are inducing in her, and she knows it’s stupid, knows he shouldn’t let him goad her like this, but he’s just getting under her skin somehow, pointed words rubbing like sandpaper until she snaps.

She doesn’t even remember what she says– she’s scattering a fire jutsu of his, one of the strange dark-fire blazes that seems to stick to fucking thin air, dispelling it before the shadows they cast can cause her problems, and she says something scathing about mind games and his flaxen-haired teammate, and it had been brutal even for her, but not as cutting as some of the things she’d said to him already, which is why the change had taken her aback.

It’s like the atmosphere thins right out, like the temperature drops whole degrees despite the still searing patches of fire littering the battlefield. It’s the only warning she gets before he’s right in front of her, and she swings her bladed fan down in time, but only just.

Temari’s Tessen fan weighs more than she does, but he stops it even as she brings it down with as much force as her aching muscles can muster. There’s a long, sharp knife in his hand that hadn’t been there a fraction of a second ago, and it’s caught her fan at the perfect angle to distribute force, right at the base of the axel. And he must be a lot fucking stronger than his skinny frame would suggest, because Temari can see the lines of the musclestraining beneath the black top, see how they bunch down the entire length of his arm and gnarl at the shoulder, how they pull tension down the length of his side.

For a long moment in time, the seconds stretched in her battle honed consciousness like thick mochi, they stay like that.

Shikamaru Nara says nothing. He only looks up, wry and furious smile curved on his mouth like slice of shattered glass, and then she sees something small in the shinobi’s irises.

The tiniest flicker of furious, predatory gold leashed tightly behind the inky black of his eyes.

Every drop of blood in Temari’s body runs cold as ice.

Temari has the greatest natural instincts of her generation, and whatever is hiding behind the dark cloak of this boy’s eyes scares her half to death.

Its gone in less than a fraction of a second, a whisper of something she could easily have imagined.

But the sharp fissure of fear still quaking down her spine tells an entirely different story.

She sees darkness moving in the corner of her vision but she dares not take her eyes off the Nara himself– off ebon eyes still creased with trace evidence of that flash of brutal temper. It creeps in further, and now Temari can see it in her periphery– coils of shadow are winding their way slowly up Nara Shikamaru’s arms, thick snakes of darkness nearly invisible against the black of his top. The Nara’s muscles tense even harder.

And Temari’s fan begins to move.

No fucking way.

The goddamn shadows are some kind of reality-augmenting genjutsu, they have to be; ninjutsu and taijutsu don’t affect them, and they’re immune to the normal laws of physics like space and inertia. They can touch, but not be touched.
But fucking genjutsu, no matter how strong, can’t reinforce genuine muscular strength, can’t act as a secondary source of torque and force—it breaks every single law of chakra differentiation that Temari even knows.

There’s a low rumble, like the tone an earthquake makes in the crust of the world just before it rends apart, like the dull roar of an incoming sandstorm you can hardly see on the horizon.

With one tremendous shove, Nara Shikamaru wrenched her fan skyward, and it arches clear over her head, whipping through the air and crashing to the ground with a deafening thunk.

Her arm is locked behind her before the sound finishes ringing in her ears, the cool, paper thin edge of the Nara’s knife a pointed brush just below her jaw.

The match is over.

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Mother has been quiet as of late.

The whispering susurrus of her voice is dull and idle, a breeze across the sand instead of a tempest. She is usually so loud Gaara can’t think anything but her orders, her mind crowding in and wrapping tight around him, merging their voices together.

It’s strange to be able to form thoughts around the noise, strange to find enough quiet for an idea or two of his own in the rustling desert of his mind.

He can think for himself enough now to know that something is wrong.

For the first time in memory, Mother is afraid.

Her fear walks in a small skin with slender adolescent bones, behind ocean-sky eyes filtered behind spun-gold hair.

He should be dead already.

Normally, mother would agree. They are all dangerous, all out to get him, out to destroy and crush and devastate. He has to devastate them first.

But she doesn’t agree.

There is no itch to see blood spill, no desire to cleave flesh from bone, no need for the sticky-damp power over death that seeps between the grains of his sand.

Too dangerous. She says. Not yet.

So far, Gaara has listened.

He’s grateful for the quiet. It gives him more time with his blood, with the other beings in his desert, with his sister and brother and teacher.

But it’s time now. Mother’s fear is too dangerous, grows more dangerous the longer they stay here in this green place.
There is, however, a problem.

Someone stands between him and Mother’s fear. A grim boy with storm-dark eyes. If he wants to destroy Mother’s fear, he must go through him first.

His sister has warned him that the boy is strong, and Mother agrees. She sees confidence and the power that backs it, notes small things that Gaara would not have thought to look for in assessing a threat—things like the curl of fingers and how quickly an expression can move from softness to steel.

The boy stands before him now, eyes neutral, expression blank. He looks vaguely weary, but Gaara is not fool enough to think that means he is not still terribly dangerous—there is a Kumo-nin still recovering in the hospital who has made that mistake already.

Mother senses the danger Gaara cannot yet see and he feels the sand begin to stir on his skin, weaving together to shield him, ready to defend him immediately.

And an immediate defense is necessary.

That speed certainly is something to fear, because in the sparse second and a half that it takes to start the match the boy is practically in his *teeth*.

The air rumbles on impact as the Uchiha's strike collides with a protective mass of sand, and Gaara seizes the opportunity to surge it forward, to wrap the granules around the boy’s fist in anticipation of compression. He will be far less dangerous with only one hand.

But it is not so easy, and the dark haired Genin is no fool.

Gaara’s sharp nose picks out the distinctive tang of ozone, and he feels the crackle of electricity through his sand before he sees it. The lightning sizzles, sharp and hot, flash forging the sand particles to thin glass and then shattering them, and Temari had warned him about this too, this strange form of taijutsu that could summon forth elemental charge, so Gaara alters his tactics.

He leaps, moves to create distance even as he pulls his sand around in a dancing twist to encircle his opponent, his *prey*, in a curling spiral of compressing desert.

But the dark haired boy is moving before he can fully contract the *Sand Burial* into a column of bloody particles, wind rushing off the length of his legs as he exerts even higher levels of superhuman speed to avoid the reaching curl.

*It seems he can pour more than just lightning into his taijutsu.*

Gaara changes strategy again fluidly, launching hardened sand-bullets on the heel of the attack, which are dodged as the Uchiha spins mid air and vanishes, reappearing at his back, only to vanish again at Gaara’s quick repose of a desert wave, aiming for area over accuracy.

He’s *good*, this boy of darkness and fiery motion. He is calm and unwaveringly focused, even when Gaara’s attacks nearly graze him, and he chips into Gaara’s defenses with methodical savagery, using small holes in his recovering shields to blow open larger ones.

The crowd is jabbering with excitement around them, Gaara can hear the irritating roar of it over the sound of adrenaline in his ears, and can’t help his derision at how terribly foolish it is.

Considering both he and the Uchiha are still very much holding back.
Gaara retracts his sand from his most recent bombardment to regroup, his eyes narrowing fractionally, gaze flinty and blank.

"Is this a game to you?" Gaara asks tonelessly, when the Uchiha settles back from his most recent flurry of parries and counters, wind cresting up from around his legs and fluttering his pitch hair. The tiredness behind his eyes has not grown, but nor has it diminished any, and when he opens his mouth to breathe out a sigh, the very air of it catches in a brief flash of crimson flame.

"Could ask you the same question." the dark boy mutters boredly, eyes narrowed in something like suspicion. “You don’t seem all that excited over this either. Something else on your mind.”

The last part of that sentence is a shock, not a question or a taunt, just an observation, even though Gaara knows his expression gives away nothing of his thoughts.

Gaara tilts his head, animal sussing out threat. “You’re in my way, like all the rest.” He says with cruel softness, sand creeping dry and abrasive over his skin as he opens the floodgates on his chakra. It makes the monster in him fiercer, harder to control, but he understands now, after their test bout, that it will be necessary. “I’ll see your blood either way.”

But the first blood Gaara sees comes at the cost of his own.

The howl of the desert Gaara has created around him must be something to behold from the outside looking in, but he doubts somewhat that the spectators around them see much more than the rippling currents of a veritable ocean of sand, writhing and frothing and eager to obey him in his quest to crush the dark Uchiha into nothing more than a red smear.

But Uchiha Sasuke is a ghost, steps so light and quick he’s hardly there for a moment before he’s gone again, and the mass of sensory sand can’t catch what it can hardly keep track of. But this game of cat and mouse has been going on a long time, and he knows he’s not the only one running low on the chakra necessary to keep it up.

Their individual ability niches and strengths have made this entire fight into a bad joke– a messy and vicious catfight resulting in the damage of nothing but property and pride.

Mother is getting nervous, her energy riling his own– making it sharper, more volatile.

~Sleep.~ her rough voice beseeches. ~I will protect us.~

No. He counters. I will protect myself.

She quiets unhappily, though does not push the issue into Gaara’s mind the way she normally would. Mother knows the wisdom in keeping their true nature concealed a while longer.

He’s learned something during their frustrating bout, however; for one reason or another- despite the obvious tactical advantage of doing so- the Uchiha is reluctant, or even perhaps incapable, of using true ninjutsu to attack him. It would be a strange coincidence– facing two shinobi consecutively that did not possess latent ability for ninjutsu, though it would be far from the strangest thing.

The green clad ninja he’d nearly broken before had been far easier prey, but if what he suspects is true, Gaara plans to exploit every weakness.
But just when he thinks he’s figured out the patterns to the leaf-nin’s movements, something changes.

Suddenly and without warning Uchiha Sasuke is simply gone, vanished in the fluctuating sea of his senses. Then he’s suddenly above Gaara, his presence casting writhing shadows over his head, and Gaara’s ears fill with the furious sound of a thousand chirping birds.

Lightning spills, fluttering and sharp, from between the boy’s outstretched hand, an obvious ninjutsu of haunting power, and Gaara barely manages to bring up a serrated shield in time to prevent the blow from being deadly. But even as barbed curls of sand twist and tear into the Uchihas arm, the jutsu still carries enough momentum and power to shear through his sand shell and rip right through his shoulder.

<>

The thing about it is, halfway through the third minute of this stupid match, Sasuke already knows he’s not going to win.

This Gaara kid is something else, a high cut above the rest of the half-assed Genin that had entered the Chunin exams hoping for recognition and a shiny new rank. The whole of the Suna team seem to be following that guideline, sure; but this shinobi, this Gaara of the Desert, is different. Dangerous. They feel each other out as opponents for the first few minutes before it becomes clear they’re both clipping back on their true abilities. For Sasuke the restraint is a necessity— the less chakra he expends the better— but he suspects caution is the reason behind Gaara’s tight rein on his chakra, a cagy and animalistic sort of warryness.

It’s only after Sasuke calls him out on his preoccupation that the reason becomes clear, when a sliver of a deeper, darker power edges sharply into the blood-haired boy’s chakra.

And then Sasuke knows exactly what he’s dealing with.

He’s spent enough time in close quarters with Naruto to know a fucking Bijuu when he feels one.

The sand-nin is being careful about it, very careful, but up close and personal with his chakra Sasuke is sure of it.

He has no idea what sibling of Kurama’s this is, but it doesn't matter. Even if he was equipped to go toe to toe with the power of a Bijuu, which he isn’t, this is no longer his fight.

This fight is, and always has been, Naruto’s.

~

He’d told Sasuke about the promise late at night, a few days after they’d moved in with their sensei. Sakura had gone to sleep with some mild chakra exhaustion from training, but Naruto had been wired that night, awake and hypermobile with overwrought energy, so Sasuke had stayed up with him.
At first he assumes the restless state of Naruto’s spirit has something to do with the new surroundings— Naruto had been living in that cramped little flat since before he could remember— but it soon becomes clear that it’s something else— something more familiar.

It’s the same kind of energy that used to plague him when they first met, when their relationship had been based off nothing but brutal spars and the tentative beginnings of mutual respect, interspersed with cutting insults and fractured silences. Sasuke had learned to notice the signs at first because he knew it meant that the beastly part of Naruto’s mind— the part he now knows comes from spending nine months in utero curled up with giant fiery chakra demon— was close to the surface, and Naruto would fight him far harder than normal.

_was that really only a few years ago_? He wonders. _It feels like ages_.

He can’t imagine being back there now, being so darkly driven towards revenge and isolation that it blinded him to easy light and open hands, to all of the change, and to all of the choice.

He wonders where it all would have gone if Naruto had not been so bright, if he’d not been so persistent. It’s not a thought he likes to entertain for very long.

So Sasuke had picked a fight that night.

For a few moments it’s like they’re back in the clearing for the first time— damage and devastation, bloodied lips and visceral blows, little to nothing held back.

But then, just like that first time, it transforms. It becomes less about fighting and more about moving together, relearning each other’s strengths and weaknesses, the places where they fit and the ones where they clash, where they’ve grown and still need to grow, where the old strength still lives and the new has taken root.

It had worked, like Sasuke knew it would. Naruto had calmed, come back to himself after they were exhausted and aching, and the soft look of gratitude Naruto had given him was all that needed to be said.

Afterward, he’d tugged at a strand of Naruto’s hair and commented on its length for the second time that month, so Naruto had agreed to let him cut it. He’d leaned back in a chair propped against the sink while Sasuke worked water into his hair to keep the stray locks down, sorting the uneven strands as he went to make sure he could get things somewhat more uniform.

Naruto’s hair looks like yellow gold when wet, and it had shimmered strangely in the bathroom lamplight, slim almost imperceptible locks of red standing out and tinting the strands an amberish hue.

_“Your mom had red hair, didn’t she?”_ He’d asked, and Naruto had blinked up at him, water shining on his forehead and dripping down his temple.

_“Yeah.”_ he’d said quietly, curiosity clearing his cerulean eyes. _“Did I tell you that?”_

Sasuke shook his head and combed back a few more strands of hair, judging their length with his fingertips before starting after them with the scissors. _“The Yondaime had plain blonde hair. But there’s red in yours.”_

Naruto’s eyes had widened a bit in surprise.

Sasuke tilted his head. _“You didn’t know?”_
Naruto’s returning headshake had been soft, both contemplative and careful of Sasuke working with the scissors in his hair.

“Kurama knew her, right?” Sasuke had asked, feeling the sudden need to fill the quiet Naruto normally interrupted regularly. He’d known the answers to most of the questions he’d been asking, but there was something about Naruto’s quiet that had made speaking aloud feel necessary. “She was the Jinchuuriki before you.”

“Yeah.” Naruto returned, “Kurama told me about her when I was little, not long before…”

And that’s when Sasuke had known something was off. Naruto doesn’t keep secrets from him, has never seen the point, but there are still a few scattered things Naruto hasn’t told him, and this is one of them.

“Before?” Sasuke prompted after a long pause, giving the dobe time to think.

“Before I made a promise to Kurama.” Naruto admitted, and it had taken him so long to do so that Sasuke had finished with his trim and had been passing the time running an idle hand through the culled strands and parsing out strays.

“What kind?”

“A big one.”

Naruto had turned to look up at him then, earnest and a little unsure.

Before he’d managed to elaborate Sasuke had snorted, cutting off the thought, and locked their gazes with a tilt of his head and dip of his shoulders. “You already know the answer is yes.” He’d reminded him. Yes, I’ll stay at your side, whatever you need. Yes, I’ll do what needs to be done, whatever that is. Yes, I’ll pull your ass out of the fire, whatever comes.

“It’s kind of out of our way.” Naruto had said seriously, and Sasuke had shrugged.

“Doesn’t matter.”

Naruto had stared at him for a long while after that, and Sasuke had returned the gaze, easy and sure.

He still wonders when Naruto will finally get it, finally understand that it really truly doesn't matter.

Not a lot I wouldn’t do for you. Idiot.

~

It’s simple in the end, not even on the far spectrum of lengths Sasuke would be willing to go to.

Save Kurama’s siblings. Save the tailed beasts. Stop those behind their loss.

So no, this is not his fight, but is he going to bow out of it?
Pain sears through Gaara’s mind, red smearing across his vision, and the effect is instantaneous. The monster in him *roars*, wrenches its way to the surface as mother surges to protect him, and Gaara knows nothing but her vicious, beastial instincts. They are his, and he is hers.

The sand around him roils, rising and crashing in fluid waves, wrapping long rough fingers around his arms, draping across his back, converging to protect the open wound. The sand mixes with the blood and crystallizes, a shell of protection and bandage all at once, sharp and aching.

The lightning is not gone, it is still a danger, arching out into his sand shroud and flash forging glass wherever it touches. It causes his senses to halt and skitter, catching over the blind spots as he reels in pain, trying to regain his bearings and maintain his own consciousness all at once.

Mother is already present in his sand shroud, her power writhing after the dark blur that is the Uchiha, animalistic and angry, and soon enough the leaf-nin has nowhere left to run.

Mother has finally managed what Gaara could not– the Sand Veil around the arena is complete, a single moving mass of deadly chakric desert, barring all access to the space within. Gaara at last sees the dark shape of Uchiha Sasuke clearly, after so long chasing the blurry echoes of his shadow. His serrated shield *had* done some damage, it seems; the Uchiha’s left arm is a bloody mess, though he still clutches the strange, fluttering jutsu stubbornly in his fingers, the blood dripping down and searing off, filling the air with the tang of iron and ozone.

The blood is too dark. Gaara knows blood, knows its colour against rough golden sand, and knows that something in Uchiha Sasuke’s blood is *wrong*.

Not just wrong, *sick*.

The boy’s eyes are sharper now, the lines around them carved in deeper, and though Gaara can sense no perceivable change outside of that, Mother’s senses are winding him up in anticipation of further danger, of something more to be wary of.

And then something *does* change– The Uchiha’s back rounds, shoulders squaring, stance widening. His posture becomes primal and wolfish, the corner of his mouth pulls back to expose teeth in a grimace just shy of a snarl.

It takes Gaara a moment to sense it, the chakra spilling off the Uchiha’s skin in waves. It’s a subtle thing, subversive, like air warping in the heat over Suna’s desert. Before long Gaara can feel it against his skin, prickling at mother’s temper as it washes over the edges of his sand shell and seeps past.

And then, like a wasteland mirage, the form of the Uchiha’s body flickers. The air darkens impossibly, the edges of the Uchiha’s body become distorted and nightmarish, monstrous and semisolid as the unnatural darkness seems to overflow from the edges of his form.

Mother’s senses reel in confusion– this is a genjutsu, it must be, but even she cannot tell the real from the false, what part of the Uchiha’s form remains his and what is an illusion.
Standing where the Uchiha once stood is the opaque form of some kind of winged demon, feathers like blades and fingertips like talons. Drifting feathers begin to appear out of the artificial darkness, fluttering down around the arena. One drifts to rest at the edge of Gaara’s dripping sand shell.

And slices right through it.

The feather cuts to the quick, just shy of Gaara’s inner shell, too close to his real skin for comfort, before dissolving away back into shadow.

The scene is deadly and hypnotizing, haunting and beautiful, and Gaara is frozen for whole seconds too long by the bizarreness and power of the atmosphere.

This is no normal genjutsu.

Sasuke is breathing hard behind the dark cloak of his illusion, and he’s grateful for the sand ninja’s paranoid defenses— he hadn’t been planning on using this jutsu at all, not until he’d finished perfecting it, and Subaku no Gaara’s chakra sand provides an adequate shield between him and the disapproving eyes of Ikari Ryouta, who Sasuke knows is watching him from the stands like a hawk.

As dangerous as it is, Gaara’s whirling dome of sand is working in Sasuke’s favor. The confined space allows the subtle miasmic chakra of the illusion to compound and crowd into the space, making the effects stronger than they would be in open air, and allowing him to use less chakra to reach the same effect.

That doesn’t mean no chakra however, and Sasuke can feel the burn of corruption in the back of his throat now, resurging from where is been hiding in his vessels.

It’s worth it though, seeing the power of the jutsu in action.

Demonic Illusion: Raven Blight

Kurenai’s instructions had been invaluable in his understanding of genjutsu— as an Uchiha the art had always come natural to him, a side effect of his Dojutsu and the natural Uchiha predisposition to Yin chakra. But this aspect of Genjutsu is entirely unlike the aspects he is familiar with. The Sharingan is capable of weaving chakra into complicated patterns— making it a powerful tool in sewing illusions, sure— but there is an entirely different aspect to them he’d never considered until he began training with Kuranai.

Presence.

It blurred the lines between chakra and reality, mixing intent and the strange sort of gravity that came with the surety of ones own ability. It’s a powerful and heady combination, and it makes Sasuke’s head spin as the dark power drapes around him.

Then again, that might be the corruption.

Sasuke’s not sure how Naruto handled this— Sasuke’s corruption isn’t even manifesting physically and he already feels like his blood is filled with sludge, like his body weighs a thousand kilograms.

Something foul rises in the back of his throat and turns his head to spit something that tastes like
blood and tar into the arena stone. He brings a thumb to his mouth, drawing it along his bottom lip. The chakrick illusion mimics the movement, and Gaara watches his every motion, rapt and wary, gaze darting along the edges of the illusion, attempting to find where it ends and he begins.

Sasuke snorts. *Good luck*.

By the end of training, even Kurenai-sensei had difficulty determining flesh and bone from chakra and genjutsu.

He looks down, sees the unnatural darkness of his blood, and resists the urge to curse.

He’ll only have one shot to do any damage, but doing damage really isn’t what he’s aiming for. This Gaara of the desert is insane, but Sasuke can see now *how* that insanity progressed; he’d started out the battle almost completely in control of himself, but somehow, as more time passed and Sasuke presented more of a challenge, a second, far more unhinged psyche had begun to reveal itself, rising up and stretching Gaara's own psyche until it cracked and splintered like dry earth, revealing more and more of the madness sleeping within, of the second mind crammed in close alongside the first.

Valuable information.

And he will wring out more for as long as he can stand on his feet.

Sasuke lunges without warning, his injured hand rising, fingers splayed. The clawed talons of the solid illusion mimic him, mixing with the sharp electric current of the *Chidori*, sawing wide as he slashes downward into Gaara’s sand shroud. The sand blocks him, sizzling and melting into more unworkable glass, and Gaara responds with an unearthly growl, sand bullets forming in the wake of the attack.

Sasuke blocks them with an outstretched phantom wing, the dark span of it arching around him protectively. He brings the other around sharply, and feathers fly from it like kunai, slicing through the shifting barriers of desert. A few strike home, and red starts to stain Gaara’s thick sand shell in splotches.

Gaara’s snarl is low and reverberating. It raises the hair on Sasuke’s arms and brings a sharp, heavy memory to the surface of his mind; the memory of Naruto’s eyes, bloody red and wreathed in black, voice pitched impossibly low and saturated in angry power, consuming and monstrous.

Naruto is still so very careful about it. He may no longer be shy about using Kurama’s power, but he’s never again let it suffuse him like that, let it pour through him with the same dark ferocity. Not since that night in wave.

Sweat drips down Sasuke’s temple, trailing the line of his jaw, dripping from his chin. His skin feels hot and tight over his bones, his breath coming in a steaming rush as he gathers his strength to attack again, to draw out more and more of this Jinchuriki’s darkness and madness.

He never gets the chance.

“*Fuuton: Sweeping Sunder*”

At first Sasuke isn’t sure exactly what’s happening; a percussive sound begins to reverberate around the whole arena, creating vibrations that rush through the sand around them. The granules vibrate, lose cohesion and begin to slide apart, spilling lifelessly to earth, and though Sasuke does not
recognise this technique, *Gaara* clearly does.

His expression changes from one of livid animal fury to that of pinched human frustration, the madness receding sharply as if chastised. Sand crashes to the earth in heaps, slowly revealing the outside world, and Sasuke too begins to quickly reign in his chakra, bringing the demonic illusion to heel and dissipating the heavy veil of it around him. The darkness recedes, sword-feathers disintegrating into pure energy and seeping back under his skin, returning to him a fraction of his lost chakra.

It’s not enough, however, to cover the true extent of his exhaustion before the sand-cloud parts completely and Sasuke feels the gazes of his teammates, his sensei, and Ikari Ryouta, whose hand is still raised high, and who is no doubt the one who stopped the fight.

The jutsu had not come from him, though, nor had it come from Kakashi-sensei. It had come from a dark-skinned man with a painted face standing next to them, whose hands are still curled together in a ram sign-- the sand-ninja’s Jounin-sensei.

Genma stands on the edge of the arena, perched on a self-made platform of stone. He grinds his teeth around the long steel needle in his mouth before announcing; “Match halt! Medical intervention! Victory defaults to Sabaku no Gaara!”

Naruto is the first to reach him afterwards, like always.

Sasuke is still steady on his feet, mostly, so he grips the idiots shoulder instead of throwing an arm around it like he wants to. Naruto’s eyes are pinched with worry, the muscle bunching under Sasuke’s fingertips, but he’s calm so far, and less angry about Sasuke’s actions than he thought he’d be.

He just wants to sit down for a minute, to retreat into the safety of his team, of Naruto’s presence, but sitting through Ikari’s blistering lecture is a requirement.

Thankfully, it’s also the only punishment that Kakashi-sensei forces him to endure.

After it’s over, their sensei guides the three of them to a more private corner, away from the prying eyes of the stands. Sakura hovers at Kakashi’s side, and Naturo stands to the left behind Sasuke, close enough that he can feel his body heat at the back of his shoulder.

Kakashi sinks down so that he’s level with Sasuke, and slides his hitai-ate up off of his left eye.

The pinwheel glow of the sharingan eye is always haunting, and not just because it’s darkly familiar-- the colour of Kakashi’s sharingan is... off, both brighter and deeper than his brother’s or father’s had been, and strange to look at up close. It spins idly, soft and constant, and Sasuke swears sometimes that he can see something just behind the curled tomoe, something branched and strange.

Sasuke knows that Kakashi’s sharingan eye is not his, that it never turns off, even when he sleeps; that he keeps it covered to reduce both the unavoidable and constant chakra drain, and how frequently he sees it in the mirror.
Its calming now, even though it wasn’t always.

It twirls slowly as he takes in the chakra damage, assessing softly and without expectation. Sasuke remains still and allows it without protest. When Kakashi-sensei is finished he nods softly to himself, tilting his chin down, and reaches up to recover the eye.

“Naruto.” He says quietly, lifting his gaze to the Uzumaki standing over Sasuke’s shoulder. “I think it’s time you finished that seal.”

Naruto nods, mouth a tight line. “Yes, sensei.”

Kakashi turns back to Sasuke, and he expects a rebuke, a lecture—what he had done could be considered careless at best, blatantly reckless at worst. Sasuke’s motivations and promise to Naruto aside, Kakashi has every right to be angry with him.

His sensei seems to sense this, and his eyes soften a touch, the corner of his mouth quirking up almost imperceptibly. A hand comes up to grip his upper arm, gives a firm, reassuring squeeze. “You kept your head, even when you saw what he was.” Kakashi says softly, and his head tilts slightly, gaze unerringly keen. “Did you find out what you wanted to know?”

Sasuke’s eyes go wide at that, surprised by the accuracy of the question. Then he remembers the words from last night, after that heavy moment of vulnerability rare to them both—’Whatever happens tomorrow, I’m proud of you.’

Kakashi just smiles a little more, as if sensing the direction of his thoughts too, eyes crinkling kindly in the corners, and Sasuke huffs, allowing a slim smile in turn. “Yes, sensei.”

He can practically hear Naruto’s brow furrowing in the background. His presence is a protective brand at Sasuke’s shoulder, warm and fierce, and he’s aware of it like he’s aware of sunrays on a cold morning, both a comfort and a relief.

The corruption is heavy, and Sasuke is so very tired of putting up with it. He knows Naruto must have questions, that he must have sensed exactly what kind of monster he’d brought out of Gaara during their battle. Be he doesn’t have the energy for questions right now, and all he wants is to be somewhere else, somewhere where he can put his pride down and maybe pass out.

Sakura is his saving grace, because of course she is.

“I’m going to get what he needs from Ikari-sensei.” She tells Kakashi, and she turns, leveling a look at Naruto that Sasuke is too tired to interpret. “I’ll meet you two at home?”

The last part is partially directed at their sensei, who nods.

“I’ll be home late, and bring what news I can with me.” He turns back and levels a look at Naruto first, then Sasuke. “Rest. Both of you.”

“Yes, sensei.” They both say at once, in reflexive unison.

Kakashi chuckles as he straightens to his full height, reaching out to ruffle their hair and drawing groans from both of them.

But as much as they whine or groan or complain, Sasuke knows that they both treasure this kind of physical affection, which comes from their sensei so very rarely.

Sakura slaps them both on the back too hard and laughs as she takes off in search of Ikari. “Be back
later guys!”

They wave her off, and Sasuke doesn’t believe for one second that tracking down Ikari-sensei in a frothing rage is the only thing she has planned.

Sakura takes a sharp left as soon as her boys are out of sight, aiming for the boxed off section of the stands where the medical staff overseeing the Chunin exams are seated.

Unsurprisingly, about half of them are crowded together off to one side, sitting pointedly opposite the incarnation of seething wrath simmering in the corner. Sakura ignores their pointed or panicked looks as she gets closer, bypassing the stairs entirely and leaping nimbly over both railings instead, twisting to land lightly next to the ex-jounin head of surgery. Shiki sits boredly next to his boss, heedless of his fury, book open across his knees and chin resting on his fist, an effective barrier in case Ikari decides to actually hit something.

“Ikari-senseeeeeeii.” she says melodically, and she can suddenly feel the startled stares of the foreign ninja behind her.

“Don’t you start with me, brat.” Ikari snaps through grit teeth, eyes narrowed to angry slits. He reminds her of a grumpy dragon like this, all scaly hide and sharp horns and teeth like knives. She feels bad, mostly because Ikari is only this angry because he was that concerned over Sasuke’s wellbeing.

Her eyes go soft, and she knocks off the sarcasm—both in tone and in posture, sitting down in front of him with her knees tucked to her chest. It’s a little childlike, but it’s the only way she really knows how to convey that she’s being sincere.

“He really is sorry you know.” She says softly. She doesn’t point out that the fact that Sasuke sat through the entirety of Ikari’s rant is proof that he’s sorry; her Uchiha doesn't put up with things like that out of anything but respect or care, not even at Kakashi’s askance.

Ikari looks pointedly away from her, but Shiki smiles, not looking up from his book, and adjusts his glasses.

“He wouldn't have done it if it wasn't important to him.” She tries, and Ikari lets out a heavy sigh.

It takes him a second, but he eventually unwinds enough to uncross his arms, shoulders relaxing faintly.

“That’s a poor excuse.” he finally turns to look it her, dark eyes narrowed and lined in the corners. “And if Baki had not intervened they way he did, he would have taken it further.”

Sakura smiles up at him wryly. “Did I not also mention he’s an idiot?”

Another heavy breath and Ikari’s shoulders drop further, the killing intent dissipating enough from the atmosphere that Sakura actually hears a couple of relieved breaths. “He’s mental is what he is, but I suppose I shouldn't hold that against him.”

Sakura’s smile turns blinding, and she takes the moment while his guard is dropped to move in for the kill.

She springs to her feet and launches at him, wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling him in for a hard hug before he can resist.
“Ugh” He huffs, the breath slightly pained. “Little brat.”

She just hugs him harder.

Ikari’s sigh this time is softer and he eventually gives in, wrapping his arms around her shoulders to squeeze once in return. “Is it too much to ask for you little shits to just fucking be careful?”

Sakura giggles, burying her face in his shoulder and hugging harder. “Probably.”

“You’re gonna break my neck, pipsqueak.”

“Shut up old man.”

Shiki huffs an amused laugh next to them, and turns the page of his book.

Ikari hands her a medical case before she takes off. “For the shrimp.” He says. “And if he doesn’t follow the regimen to the fucking letter, I will tell Umino, and kill him.”

One of those is a much clearer actual threat than the other, but Sakura keeps that comment to herself.

Her next stop is Shikamaru, who she finds with Ino in a clearing not far from the arena. Civilians are beginning to file out and back into the streets, chattering and loud, now that the spectacle is over for the day. Picking out voices, Sakura can tell many are frustrated or puzzled– most of Sasuke’s battle with Gaara had been very confusing, but most especially to a civilian, since many of them would have no inkling as to the reason behind the medical intervention, or Baki’s forced halt of Gaara’s chakra in its tracks.

Sakura hadn’t known Baki was working with Kakashi-sensei, or maybe she wasn’t supposed to know, but she can tell the difference between her sensei’s ambivalence and his grudging respect, and watching them stand beside each other on the railing, overseeing the event, Sakura could definitely tell it was more the later than the former.

Sakura hadn’t actually seen most of the fight herself– none of them had because of the big dumb world-ball of sand around everything, but there was one thing she knew without a doubt.

Sasuke had done something stupid.

Sasuke did not do stupid things. He was not a stupid person. Which means that whatever he’d done, he’d done it for Naruto.

Which, regardless of how necessary it might have been, still made her so mad she wanted to roundhouse kick something.

Dumbass boys.

She’ll demand an explanation later. She’s pretty sure she knows what’s going on, but she’ll demand one anyway.

Ino sees her coming first and waves her over to where she and Shika are standing in the shade of some birches, waiting for the crowds to dissipate.
Shikamaru looks up from the scroll he’s reading as she approaches, rolling it smoothly back up and tucking it into his cargo pants pocket. “Hey. Everything alright?” He asks, the concern in his voice soft and inquisitive.

Sakura nods, huffing. “Sasuke’s gonna be fine. He won't be leaving the house anytime soon though. Naruto’ll need at least twelve hours to get everything working right.”

Shikamaru hums his assent, eyes shuttering slightly as he thinks, adjusting his plans and pulling his mental strings to best suit the current circumstances.

Ino shoves Sakura in the shoulder suddenly, hard enough that she needs to shift her feet a little to maintain her balance. Sakura looks at her sideways, blinking. “What?”

Aaaand that’s a pout. A patented, dangerous, Ino brand pout, complete with the little crinkles in her forehead that somehow make her eyes look huge.

Which isn’t fair because Ino’s eyes already look huge, meadow sky blue and actually very distracting, and they really do have an operation in the works here, Sakura can’t afford to be distracted.

“You didn’t come by after your fight!” Ino whines with an edge of growl. “I told you I wanted to show you my sensory jutsu, and you said you’d show me the basics of the resonance!”

“I meant to!” Sakura complains, slightly desperate. Ino’s got this stupid ability to fluster her, and she’s absolutely abusing it.

“But you didn’t even say anything after!” She wheedles, pulling on the edge of her overshirt like a kid.

“Sasuke’s fight distracted me!”

“Excuses!”

Shikamaru snickers quietly under his breath, counting through scenarios in his head while they squabble. There’s only one thing left uncertain now—Gaara’s a wildcard, the spanner in Shikamaru’s works. It’s impossible to predict exactly how he and Naruto will react to each other tomorrow, and there’s a good chance that whatever happens, the events of the end of the exams will draw both their adversaries out of hiding. He needs to account for possible worsts, and make sure the Nine keep any upper hand they can.

He looks up when he’s finished sorting, taking in the sight of his teammate and their heavy hitting flower demon. They’re leaning close, half arguing half laughing, eyes bright and playful, clearsky and springwater. Shikamaru smiles, reaching over to put his hands lightly on Ino’s shoulders and pull her gently back towards him, out of Sakura’s gravitational pull. She tends to muddle his Yamanaka’s priorities a bit, and normally he wouldn’t mind, but right now they have shit to do.

“Ino.” He murmurs, a mild chastisement, and Ino turns to look at him with a gratifying amount of focus. Sakura immediately looks put-out.

“Hm?”

“Ready for some recon?”
Her eyes widen and sparkle with excitement, a smile spreading wide and wild across her face, quickly overwhelming her confused frown. “Yes! Finally! We’re starting?”

“Just recon.” Shikamaru reminds her patiently. “But yes.”

Ino leaps up and punches the air, whooping, and proceeds to overbalance in her exuberance enough that Sakura, laughing brightly at her sudden excitement, has to reach out and straighten her before she can fall any further forward. “Hell yea!”

Shikamaru hums, smile closeliped and crooked, taking a step back so she can turn around fully. “Team?” he asks, “No more than three.”

Ino blinks at him, a little taken aback. “I get to pick?”

Shikamaru shrugs. “You’re my specialist. It’s your squad.” he reminds her. He trusts her judgment, and even more than that, he trusts her intuition.

Ino flushes a little with pride, casting a curious glance at Sakura. Haruno tilts her head to the side, rosy ponytail swishing, and smiles apologetically. “Subtle’s not really my style, Ino. But lemme know if you need me to break something.”

Ino laughs. “Oh I know, I’m just bummed I can’t steal Sasuke from you.” She taps her fingernail against her lips, thinking. “I’ll need Shino for sure. And Hinata.”

Shikamaru nods, shuttering his eyes again to make adjustments. “No one else?”

Ino shakes her head. “All I need. Better to go in light.”

Shikamaru nods, then turns to Sakura. “I can count on you and Kiba for backup later? If needed?”

“Obviously.” Sakura returns flippantly, placing a hand on her hip and grinning like a savage. “You got a call-to-arms for me?”

Shikamaru digs into one of his many thigh pockets instead of answering, retrieving three jade beads the size of large pearls. The fourth stays in Shikamaru’s pocket, unnecessary for now. Each one has a circular seal on it, thin delicate black lines curling over the green, with a sigil in the center bearing the likeness of one of the Four Sacred Beasts each.

They had been one of Nauto’s more brilliant feats of sealwork, created at Shikamaru’s behest in preparation for the start of their first move in the long game. They’re each tuned to the chakric signatures of the nine, and go both blank and chakra dead in the presence of other signatures as a failsafe. At Shikamaru’s touch they light up, soft golden chakra pouring through the black lines and making the jade beads look like gilt gems fit for a Daimyo.

War Talismans.

Originally employed by Uzushio’s special ops teams, made unique by Naruto’s powerful seal variants.

Shikamaru hands the Phoenix Talisman to Ino and the Kirin Talisman to Sakura, who rolls hers in her fingers idly. The jade is warm from Shikamaru’s body heat and the seals tingle pleasantly against her skin, syncing to her senses, heartbeat, breathing, nervous system, and adrenaline levels. She watches Ino rub her thumb over hers as it does the same, flickering a little with inner light before the glow dims again. Shikamaru keeps the Lion Dog Talisman for himself, rolling it along the backs of his fingers as it syncs.
“I’ll be with Choji, working on locking down the safe zones.” Shikamaru tells them, voice level and heavy, and the playfulness drains out of the atmosphere as he speaks, meeting both Kunoichi’s eyes individually. His gaze reflects nothing but steely determination now, and both girls shift to match, nodding firmly. From here on out they proceed at high alert, in cyphers and codes, missions and moves. From here on out, they are at war.

He nods back, continuing. “Sasuke and Naruto are out of the picture for tonight, which is nothing unexpected, but it means we’re working at two-thirds capacity. Ino.” Their Yamanaka straightens, focus razor sharp, eyes clear and icy. “You’re a ghost. From dusk till dawn tonight, you, Hinata, and Shino…” Shukamaru smiles ferally, the curve of it almost smug with his confidence in her, “don’t exist.”

Ino’s returning grin matches his, wolves in the same pack. “Phantoms in the night.” She lilts, slipping her Talisman into one of the small pouches on her belt. The Phoenix is the most subtle Talisman, softening the presence and smoothing out the chakra of the individuals synced to it, honing team resonance to a silent, knife-point edge. Perfect for scouts, infiltrators, and of course, assassins.

Shikamaru nods, crossing his arms and sliding the Lion Dog talisman along the grooves of his knuckles. “Tag the sleepers, and find me an insomniac. Mapping the Dreamscape is secondary, but if you get to it, don’t worry about the upper ranks, just the pawns.”

Ino gives him a cheeky two-fingered salute, “You got it boss.” and then she’s gone in a flash and a swirl of leaves.

Sakura is still smiling faintly after her when she’s gone, and Shikamaru snorts.

She turns a glare in his direction “What?”

Shika isn’t cowed in the slightest, giving her an idle shrug. “Nothin’ Haruno. Nothin’ at all.”

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The interior of the black temple is dark, devoid of ambient light save for what the chakra charged pools create themselves, glowing and swirling with jewel-tone shines, soft on Sasuke’s aching eyes and throbbing skull.

He’s reclining in one of the inner pools of the Gold room, which had been revived by Naruto and Shikamaru’s quick and dedicated efforts in the weeks following their initial encounter with Orochimaru.

After spending his first hour in the temple sweating out corruption in the white room this pool is a welcome relief– he can feel the shimmering restorative chakra sinking through his skin, tiny parcels of living energy moved and directed by the intricate instructions of Naruto’s seals. He’s still working on them now, leaning back on the floor above Sasuke and trailing his fingers over the control systems embedded in the floor.

The backs of his hands are lit up with two seals; the one that splays up from his wrist to his knuckles is for concentration, specially calibrated for his hyperdense chakra. The other, which flows in five thin, geometric lines from his knuckles to the very tips of his fingers, is for manipulation, and allows him to draw in and configure sealforms in pure energy directly onto
surfaces, without the need of an ink conduit. It doesn't work on living things, where the chakra interaction is more complex and still requires a medium, but it’s perfect for inscribing and altering seals on the walls and ceilings, and other objects without high levels of inherent chakra.

He pulls his fingers through a long array, watching as it ripples and changes at his focused touch, configuring to alter its purpose at Naruto’s behest. Sasuke feels the change almost instantly— the tiny motes of chakra start moving with purpose, seeking out the places in Sasuke’s vessels where the corruption still lurks, ferrying it along natural pathways and out through his tenketsu. It’s a pleasant enough feeling, if vaguely uncomfortable with the way his chakra is forced to move around the tiny intrusions.

“Better?” Naruto asks.

“Better.” He confirms.

Naruto leans back towards him, the lines on his hands fading to black again. It’s quiet for a while as Naruto watches the seals move around the basin, tracking each line to ensure it’s all moving the way he wants it to. It’s the first time he’s stopped moving or working for a significant period of time since they got back— he’d been too busy organising the seals to really talk, and he and Sasuke haven’t needed to talk in order to work around each other for a long time now.

Then for the first time in several hours he does make a verbal expression— a long, frustrated groan that is the most childish thing Sasuke’s has heard out of his mouth since Sakura hid his scrolls last month in a vindictive attempt to get him to sleep.

“Which one is he?” Sasuke asks, when he’s done being dramatic.

“Shukaku.”

“The One-tail?”

Naruto groans again, rubbing at his eyes with the heels of his palms.

“Hn.” Is Sasuke’s response to that, and then, after a pause; “I expected you to be pissed."

“I am pissed.” Naruto growls in retort, carding a hand roughly through his golden hair. “I’m supposed to be the stupid one, remember?”

Sasuke gazes pointedly at the masterpiece of sealwork cartwheeling around the space in brilliant, intricate patterns.

Naruto just narrows his eyes in response. “Shut up."

Sasuke shrugs, the water shifting around his shoulders as he moves. “I had my reasons.” he tries, just to be standoffish.

Naruto snorts. “Yeah, I’m not falling for that.”

Sasuke huffs, glaring, and sets his chin on his fist, elbow propped against the edge of the basin. “Are you really going to make me say it out loud?”

Naruto raises an eyebrow and narrows his eyes, like he’s thinking about doing just that. But he doesn’t, instead he shifts around so he’s facing Sasuke fully, legs crossed over the floor, wrists on his knees. Sasuke shuts his eyes a bit. The apology goes unsaid.
From this angle Sasuke can see the seals peeking out from under the high collar of Naruto’s shirt, geometric lines and sweeping scripts wrought in soft black. They change constantly, shifting whenever Naruto finds a more efficient pattern or more potent line of scripture. The only thing that never changes is the blank swaths of skin around which he writes them, the lines within which the extensions of Kurama’s seal sleeps, like a painting in negative space. Kurama’s presence in it is so strong that it rejects the energy of any seal that might be painted over it, burning it off and away like drops of water on a hot pan. As a result Naruto doesn’t have many near it; some trailing writing across his collarbones, flowing mandalas on the backs of his shoulder blades, parallel geometrics in the hollows under the back of his ribs. The only exception is the Hollow Chain Matrix, which rides the lines of Kurama seal close down his arms, hugging just shy of the consuming edges and filling the whole space besides. The breadth of his skin is experimental canvas—covered in prototypes and half-finished masterpieces, and Sasuke knows that, one day, he plans to place his finished creations in more than just brush-ink.

“I know you agreed to help, but this isn’t really what I meant.” Naruto mutters.

“If you complain, that technically makes you a hypocrite.” Sasuke points out, and Naruto’s face pinches in frustration, the whisker-marks on his cheeks crinkling.

“The risk level with Neji was, like, a tenth what you risked with Gaara. Plus there was a minute there when I was positive Ikari-sensei was gonna actually kill you.”

“Humph.”

It’s the closest to a concession that his pride will allow, though Naruto seems satisfied by it for now, his face smoothing out as he breathes a sigh.

“So.” Naruto trails off. “What did you find out?”

Sasuke lolls his head at the edge of the basin, closing his eyes briefly. “Something’s off in his head.”

Confusion pulls Naruto’s eyebrows together. “Well yeah, even I could tell that from a distance.” he grumbles.

Sasuke shakes his head, eyes slipping open again. His damp hair sticks to his face, sliding over his cheeks and forehead like tiny ink brushes. “No, I mean something’s off in there, fundamentally wrong.” He turns to Naruto, allowing the heavy pull and bleed of the sharingan to rise through his eyes. As the tomoe swirl, he takes in all the subtle nuances of the chakra surrounding Naruto’s seal; the ebb and flow and stream. The patterns of it are etched into his memory with unerring accuracy after that night in wave– and now he knows, by sight and feel, which parts are Naruto, which are Kurama, and where the two touch within it.

He reaches out, following the thin ring of space on one of the outer lines of the Jinchuuriki seal, first with his eyes and then with his fingertips, tracing it with the ends of his nails through the close fabric of his shirt. Naruto follows the motion with his eyes but doesn’t move away, head tilted curiously as Sasuke finds the spot he’s looking for, between two powerful lines of script on the inner edge. “Whatever structure in your seal that keeps Kurama’s mind separate from yours? I don’t think it’s there in his.” he explains.

That definitely means something to Naruto– his eyes widen, mouth opening slightly on a sharp intake of breath. “What do you mean?” he demands. “What did you see?”

Sasuke recalls the moment with perfect clarity; when Gaara’s aggressive grimace had twisted,
transforming into something gleeful, something bloodthirsty and monstrous. When he closes his eyes and brings up the memory, Sasuke can practically see the second consciousness rising behind the sand-nin’s eyes like an ill sun, bloody red and swollen with madness.

“It’s almost like the Ichibi’s mind is… crammed in there with him.” Sasuke murmurs, attempting to word what he saw and felt in a manner that Naruto will best understand. “And it’s not just that they’re too close together; there’s something warped about it, like metal under too much heat and compression.” He withdraws his hand from Naruto’s stomach, rubbing his knuckles along his temple as he remembers the chilling wrongness he’d felt, the twisted pressure, the contorted intent that seemed to twist back in on itself. “There’s some third thing fused in the whole mess, I think, something that only reacted when I drew blood the first time. That’s what set it off in earnest.”

Naruto’s eyes pinch and he bites his lip as Sasuke speaks, and it takes a second to recognize the emotion on his face as sympathy. “Shit.” He mutters vehemently, rubbing the knuckle of his thumb into his forehead as he thinks.

“What?” Sasuke asks, lifting his chin and turning more fully towards him.

Naruto makes a distressed noise in the back of his throat. “It sounds like someone removed the Cerebral Rampart. It’s the part of a seal that deals with keeping individual identities separate.”

Sasuke’s brows draw together in confusion. That sounds… unpleasant is not a strong enough word. Dysphoric maybe. “Why would someone do that?” He asks softly. “Doesn’t that defeat the purpose of the seal? Putting the tailed beast in a position to steal control?”

Naruto’s eyes shutter as he thinks, the lines in the corners deepening. “Theoretically, shortening the Cerebral Rampart could maybe allow a Jinchuuriki to access more control over a tailed beast’s chakra, but removing it? That’s just— that’s just stupid!”

Naruto’s frustration is starting to rouse Kurama; red bleeding in around the edges of his irises, black rising like khol around his eyes. His fingernails start to elongate and sharpen into the beginnings of claws, his seal slowly darkening into a visible pale grey, a trickle of acidic chakra biting into Naruto’s smooth ocean-wind energy.

Sasuke reaches out on instinct, water splashing over the edge of the basin with the sudden motion. One hand latches around the Uzumaki’s wrist while the other skates Naruto’s cheek and finds purchase at his jaw, firm, forcing their gazes into a lock. Amber-ocean eyes fuze to ebon-ruby, and Sasuke’s fingers curl under Naruto’s chin, possibly too hard, but Naruto’s focus just razors, thin cat-like pupils fixing on him wholly.

Sasuke gentles the touch as soon as he has the entirety of the Uzumaki’s attention, and when Sasuke pulls him in, barely a hint of pressure on the back of his blond neck, Naruto moves to meet him without resistance.

Their foreheads touch.

Sasuke has never been able to describe the exact feeling that blooms through his chest when they do this, the electric hum that drags the whole length of his body, from the top of his spinal cord to the tiny capillaries in the tips of his fingers.

It’s ritual and reminder, it’s touchstone and truth, it’s them without the world in between.

It’s a force that lacks both reasoning and definition, the magnetic pull that rights their axis, it’s— well.
It’s a matter of gravity.

Sasuke shifts a bit, changing the angle so the lock of their eyes is softer, and Naruto shifts automatically to match, some of the tension draining from the chords of muscle in his throat where Sasuke’s hand rests.

*Calm down.* The touch says, as clearly as if Sasuke had said it out loud. Clearer.

Naruto is a righteous soul—easy to work up over something he believes is unjust, but that also means he’s sometimes guilty of letting his emotions think for him, and right now they can’t afford to be reckless.

Sasuke can feel the burning power of the Kyuubi under his palms, flaring with every pulse of Naruto’s heart against his fingers. Kurama’s chakra is even more volatile when roused by Naruto’s fury, sizzling and spitting and building like a volcano moments from eruption.

Sasuke is reminded suddenly, in this moment, looking into red and blue kaleidoscope eyes, that Naruto *is* terrifying. Not because of his instincts, or his talents, or the bestial god of chakra that lives in his soul. This *idiot*, whose anger could level mountain ranges, whose wrath could raze whole countries to the ground, looks Sasuke right in the eye and *calms*, breathes deep and banks the fire in his blood, quieting the monstrous power rising inside him, soothing the beast with whom his intent and emotions are so often one and the same.

He’s *terrifying* because he can look hate and fear and anger right in the face and tell it *no*, because when he looks into the eyes of those consumed with the same dark emotion, the same *pain*, he doesn’t see something monstrous.

He sees something human.

He’d seen it in Kurama. Haku. Zabuza.

Sasuke.

And if Sasuke knows anything at all, it’s that Naruto doesn’t even see a monster in *Gaara*, just someone hurting, and angry, and alone. Maybe two someones.

The animal in his teammate’s chakra recedes, the amber driven from his irises by boundless blue, the anger chased away by *Sasuke’s* grounding, his presence, his *touch*.

And that alone makes him feel more powerful than any jutsu or Kekkei Genkai ever could.

“People do stupid things for power.” Sasuke tells his idiot firmly, when his eyes are clear again. “What’s more important is what you’re going to *do* about it.”

Blinking a bit, Naruto stills as the soft words sink in all the way. He takes another breath, deep enough that Sasuke can see his chest expand with it, and nods. Then he smiles slightly, wry and sheepish, eyes soft in vague apology, and it’s so blindingly *Naruto* that Sasuke suddenly wants to do something very, *very* stupid.

But he’s already hit his stupid quota for the next *year*, so he moves his hand from it’s trecherous place along Naruto’s jaw and tweaks the Uzumaki’s ear in admonishment instead.
Naruto squawks indignantly, pulling back to a safer distance and rubbing the harassed curl with his palm. “Jerk.”

“Dumbass.”

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Jiraiya shifts uncomfortably in Sarutobi’s office, rocking back and forth on the edge of his sandals. Sarutobi smokes aggressively at his desk, in long heavy puffs from his pipe, completely ignoring the oolong tea spilled over his paperwork, the cup rolling lazily across the sopping mess. The anbu standing next to him—tall, Kunoichi, bear mask, a black ops file open in one hand— is still holding the broken splinters of her brushpen, blue cypher ink dripping over her fingers from the shattered cartridge.

The tea cup finishes its journey uninterruptedly and rolls merrily off the desk, shattering both itself and the thick silence hanging in the air.

“*What?*”

The sharp word comes not from the Hokage, but the anbu, whose hand is still so tense on the bamboo pen shards that her fingers are starting to bleed.

Jiraiya rolls his eyes. “You want me to start from the beginning? Or just repeat the good part?”

“Enough.” Sarutobi says sharply.

Jiraiya just closes his mouth. After all this time the rebuke has lost its sting—Sarutobi’s been sick of his shit for half a century, it’s not exactly a surprise anymore.

“Bear.” the old man says softly. “You may go.”

The anbu bows shortly and turns, contrite, but he catches her arm before she can completely obey. “Leave the report.”

A telling half-second of hesitation and she nods, closing the folder and setting it on the corner of his desk before dismissing herself, vanishing in a swirl of leaves and a flash of bright chakra. When she’s gone (though likely not far, there are at least three anbu within sneezing distance of the Hokage at all times, Jiraiya isn’t stupid) Sarutobi removes an antisurveillance seal from a roll inside one of his desk drawers and places it on a dry spot near the opposite corner by his inkstone, the flare of chakra in it sharp enough to make Jiraiya wince a bit. He already has a headache, and Sarutobi’s chakra can be… intense when he’s cranky.

The old man then proceeds to flick the folder back open, remove the half finished report, and drop it right in the middle of the greenish puddle on his desk.

Jiraiya gives the piece of paper a long, flabbergasted blink as it soaks through, the cypher ink disintegrating off the page exactly as it’s designed to.

There’s a long, heavy beat of absolute silence.

“So, forgive the *impertinence* Hokage-sama…” Jiraiya says slowly, because he’s always been a
little shit and thirty years as spymaster has never changed that, “But what the fuck .”

“Repeat it to me again.” Sarutobi snaps instead of answering. “Everything you saw, from beginning to end. Excruciating detail.”

Jiraiya chews his lip and debates the merit of another sarcastic retort, only to catch a glimpse of the dark light hardening Sarutobi’s eyes and rapidly decide against it. Instead he huffs, takes a deep breath, and starts from the beginning.

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Jiraiya is staring, openly and unrepentant, at the little blond devil that is Uzumaki Naruto. They’re sitting in a clearing of the kid’s choosing, a pretty little circle of peace and quiet on the outskirts of Kakashi’s clan territory. Naruto is standing, a sharpened stick in his hand, over a flat plane of clay dirt cleared of grass with an unthinking earth jutsu.

And he’s… drawing.

Jiraiya can’t even fucking follow his train of thought at this point- the little bastard has refused to explain his reasoning- he’d just bolted into the nearby grove halfway through Jiraiya’s initial explanation of the hiraishin concept of homing seal formulas and come back with mostly straight stick and a gleam in his eye that Jiraiya found blatanly unnerving. Somebody that short has no business being that intense.

It probably doesn’t help that he’s still awkward as hell around the brat; he’s been a spymaster so long that he has no idea how to really be honest anymore, and he can’t even figure out what he might want to say if he could be honest.

Something that would get him murdered by the old man, probably. Or Kakashi.

More than anything else right now though, he hates that this kid’s life is now none of his business. He’d forfeited that right when he’d forfeited the opportunity.

Kakashi has made it his business, against the most livid of the Hokage’s warnings; it’s no secret around the village that the row about the Genin moving into his place had almost reached physical-confrontation-levels. That alone scares the crap out of Jiraiya, personally– the fact that Kakashi had felt so strongly about something that he’d shouted down the Hokage about it. The last time he’d felt even remotely that strongly about anything was after… well.

Jiraiya still gets chills remembering that night. Minato had come to him in a panic so severe Jiraiya had thought the world might literally be ending, and it hadn’t been all that far off the mark.

It had taken both of them, two Kage level ninja, to safely subdue one thirteen year old boy.

Kakashi’s anguish had been so severe, his wrath so unconsolable, that thinking about it still makes Jiraiya cringe a decade and a half later. The outburst had been even scarier for how long it took to manifest, for how long the denial had persisted, right until the dam of grief had burst open in the form of a lightning storm that much of Konoha still remembers, even if few are still alive who remember the cause.
Two and a half days after Kannabi Bridge. Sixty two hours before Kakashi had caught a glimpse of himself in the water of a pond in training ground 16 and destroyed four acres of forest in a fraction of a second.

Jiraiya had been old already by then, for a ninja. He’d seen chakra do more impossible things than most twice his age, walked into the sage lands and returned alive, but never before in all his life had he seen the sky break open like that.

The sky there hasn’t felt right since. The land of training ground 16 is still dry and barren, cracked empty earth that hasn’t seen rain or root for fifteen years, as though Kakashi’s grief had scared the heavens so badly the clouds are no longer welcome to cross there.

Hatake Kakashi had outlived everyone he’d ever really loved, lost every piece of his heart he’d ever dared to give away; Sakumo, Rin, Kushina, Minato.

Obito.

And it’s more than one person can reasonably survive, more than even Kakashi’s prodigious will was capable of withstanding without some kind of break, some form of lockdown. He’d resigned himself to spend the rest of his existence entirely alone after that, bereft of what once made him whole and human and happy.

Except apparently he hadn’t.

Because now he braids cherry blossom hair in the morning and cooks breakfast for four, reads ancient war strategy and sealing-for-dummies behind his Icha-Icha, steals jutsu and training codexes from the anbu coalition archive, cleans empty ramen bowls and notebooks from his living room with the ease of practice, and soothes nightmares from dark eyes tinted red with panic.

Jiraiya wonders, watching Naruto draw dizzying patterns in the clay, if these kids have any real idea just what caliber of miracle they’ve pulled here.

“So something like this?” Naruto asks curiously, drawing Jiraiya’s attention to the most recent addition to the dirt canvas. His eyes trail across the journey of thought laid out in the soil, the progress of one idea to the next. He can understand some of it, mostly the beginning and certain parts of the middle. Some symbols he knows and understands, some look familiar enough that he can guess their meanings and functions, and others are completely fucking beyond him. The kid’s mind is a crapshoot– some of the reasoning is simple enough a normal Genin could probably grasp it, but other parts make him feel like a moron– the kind of shit that would make Minato swoon if with pride if he were still alive.

But that thought leads to dark places he refuses to visit, so he skips to the end of the transcript near where Naruto is standing. Sketched there are several examples of homing seal formulas– none of which remotely resemble Minato’s signature. A lot of them actually look disturbingly close to the Nidaime’s homing seal– concentric rings of thin intricate script intersected at angles by lines of contrasting sigils. It was a style of sealing Minato was never able to get to work for him right, too complex for his straightforward style and energy, and too many meanings for his focus of grounding. Jiraiya understands it even less than his student had, and as he traces the glyphs with his eyes they almost seem to move, to rise up from the earth in three dimensions.
“Uh… forgive me for sounding stupid asking this, kid, but where did you even get the idea for these?”

Naruto blinks at him, like it’s a confusing question. “What do you mean? Is this not how you string the anchors?”

Jiraiya blinks back at him in the same manner, brows drawing together. _String the anchors?_ Minato had always described the hiraishin more like a hole-punch in space, a one way pull between him and his chosen seal or target.

Jiraiya gets up from the grass and walks over to him, careful not to step on his sprawling arrays, fingers rubbing at his chin as he attempts to focus on all the little intricacies.

Cognition strikes all it once, and Jiraiya binks. Opens his mouth. Closes it again.

Because he’s pretty sure that’s the beginning of an all-purpose teleportation seal, which, while not the goal, is brilliant to the point of being ludicrous.

_Fuck it._ He thinks after a long minute, and throws his pride to the wind.

“Wait, explain this part to me.” he says, pointing to the top lines of script. “What do these circles do? And what’s to point of these fasteners on the end here?”

Naruto looks bewildered for a minute, but then hesitantly he starts to explain, pointing out the different glyphs and symbols, the way they change the energy as it moves through space, the way some runes remember chakra signatures better than others, how the line placement is meant to focus that memory into a single space with strong enough force to recall a living being with the same signature.

It turns out that once you get the kid talking he can’t really seem to stop, and Jiraiya’s not really sure when he pulled the notebook out, just that by the time Naruto is finished with his monologue he’s on the last page.

“Okay, I think I know where we went wrong here.” Jiraiya hums as he traces some of the patterns with his fingertips. It’s starting to come back to him bit by bit; all the time he and Minato spent pouring over Tobirama’s treasured notes, deciphering the lines of script and formulae while Kushina helped and sassed them in equal measures, eating ramen and throwing crumpled paper at Minato’s head. She’d always liked teasing Konoha’s yellow flash with her natural sealing knowledge, taunting him with it playfully as they struggled, but in the end she had been the reason they figured it out in the first place.

He gestures Naruto in closer and the blond boy kneels next to him, offering him the stick. Jiraiya takes it and starts doodling script in softer lines than before, outlining two familiar seals. “In the second Hokage’s notes, he also called the homing seals ‘mortal fasteners’, and mentioned ‘grounding through value’.” He points to Tobirama’s seal on the ground next to Minato’s. “This is the seal from the original jutsu, the one the fourth Hokage—” _Fuck it._ “Your father, couldn’t get to work for him.” He points to the other seal. “This is Minato’s.”

Naruto pours over them, eyes wide and a tiny bit awed as his gaze lingers on Mianto’s seal, the messy script characters so simple in comparison. “But they’re so different.” Naruto mutters. “How the hell can they do the same thing? That doesn’t make _sense_.”

“Ah ah ah! I have a theory!” Jiraiya interrupts before the kid can get too frustrated. “At first we thought it was because Minato and Tobirama were too different, but what if it was just because
they were *different people?* ”

Naruto blinks at him. “I don’t get it.”

Jiraiya rubs his head and grimaces. “Okay, I probably could have phrased that better, but what I mean is that I think what works for one ninja *can’t* work for another.”

Naruto just looks *more* confused, not less.

Jiraiya sighs, exasperated, and takes up the stick again. “*Mortal Fastenings*, get it?” he draws out each separate line of Tobirama’s seal and expands them, making the exact sealing script more visible and defined. “‘In order to untether the body so completely from the laws of nature, one must possess that which grounds them to reality just as completely, a gravity that guides the soaring comment back to earth.’ That quote comes right out of the Nidaime’s original notes on the jutsu. What if the seal isn’t just a seal it’s—”

“*Forces of Value.*”

Naruto’s voice startles him right out of his rant. The boy’s voice is a little breathless, like he’s seeing something now in Minato’s scrawled seal that Jiraiya still isn’t, and he’s suddenly a furious flurry of motion again. He materializes a dark brown scroll from thin air and unrolls it, fingers fluttering frantically over the massive spiderwebs of seals inside, unrolling half the thing into a coil on the ground before he finds the one he’s looking for. A puff of silvery dust and he’s holding a tome as thick as a history account, which he immediately opens to a specific page. He steals the stick out of Jiraiya’s hand and writes Minato’s seal in clear, overexaggerated lines, straight up and down like kanji. His eyes scan the pages of the tome, flicking from one line of text to another, and he begins to write something next to it, the sharp tip of the branch making slow, clean lines alongside the seal. Jiraiya recognises the kanji before he’s finished.

A name.

*Uzumaki Kushina*.

Jiraiya stands up next to him and looks down at it, flabbergasted. “Kid, what…”

“Certain kinds of seal script can also be used for language,” he explains softly. “You can use it to write messages, or instructions, or… names.” There’s something heartbroken in Naruto’s voice that makes Jiraiya’s chest constrict, as if one of Orochimaru’s anacondas has found its way into his ribcage. “I’ve used it before— working the name of what you’re sealing into an array can make it more powerful and stuff— so I thought maybe…”

Naruto’s voice is getting hoarse, and Jiraiya gets the powerful feeling that the kid has used this kind of script for a lot more than *storage arrays*.

He puts a tentative hand on Naruto’s shoulder, and he looks up at him sharply, his blue eyes are glistening. Jiraiya hesitates, wondering at boundaries and whether or not physical comfort might be welcome, before he thinks, yet again; *fuck it*.

He puts an arm around the kid’s shoulders, slow enough that Naruto can see exactly what he’s doing before he does it. It awkward at first— Naruto stiffens and his eyes widen, but it seems more out of surprise than anything really negative, so Jiraiya completes the motion, giving the brat’s shoulders a gentle squeeze. He relaxes a fraction, just enough that Jiraiya lets himself believe he might have done something right for once.

“You know, it doesn’t surprise me at all.” he says into the moment of quiet, while Naruto rubs
surreptitiously at his eyes.

“Huh?”

Jiraiya gestures at Kushina’s name. “Tobirama may have had a lot of things tying him to reality, but for Minato... Kushina was his world. Everything else, the village, duty, victory... it all took a back seat to her.

Naruto looks up at him briefly, then back down to the seal. “He really loved her, huh?”

Jiraiya’s eyes cloud a little, and he blinks back the sting in them. “It was pretty scary actually, how much they loved each other. You know they had *Kill on Sight* warrants even before the war?”

Naruto shakes his head.

“Did you know that upgraded to *Flee on Sight* if they were on the battlefield together?”

Naruto sniffs. “That’s badass.”

“Yeah.” Jiraiya agrees. “That is badass.”

They end up figuring the rest of the *hiraishin* out together, turning the clearing into a sea of equations and sealwork, crossed out and redrawn over and over and over. Naruto is clever, and paranormally intuitive, and honestly fucking hilarious—not like Kushina with her raunchy humour, or Minato with his friendly jibes, but a wise ass, deadpan and sarcastic and yet still so overarchingly good-natured.

It’s...fun.

Naruto is everything Jiraiya was afraid he’d never be. Happy, kind, confident, clever, bright enough to make Suna sunshine jealous.

Jiraiya wouldn’t blame the kid for hating him, with all he knows, but it’s like the thought hardly crossed his mind. They talk and banter and... *laugh*, and Jiraiya hadn’t expected a thirteen-year-old to be some of the best company he’s had in years.

There’s still a few kinks in the formula to work out, but they’ve been at it for hours already, and Jiraiya stares balefully at the beginnings of the Konoha sunset reddening the horizon. He’s pretty sure Kakashi will hunt him down and murder him if he keeps his cub away for too much longer, so he interrupts Naruto’s current train of thought regretfully, with a gentle pat to his back.

“Sorry kid, I hate to ask this now, but I still have to take a look at... you know.”

Naruto hums in question as he backtracks out of his thoughts, blue eyes still bright with his passion for the sealing puzzle he’s got engraved on the ground past his legs, crossed over the muddy earth. Clever as he is, he doesn’t seem to understand until Jiraiya gestures awkwardly at his stomach.

“Oh!” he says, setting the now battered stick down by his thigh. “Sure.”

That was... less like pulling teeth than Jiraiya expected. “Really?”

Naruto shrugs. “Yeah.” he agrees easily enough, the bright light in his eyes dimming to something
softer at he looks off towards the crimson sunset. It’s paranormally beautiful this time around, with shades of pale purple rippling beneath rich red and orange, catching on the feathery roll of clouds in the distance. Eyes still fixed on the molting colours, Naruto murmurs; “You’re a lot less of an asshole than I expected.”

It sounds like more than just a backhanded compliment. It sounds like something tender, like something accepting, like something close to absolution. The emotion in it jars something raw in Jiraiya’s chest, hits his regrets a little too close to home. It can’t be a coincidence, even though the kid can’t possibly know just how much this means to him, just how much he wishes he’d chosen differently, made better mistakes. He’s suddenly very glad the kid isn’t looking at him, because his eyes are burning and he’s lost control over his expression completely.

“Thanks kid.” he breathes, when he can manage the words steadily. It’s not enough, but it’s all he’s got right now.

Naruto turns back to him after he speaks, and the smile he gives Jiraiya is brilliant and forgiving and filled with all the things he doesn’t remotely deserve.

It doesn’t seem like such a miracle now, that Kakashi’s heart has risen from the dead. If the other two brats are half as impossible as this one, it was only inevitable. Honestly, Minato and Kushina’s kid or not, Jiraiya thinks he might love the brat already.

Naruto strips off his shirt layers and strange wrappings while Jiraiya prepares the inspection seal and the chakra that goes with it. Normally he’s just have the kid channel the Kyuubi’s chakra enough to get a look at the eight trigrams, but Naruto had mentioned off-hand that it would be better if he saw everything down there in person, and Jiraiya hadn’t argued with him.

The offhand mention had made him nervous though; even though the seal can’t be unlocked without the key– the only copy of which is in Jiraiya’s possession– he now thinks it might be possible that Naruto has changed something about it with his experimentation, maybe even intentionally.

He charges the seals to his fingertips, prepared for the worst.

Turns out he’s not prepared for shit. Definitely not fucking this.

The inside of Naruto’s seal does not look like the prison it is supposed to be. There is no darkness, no compression, no fucking bars. Its open, and bright, and beautiful; the air smells like water and sunlight and green growing things, the energy tastes like storm-air and sea salt and ozone, the space feels like it goes on for an eternity.

The shallow sea of warm, calm water around him is filled with lotus flowers, both potent black and brilliant indigo, that range in size from the palm-width ones floating around his feet to gargantuan specimens the size of Kakashi’s living room. Pale basalt columns rise out of the crystal water like fingertips, broken geometric walls of volcanic stone that crest and converge behind a rise of earth the size of a small island. Blue-green grass sways in the impossible breeze, sprinkled with wildflowers and what look like fragments of old ruins, familiar ruins, slanting half buried in the soft earth. Water crashes in denial of physics from the crest of the highest basalt structure, rushing
over stone in lush sprays to feed into a large pond in the center of the earthen rise, over which presides a willow tree many many times larger than the species is capable of growing naturally.

Under the soft, swaying branches of the massive tree, partially obscured by the curtain of green, rests the *Kyuubi no kitsune*.

The great fox lies stretched out under the canopy in all its colossal glory, a single beastial eye cracked open lazily to observe Jiraiya dead on. Its enormous head is draped over crossed forepaws, tails curved around the beasts body in a crescent, and *what the fuck*.

Jiraiya remembers the Kyuubi perfectly. He’s seen the damn thing up close and personal, felt the marrow-deep terror and breathstealling hate of its presence, choked on the power and chakra it radiated even bound by Kushina as it was. It should be locked up behind the most powerful imprisonment seal known to the ninja world– not lounging in the vestiges of evening sunlight under a dreamscape sky, looking for all the world *content to be right where it is.*

Fury and fear mix hotly in Jiraiya’s blood at the sight of Kushina and Minato’s murderer comfortable and at ease in the heart of their son, and it *never* looked this strong in Kushina’s seal; the fur is a darker, richer amber than he remembers and is decorated with thin, subtle bands of black in places where it wasn’t before. The darkness ringing its eyes is thicker too, and more trailing, and there's another third thing that makes the hair on Jiraiya’s arms stand on end.

It’s calm.

Jiraiya remembers the Kyuubi as something writhing and furious, all tearing claws and spat insults, never quieted, never stilled. But *calm* is always more dangerous than wrath, and the one thing you could always expect from the nine-tails was anger.

But before Jiraiya can move or breathe or open his mouth there's movement to his left, and Naruto– without the slightest hint of fear or hesitation– takes off for the center of the knoll at a run, kicking up sparkling arcs of water in his wake.

“Kura! I brought the old perv!” He shouts, bare feet sinking into the black sand at the edge of the rise as he climbs it. The fox raises its head as he approaches, black lined mouth pulling wide and soft in a way Jiraiya can only describe as a smile. Not a smirk, not a snarl, a *smile*.

~*I see that, kit. No accounting for your taste in company.*~

The beast’s tonal, rumbling voice is unmistakably fond, resonant with teasing familiarity.

~*Be nice!*” Naruto chastises back, reaching out easily to run his hands over the fur of the fox’s snout. “He’s freaked out enough already.”

~*Humph.*~ The beast rumbles in turn, soft enough to be grudging agreement.

Jiraiya is stunned to complete silence. He stares for a long heavy moment, a minute that feels like an hour, as he attempts to contemplate exactly what he’s seeing.

No bars. No separation. No Hate. No Fear. A little boy and a tailed beast curled together like parent and child, like comrades, like *friends*.

Jiraiya knows genuine devotion, what it looks like and feels like. He sees it, sees this very rare human thing in the eyes of the bloody monster of the leaf, the most feared creature of its kind, the
greatest disaster of the elemental countries.

If this is all some kind of giant elaborate joke, Jiraiya doesn’t see where the punchline is going.

Naruto looks over after a moment, still leaning into the Kyuubi’s nose, and waves him over impatiently. “Come on! He won’t hurt you, he promised.”

*He* promised?

Jiraiya swallows hard. He thinks his legs might be shaking, and he *knows* his hands are, but he grasps numbly for the pieces of his shattered poise and tries to cobble together enough sense to respond to the situation like a *shinobi* and not a startled rabbit, which is exactly what he feels like under the nine-tails’ gaze—under giant arterial-red irises rimmed with gold and heavy with predator focus.

Jiraiya approaches warily, taking the same path up the kid did, eyes on the beast the entire time. The fox returns his gaze levelly, and true to word Jiraiya does not find himself bitten in half, even when he gets close enough to feel the great rush of the monster’s breath.

“Okay kid…” he says slowly, breathlessly. “Care to explain what’s going on?”

~**Mind your manners, Sannin.**~ The beast rumbles in warning, and Jiraiya flinches. ~**He’s under no obligation to tell you anything.**~

Naruto scoffs and scrubs his fingers roughly through the tailed-beast’s fur. “It’s *fine* Kurama. Knock it off.”

The fox’s response is a low grumble and an unmistakable nuzzle into Naruto’s torso, followed by acquiescence as it lays its head back down and closes its eyes once more.

Naruto turns to meet Jiraiya’s eyes, one hand still petting soothingly over the Kyuubi’s muzzle. “So I know you’ve technically met him before, but this is Kurama.”

Jiraiya has so many questions.

He sorts through them, tries to put them in some kind of order, and starts with the most benign one he can think of.

“I didn’t realize tailed beasts had names.”

Wrong question.

The Kyu- *Kurama*, opens his eyes again slowly, dark and deadpan. ~**Funny.**~ he growls, ~**You didn’t exactly ask.**~

That’s a nerve. Strike one, Jiraiya. Though that might also be a strike on ninjakind in general. “Uh…”

“Okay, so you’re both idiots.” Naruto interrupts. “But that’s not the point right now. The point is, *this* is Kurama.” He stands straighter and flattens his palm against the fox’s nose pointedly. “He’s my tailed beast, he’s my comrade, and he is my *friend*.” The kid says the last word with such vehemence it practically takes on a new meaning all together, stronger than family or kin. He takes
a pointed step between them, as if Jiraiya is somehow the threat here and not the other way around. “Got it?”

After a long moment, Jiraiya nods.

Naruto looks satisfied enough at that, and Kurama reaches to ruffle his hair with one giant paw, drawing a startled giggle from the Uzumaki heir.

There’s a pause as Kurama stills.

~Actually kit, would you mind giving us some privacy?~

The question blindsides Naruto a bit, who blinks and tilts his head questioningly at the great beast from under large clawed fingers. “Sure. You gonna be long? Kakashi-sensei said to be home by dinner.”

~Not long. Now scoot.~ Kurama scolds, and Naruto slides several meters when the beast shoos him with the brush of a tail.

The brat sticks his tongue out at him in retribution, but goes willingly enough. “Want a change of scenery before I go?” he asks.

Kurama hums deep in his vulpine chest. ~Violet Garden.~ He decides. ~At midnight.~

“You got it!” The boy calls brightly, and then he’s gone.

Jiraiya wishes he’d spoken up before now, because now he’s alone in a chakric soulscape with a Tailed Beast that probably still wants to scrape the marrow from his bones, with no definitive way out until someone on the surface breaks the seal connection.

But the fox just hums again, and reaches around to push Jiraiya more towards the pond.

~You’re going to want to stand back for a minute.~

There’s a sudden distorted rumble, then a melodious sound like the ringing of a massive bell. Without warning the world around him starts to shift and melt; the sunset colours drain from the sky and the solar disk itself disappears, navy darkness spilling across the atmosphere in its place, cradling the bright silvery disk of the moon that carves itself a place at the zenith. The willow shrinks away, the grass dissolving into more glittering black sand, the ruins transforming into the same decorative boulders used in *karesansui* gardens. The waterfall warps, changing into a softer feature that trickles in zig-zag patterns over mossy granite, and the pond narrows, elongating into a decorative river. Plants begin to grow out of the sand, creeping over the boulders and stretching higher and higher, dark vine-like branches gripping stone and each other.

Then suddenly all Jiraiya can see is shocks of gorgeous violet as dozens of massive wisteria trees bloom all at once, every branch heavy with trailing purple blossoms that glow in the light of the full moon above, which Jiraiya can hardly see now through the trees. At his feet the sand arranges itself in flowing spirals and circles as if with a hundred invisible rakes, like something out of the fire temple’s meticulous stone courtyards.

After a few minutes everything settles, and a soft breeze begins to meander through the low hanging flowers, filling the air with their perfume. It’s all so real and yet like something out of a fever dream; from the scent of the wisteria and the individual grains of sand, to the glow of the overlarge moon and the dulcet sounds of water trickling over rock.
“How is this… possible?” Jiraiya asks aloud, without meaning to.

~The kit makes them out of memories.~ Kurama answers unexpectedly.

Jiraiya spins to face the fox and Kurama’s head rises, the tree branches swaying politely out of the way as he moves. He lifts a dextrous paw to brush clawed fingers gently over the bunches of wisteria blossoms, tender claws framing the clusters. It’s an idle motion, but it’s also a very human one.

“Memories?” He wonders, reaching out to pluck a single tiny flower from the closest branch. It feels real, velvety smooth and delicate in his fingertips. “What do you mean?”

The fox hums, a rough sound that would be a growl in a lesser beast. ~I mean the boulders come from memories of the mossy ravines of Wave country. The garden patterns come from memories of the inside of the Hyuuga complex. The sand comes from memories of the beaches of Uzushiogakure.~

“Uzushio?” Jiraiya blurts, forgetting for a second who he’s talking too, but the fox just raises a regal eyebrow at him. And what the hell happened to that temper? By the kyuubi’s own declarations, he should hate Jiraiya on principle just for being human.

~Yes, Uzushio. There is a great deal you don’t know, Sanin.~

Jiraiya can agree with that at least, and now he knows why the ruin fragments from the scene before looked so familiar— it was the only part of the island Jiraiya got close enough to see before the sky had started to rumble angrily and the sea had begun to lash with outrage.

“What about the wisteria?” He has to ask. They’re more native to places like Waterfall or Hotspring country, and tend not to grow well under the shade of the Fire country canopy. “In this colour? No way he saw them anywhere around here.”

That gives the beast a fraction of pause. ~... It’s from his Uchiha’s memory.~ He says softly.

“Uchiha Sasuke? His teammate?”

Kurama nods. ~From a trip to Daimyo’s estate with his father as a small child. But that’s not why they’re important.~

“They can share memories?” Jiraiya asks too fast, surprised. “That’s… advanced. Even for an Uchiha prodigy.”

Kurama crosses his paws again. ~Yes. But it’s not because he’s a prodigy that he can share memories.~

Okay Jiraiya’s a little thick sometimes, but even he can catch that hint the second time around. “Okay, why are these flowers important?”

It’s weird because it’s not as weird as he thought— he’s having a perfectly civil conversation with a tailed beast and he’s already stopped finding it odd. Sure, it’s tense as fuck and Jiraiya is quite aware he can be murdered in here with relative ease, but there’s also a little instinct in the back of his head that gives him the feeling he can relax; Naruto would probably be pretty pissed at Kurama if he slaughtered Jiraiya all over the pretty flowers, and part of him knows that’s better protection from Kurama than anything else could be.

~They’re important,~ Kurama says lowly, ~Because if you want to have any part in my kit’s life,
there are a few things you need to understand about how this family works.

That’s the most threatening thing Jiraiya has heard from him so far, and there’s protectiveness clenched behind the fox’s teeth so strong Jiraiya can feel the emotion ripple through his bones the same way hate used to.

“Why not just kill me then? If you’re afraid I’m going to hurt him?” Jiraiya asks, because he’s not always smart about opening his mouth.

The Kyuubi snorts, teeth the length of nodachi flashing pearly-white, dark lips pulled back in a precursor to a snarl. ~If I thought you’d hurt him, Sanin, you would already be dead.~


~Not as much as you may think.~ The beast says brusquely, tails lashing in agitation. ~I still find much of your kind… distasteful.~ Kurama sighs, a great huff of breath that rustles the trees like wind. ~The fishcake is… very different.~

There’s a very long slightly awkward pause– Kurama looks as though he is trying to find the proper words to explain what he means and Jiraiya’s not about to interrupt him. Besides, he thinks he knows what Kurama is getting at– Naruto is… impossible in the best ways. Jiraiya’s only really known him for a few hours and he can already tell that. The Kyuubi no Kitsune has been with Naruto since before he was born, curled together in Kushina’s stomach when she was pregnant, and sealed together at the moment of his birth.

That’s a lot of time for a bright soul to make a difference, and clearly he’d made an impossible difference.

“Yea.” Jiraiya murmurs, sinking down to sit in the sand. “I think I get that.”

~Believe me Sanin.~ The beast corrects, almost softly. ~You really don’t.~

He doesn’t elaborate. Instead Kurama reaches for a cluster of wisteria again, and continues their conversation from earlier like it was never interrupted. ~Do you know what they stand for?~

Jiraiya nods and recites, straight from the Yamanaka handbook; “Honour. Memory. Patience. Longevity. Love.” He pauses, another, lesser known meaning catching a bit in his throat as he begins to understand. “Victory over hardship.”

~Yes.~ the fox murmurs, and then leans in close, very close, so that they’re eye to enormous eye.

~You want to know what changed? I’m going to tell you. And if you want to run off and tell this whole hypocritical village every word, you go right ahead.~ There’s something swirling in the great beasts eyes, something golden and powerful in a way that has nothing to do with ancient chakra. ~It won’t matter. He does not need you, or them, and it is they who would be lesser for the loss.~

~<>~

Sarutobi looks vaguely like he’s about to throw up all over his tea-stained desk.
Jiraiya, funnily enough, is not finding himself all that sympathetic.

“He...what? That... that cannot be.” the old man mutters, white as a ghost.

“It is.” Jiraiya says bluntly, and doesn’t much care how cruel it sounds when he says aloud what Sarutobi is thinking. “Turns out all the secrecy, all the covert bullshit, all that isolation from the people that loved him or his parents? Was for a whole fuceload of nothing.”

“Jiraiya!” Sarutobi snaps, but Jiraiya just grits his teeth and fires right back for once.

“No. This was a bad idea from the start. He should hate this village! It would have been easy! We made it easy!” he takes a deep breath through his nose and lowers his voice back to acceptable decibels. “But he doesn’t. And that’s to his credit. Not ours.”

He lets that sink in, eyes hard, and Sarutobi’s are wide and startled in response– Jiraiya’s never raised his voice at him like that before now. Gods, he’s turning into Kakashi now, what the fuck.

“Look.” he breathes out, exasperated. “You wanted my report, here it is, one more time; The Kyuubi-no-Kitsune is not secure. The eight trigrams seal has been altered. It cannot be resecured. And there is no doubt in my goddamn mind that the only reason this village is still standing right now is because destroying it would make Uzumaki Naruto upset.”

Sarutobi doesn’t respond. Jiraiya’s not sure he can at this point– Jiraiya would be concerned he gave the old man a heart attack or something if that kinda thing happened to shinobi like him.

Jiraiya sighs. “Something’s gotta change here, sensei. And if you don’t do it, someone is gonna step in a do it for us, and that might not exactly go well.”

He steps away at that, heading towards the window and sliding it open, looking back only when he’s got one foot on the sill.

Sarutobi’s got his head in his hands, age gnarled knuckles digging hard into his temples. The sight calms some of Jiraiya’s frustration; Sarutobi’s always done what he thought was best, to the utmost of his ability, and he might have blind spots, he might make mistakes, but he’s human. They lost one of the best Kage they’d ever had far too soon, and Sarutobi had done what he could in the aftermath. It’s more than most could manage, so Jiraiya digs around in his heart for a small mercy.

“I’m staying with Kakashi and company while I’m here.” he admits. “Come find me when you’ve got your shit together. And don’t take too long okay? If Naruto does decide to leave the village, there’s a good chance he’ll take half your best shinobi with him, me included.” he tries to phrase it like a joke, even though it isn’t one, but the attempt still falls flat. Sarutobi just nods dumbly.

Jiraiya starts to pull himself through the window but then pauses, turning back just enough to catch Sarutobi’s tired eyes. “One more thing you should probably watch out for– the Uchiha on Kakashi’s team in regards to Naruto.”

Sarutobi’s eyes narrow a bit, deepening his crows feet even further. “Sasuke? He is a danger in this as well?”

Jiraiya shrugs. “Sort of part of the definition, yeah.” he allows. “They’re Kindred.”

<>

When Jiraiya gets back to the Hatake complex– still halfway wondering if dropping that last bomb on the old man and taking off was a little too mean– he finds Kakashi is waiting up for him.
He’s leaning against one of the stylized wolf statues that frame the front door, dressed down to black basics. His hair is damp and slicked back like he just got out of the shower, and his hitai-ate has been replaced by a simple black band of fabric pulled low over his sharingan eye.

Jiraiya had been prepared for this to a degree—he knows now that Kurama isn’t the only ferocious parent Naruto possesses, and he’s honestly not sure which one he’d rather deal with.

He lands softly in the grass a few feet from Kakashi, and the cool nighttime darkness of the estate, so distant from the bright lights and constant noise of the village proper, exudes a kind of calm that soothes the sharpness of Jiraiya’s irritation.

“Are the kids asleep?” he asks, barely above a whisper.

Kakashi hums quietly. “They’ve gone to bed.”

That’s pointedly not the same thing, but Jiraiya doesn’t press.

“Want to know what I told the old man?” he tries, wondering at the odd quiet Kakashi is radiating. It’s soft in a way, but also somehow intense—like acceptance, or maybe…

Resolve.

Kakashi’s response, when it comes, is a haunting echo of words he’s already heard.

“You’re welcome to tell him whatever you want, Jiraiya.” Kakashi murmurs, serious and soft. “It won’t change anything that matters.”

<>

“Shika scares me sometimes.” Naruto mutters, rolling up Ino’s report and setting it on fire. The flash paper lights his face ghostly white for an instant before it’s gone, not even a speck of ash to flutter down and stick in the rug.

“Hn.” Sasuke mutters in agreement, chewing on the end of a green tea chocolate stick. He’s laying with his head propped up on one arm, with his feet in Sakura’s lap. She’s being uncharacteristically nice about rubbing the soreness out of one of his ankles, pressing almost idle friction against the stressed tendon. He hadn’t told her it was bugging him, but Naruto hadn’t told her he’d overheated his chakra coils either and she’d still given him an energy wash as soon as she was home.

Naruto leans tiredly into her side, cheek pressed against her strong shoulder, and wonders where they’d be without her.

~Up shit creek without a paddle, probably.~ Kurama sasses idly.

“Why do I get the feeling that tomorrow’s gonna suck?” Naruto asks the room.

“Because Orochimaru’s still slithering around under everyone’s noses, Danzo’s peons are probably hiding in the backyard, and you’re scheduled to go toe to toe with a mentally unstable Jinchuuriki tomorrow for the amusement of the masses?” Sakura supplies helpfully.

“Well when you put it like that.” Naruto grouses, stretching his arms above his head and pressing his back into her side.

“You do have a plan, right?” Sasuke asks.
“Nope.” Naruto admits blithely.

“Ugh.” Sasuke grunts, disgusted.

Sakura laughs and frees a hand to rub through Naruto’s hair, scratching lightly at his scalp, and Naruto closes his eyes with a hum. “Just be safe, ‘kay?”

“Can’t promise safe.” Naruto counters. “Can promise alive though. Possibly even in one piece.”

Sakura tugs on a strand of his hair too hard in admonishment.

“Ouch, gez, okay, I’ll be careful. Happy?”

“No.”

“Ugh.”

They all look up from the fuuton when there’s a soft knock on the door.

“You don’t have to knock, sensei.” Sakura reminds the presence on the other side, and the door slides open.

Kakashi steps inside, Urushi, Pakkun, and Bisuke trotting in on his heels. “You should really be asleep by now, cubs.” he admonishes as Bisuke dives right into Sakura’s arms and Urushi drapes himself across Naruto’s lap. Pakkun trots right over to Sasuke and whines until the Uchiha rolls over enough for him to sit on his chest.

“Can’t sleep.” Sasuke mutters, scratching the pug behind the ears.

“Mhm.” Kakashi hums, moving to sit cross-legged between Sakura and Sasuke. The wide window along the far wall has been left open enough for the cool breeze to weave through, and Kakashi notes proudly that it’s also been trapped to high hells– the shredder snare below the sill would be a particularly nasty surprise to anyone foolish enough to set foot on it, and comes straight out of Genna’s paranoid list of favored boobytraps.

Sakura leans into Kakashi’s side the way Naruto’s leaning into hers, making the three of them look something like a set of half-fallen dominos. Sasuke, offended at the idea of being left out, pivots around to rest his head on the end of Kakashi’s thigh.

Kakashi smiles under his mask, rubbing one hand soothingly back and forth over Sakura’s back. She hums contentedly and nuzzles her cheek into the fabric of his shirt, and Naruto adjusts so his spine isn’t digging into her ribs.

After they’ve all settled in and the rest of the ninen have started trickling into the room, Kakashi reaches into his pocket and pulls out a very different book than the one he usually carries around with him.

*An Incomplete History of Known Bloodline Limits. Classification Level 4: Anbu Restricted.*

“Now,” Kakashi murmurs, flicking the dark, worn-in cover open with his thumb. “Where were we?”

Kakashi nods and flips to the correct spot, eye tracing the words until he finds familiar phrasing, and begins to read.

They’re asleep a half-hour later.

Kakashi trails off softly, as not to wake them with sudden silence, and crooks his fingers at Bull and Uhei as he slips the book back into his pocket. They both lumber up onto all fours and pad closer, nosing at his hand and huffing quietly. He makes a couple of familiar motions in shinobi sign and they both nod, maneuvering into position at his back and side. With a practiced couple of motions they slide into his place as he sits up, Bull’s bulk supporting Sakura and Naruto, Uhei wiggling into pillow position for Sasuke.

He just stands there for a moment, watching them doze, and can’t help but marvel at how strong they’ve gotten in so short a time, how close. They’ve done so much, grown so much, gained such powerful drive it sometimes scares him. The extent to which they care; from Sasuke’s subtle and steely devotion to Naruto’s bright and indomitable kindness, Sakura’s aggressively determined heart between them, gives them a power no kids their age should have.

Maybe it’s time for Kakashi to do some growing of his own.

After all, what kind of sensei would he be if he couldn’t keep up with his students?

<>

Pakkun follows him out of the room, stepping gingerly off Sasuke’s chest and trotting to catch up.

“That’s one heck of a look on your face, boss.” He grumbles when they’re far enough out of earshot of the cubs. “We got work to do?”

“Something like that.” he murmurs, and keeps walking.

He stops at the door to the basement vault, a thick, lead-heavy slab of sacred wood stronger than titanium and blood-sealed shut. He reaches for the blank spot in the center of the Uzumaki seals and presses his chakra signature into the grain beneath his palm.

The seals register, recognising his presence from the bank of chakra samples Naruto worked into its structure, and the locks click open, one after another until the door swings open on its own weight.

He walks slowly down the stairs, not bothering to light any of the lamps decorating the walls, passing the treasures within as he goes; giant golden scrolls hewn with Uzushio’s clan markings, ornamental Uchiha enforcer weapons worth more than Kakashi’s yearly salary, jar sets of ancient medicines and toxins that would make Tsunade weep with envy– the spoils of an unwise bet with Kakashi’s favorite Kunoichi.

He comes to the back of the room, to a hidden wall tucked between the seams of two others in a sort of optical illusion, and Pakkun’s pace slows when he realizes exactly where Kakashi is heading.

“Boss? I thought you said you’d never open that thing again.”

“I said I’d never do a lot of things.” he murmurs, reaching up to rub his fist over a space on the wall about eye level. Dust and plaster crumbles away, with each pass revealing more and more of
the crosshatched diamond that is his clan symbol. “I said I’d never let anyone close to me again, I
said I’d never again be responsible for someone else's life, I said I’d never go against the will of
my village or my Kage.” At the final pass of his bare skin on the symbol it begins to glow softly,
awaiting orders. “Turns out I’m a bit of a liar.”

He pauses, staring at the dull glow of the old sigil, so long neglected that the light flickers in and
out like a dying candle.

“I’ve been fighting with one hand tied behind my back for a long time, Pakkun. Too long.” He
breathes, his voice dropping into a whisper. “I don’t remember what it feels like to be unbound.”

“It’ll be dangerous, boss.” Pakkun admits gruffly. “And forgive the insubordination but– about
damn time.”

Kakashi breathes a startled sigh of relief. “You’re sure?”

Pakkun nods with a huff and sits back, lifting his front paws into the air. Kakashi obeys and
reaches down to pick him up, and Pakkun presses both paws comfortingly into his shoulder. “We’ll
always be your pack.” He grumbles, and looks pointedly at the flickering seal guarding the oldest
part of the Hatake complex. “It’s time you stopped holding out on us.”

Chapter End Notes

Make sure you hop on tumblr and see this post for my other authors note, it's real
important to me:
https://sablescribe.tumblr.com/post/189354375854/authors-note

And go check out this post also so that you all know how awesome you are
https://sablescribe.tumblr.com/post/188430102404/ohh-overdue-appreciation

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