Shattered Glass
by yuuki_Ilene

Summary

When you take away the people that the most unpredictable ninja treasures, you makes a terrible monster out of her. She will not sit still and accept it - no - she will take it all back in time and change everything, even if it meant stumbling while treading along the road of shattered glass. Time Travel. Eventual Fem!NaruKaka. Cross-posted FFN

[ON HIATUS]

Notes

This story will dabble on morality, character deaths, violence and light hints of sexuality/nudity. Hence, it is Rated Mature. If any of these themes brings you discomfort, please turn away now instead of opting to lash out at it later. Unlike most time travel fanfictions, this will be darker in content and my take on is not idealistic or light-hearted. There is little beauty in this story since I do not believe that Shinobi life was as optimistic as Masashi Kishimoto makes it out to be, and the characters will commit actions that are morally wrong.
Remember to whip out your dictionaries and thesaurus - Kurama is an eloquent beast who tends to speak with jargon in this story (which should be a given, considering the fact that he is an ancient).
The brush in her hand moved with intent, each brush stroke smooth and even without irregularities, perfect like a set typography and each piece elegant like an artist in her element. She lifted the apparatus dipped in a generous amount of ink as she studied her work with a keen eye, not allowing a single flaw to escape her intense scrutiny. She demanded perfection – or rather, the seal work did not allow for detriments – because what she pursued was a topic breached by many and yet succeeded by none, all her predecessors dying by their own creation or trapped in a different time.

But she would be different, she swore, hunger devastated in her eyes. She would succeed.

The dim room she dwelled in was dominated by her opus – her masterpiece – where large pieces of paper overlapped one another, each construct drawn with her lifeblood and significant to the complex array that she created. She knelt on a cloth surrounded by her papers, her ink-stained hands and sleeves hovering over parchment while she compared the rough sketch to the actual. She hoped fervently that it would be her last, her weary body exhausted of its zealous commitment to her piece, one that was tempered with more failures than successes. The ancient beast stayed deadly still as he watched his host gross over her work, likewise hoping that the current piece would not have to join the stack of rolled-up papers in the corner of the room.

Her thin lips twitched into a rare smile as she raised her hunched back leisurely slow, her head turning slowly to admire her handiwork that spanned over a few years. Parts of the outer layer were alight with vibrant red ink and it thrummed as if it was alive with stored power. As it reached the core, the spiraled words became more compact and detailed, its scriptures like another language as they layered on top of one another, the waxy thin paper faintly showing the delicate brush strokes beneath.

Her stained hands brushed locks of her unruly, unconditioned hair out of her face, revealing harrowed cerulean blue eyes. "It is completed," she whispered, her voice hoarse from disuse as she gripped onto the piece of cloth.

The Bijuu chuckled. 'Congratulations, kit.'

Naruto peered at the window that was covered by thick blinds, rising to her feet and flickering towards it, drawing them open to see the light. The midday sun blinded her; touching her paler skin and ruining her vision momentarily before it adjusted to the sterile life before her.

The small village she resided in was self-sufficient, going about their lives to sustain themselves with the bare necessities. It was mechanical and static as each of them went through the processes of life like ghouls, dragging along their props with lifeless eyes, seeking some kind of refuge that did not belong in this world. It wasn't like her old bustling village that she knew, filled with so much warmth and glory that it made her cheeks hurt. She missed the old smells of spices and clothes that her old affiliation had, filled with so much joy and boisterous noise. It was beautiful and vast with life, unlike this village that laid in the ruin of war, now a barren wasteland where everywhere she turned to was a living funeral, her loneliness a wretched reminder of everything she had lost.
Of everything she had failed to protect, even though she had sworn to.

Her eyelids flitted close as tears welled in her eyes once again, closing the blinds as she sank to the ground, her head leaning against the rough walls. Her body trembled but she doesn't allow herself to make a sound of anguish because she was tired of crying for the things that had already been done. She knows that she doesn't deserve the light. She can't stand looking at the villagers who were equally tormented by the losses of war – a morbid reflection of herself – because every time she did, she would remember all the deaths that she witnessed, the fading warmth in her bloodied arms, their faltering breaths –

Her eyes snapped open uncontrollably as she let out a whimper of despair, teeth biting her lips in attempt to halt it. She knew the truth that they all denied while they tried to move on from the catastrophic event: they just existed. She just existed. They stopped living when a fragment of them died along with the war.

'You don't have to do this, kit,' the fox implored in her head. 'Why do you seek to relieve the memories that haunt you? You have already done your part in the entire grand scheme of things; you have stopped the greater evil from triumphing. Why do you pursue this madness, Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto?'

The kunoichi shrugged her shoulders lethargically. "This is not home," her voice cracked at the last word, her hand raking through her hair. "This is a graveyard, where they are no longer around because I failed to protect them. Home-" she broke for the second time- "is when they are around with me and not just a ghost in my memories that I cannot remove."

She sounded so aged and afflicted that it nearly broke the Kyuubi's non-beating heart, feeling the utter despair rolling off the formerly hyperactive ninja in waves. The war ruined her in more ways than one, trashing and stomping on her dreams ruthlessly before tossing it away like it was refuse. His host was just played out like a theatrical puppet by the ploy of another man, losing everything to the things she could not control, and that no immeasurable power could prevent. How could he not be aware of the desperation that anchored deep her heart, the palpable structure abused by her phantoms that made remedy impossible?

Living for her was a fate crueler than death.

It always started with a small trickle of water that dripped in their mindscape. But he doesn't know when – he presumed it was one of the numberless deaths – when it started pouring and he remembered himself drowning along with her endless grief that screamed and ripped like torrential rain, a maelstrom gathering and calling disaster. He doesn't know when she became inconsolable but he watched her retreated into herself, reduced to a pathetic shadow that flitted around the edges, never truly living.

Her albatross had a constant presence, refusing to let go of the tortured child. She constructed and planned tirelessly like a machine, often forgoing her meals and sleep for progress. She thrived on action to forget, only necessity and her body shutting down on itself as an indicator that she was still human, and she would wear and tear without rest. When she was uninspired, she would train for hours to perfect her amalgamated style, only collapsing when exhaustion overcame her and she would sink into a deep blank sleep. She never stopped working like clockwork empowered by sheer damaged will, forging her weapon and sharpening her own mind for something that was likely to fail.

She bet everything on her masterpiece to live again.
He sighed, stressing warily at the truth. 'And you are aware that this madness might bear no results, right?'

She looked at her seal work longingly like a woman mad obsessed. "It doesn't matter," she muttered. "I have nothing left to lose anyway. And even if it fails... at least I tried."

His red eyes softened, recognizing her own self-blame for inaction. Raising his body and onto his four limbs, his head inclined towards his host, a gesture that he hadn't done since the passing of his creator. 'I swore that you would be the last vessel that would host my chakra and I will follow you until your death. And no matter where you go, whether this succeeds or fails, I will stay with you until the end, Naruto. Hence, I ask of you once more, do you really wish for this?'

Her lips trembled at his unconditional support, guilt spiking within her. This was her lifelong partner that would be sacrificed along with her if she failed, and just as she was putting herself through the grinder again, he would have to follow. Could she really ask such a thing of him? She knew it was unfair to him and this was her decision.

She needed to do something about this.

"Kurama," she began, mustering her courage to speak without showing her weakness, "this has been my wish for years but it does not mean you have to follow me. The seal has always been open and you can leave if you want. I won't hold it against you even if you chose to do it. It will take me awhile to recuperate but I'll be okay, 'ttebane."

The Kyuubi no Kitsune's nostrils flared with anger at her suggestion, 'And abandon a foolish mortal like you that is upheld by pointless heroics? To believe that you are stable enough to carry out what you intend to do? I may be disapproving of this suicidal plan, but as your sworn partner, I am no fool. I will not abandon you when you need me most. Someone has to rein you in before you destroy your own plans with your own ideals.'

She flinched at the backhanded insult although her heart warmed at his proclamation. "There are worse ways for me to die, kit," huffed out the fox, settling back to his original position before he spoke. 'I've lived and seen everything this world has to offer. I've experienced the sweetest of tender meats and the foulest of men and triumphed bitterly over a madman with you. My brethren have been domesticated and slaughtered and this world has been reduced to a desolate canvas that will not recover for centuries to come. There is no enjoyment in viewing misery when there is no happiness and there is nothing to seek in this wretched time.'

'There are worse ways to die, kit,' he repeated truthfully, his gaze earnest. 'But if I had to choose, dying with you may not be that bad after all.'

His vessel looked at him in amused sadness. "You're really bad at this, aren't you?"

'You are possibly the last mortal I want to hear that from, especially when you boast horrible social cues,' snapped the fox, irritated by the fact that she ruined his honesty. The kunoichi laughed in the mindscape.

The jinchūriki wiped away the remnant of her tears as she skirted around the edges of her papers and opened a door that led to a separate enclosed room in the house. Her hand pressed on the stasis seal momentarily to deactivate it, her eyes roving over the collection of mementos. The weapons of her fallen friends were decked out in displays on the walls and the unique assortment of items from
techniques to accessories were organized by category on tables in the room, all of them precious to her in some way or another. She approached the leftmost table first, picking up her traditional Shinobi outfit that consisted of a dark orange jumpsuit and mesh armor delicately before hugging it to her chest. She stilled for a moment before she undressed, kimono pooling on the ground around her as slipped on her old garb, smiling at the familiar rough texture that lied on her skin. Her pouches were strung on her hip and right leg next, filled with storage scrolls that held her plans, her important effects and her own inventions in Fūinjutsu.

Naruto reached out hesitantly to the two hitat-ate that laid flat on the table next to where her outfit was, her fingers brushing against the metal plates, weighing their significance in her mind. The Konoha insignia would eternally be the only affiliation that she would swear loyalty to and it had stayed with her for the majority of her life. But the kanji for nin and the symbol of tolerance represented the last years of her Shinobi career that encompassed everything she wanted to forget. Beyond its ugliness, it also meant the great people that she met in the midst of the sanguineous war, who impacted and parted things onto her.

'Just take the latter, kit,' her partner advised, 'you can get the Konoha insignia again later.'

She nodded, hanging the hitat-ate on her waist, turning around and striding out of the room, not even giving the mementos a last glance. She shut the door behind her and re-sealed the stasis – permanently this time – her eyelids fluttering close as she etched all the things she had left behind in her mind.

This time, she vowed, I won't have to collect them ever again.

She would see those items hang off their owners proudly and watch them wield it with the mastery she could never hold a cup to, allowing those items to be more than just of ornamental value.

"We only have one chance, Kurama," Naruto said, determination apparent in her eyes. "I hope you're not out of practice."

"Never," he vowed similarly, giving her a foxy grin as she floated towards the middle of the seal array and settling down on her knees. "We will succeed."

She pulled her hair into a ponytail before she pressed her palms flat on an empty space of the array. "Silence," she commanded as the seals around the room glowed, the noises of the village outside fading into nothingness. "Barrier," intoned the seal master, watching as the inner fittings of the house adopted eight different colored outlines before it stayed at yellow.

Her left palm lied on the seal of her stomach, "Lock." The large gates in their mindscape closed and the Eight Trigram Seal spiraled to a close, the prisoner still lying on his belly without protest. He peeked one red eye at his host, smiling at her renewed vigor. 'Do you have enough chakra for this sequence, kit?'

"If eighty large chakra storages with a three to two ratio of your chakra and mine respectively aren't enough," she grimaced as she coaxed chakra into her creation, "then this world is done for."

Black words started to trail up her arms and coil around her body like a snake, branding her for its own. The heated ink seared into her skin and she winced slightly, feeling as if she truly became the center of the seal, a single entity rather than two. The dark marks of the seal from the core started lighting up with a vibrant crimson as if it were alive, the color slowly spreading outwards to meet the smoldering red that lined the outer edges. The kunoichi watched the colors creep slowly as she continued the steady influx of chakra, a sense of anticipation and worry welling within her. Her eyes narrowed at the possibility of failure. I'm an Uzumaki through and through, 'ttebane! I don't simply
fail at Fūinjutsu. I bled for this piece and I'm going to get ever drop's worth once this succeeds, she hissed in her mind.

The encouraging smiles of her friends flashed across her mind and a grin ghosted on her lips. For them, for their futures, I cannot fail.

'Hey kit,' the Kyuubi called out, causing her grunt in reply.

'Do you remember what day it is?' he asked knowingly.

The question took her by surprise. "What?"

Blue, blacks, and reds merged just as she reacted, the white light blinding as it engulfed the entire room. The array bled with overwhelming chakra and it pulsed tangibly in the room, the two mediums in the storages blending as the barrier of the house cracked from its ferocity. The wooden structure of the house groaned from the tension while the origin stayed unmoving in the middle of the chaotic whirlwind of power, bleeding out from her seven orifices while she strained herself to channel the last part of the sequence.

A loud explosion boomed in her ears. In her mind's eye, she saw the Kyuubi no Kitsune smiling at her fondly.

'Happy Birthday kit.'

And in the next instant, the entire room was decimated into the pieces, the paper ripped into shreds after serving its purpose and floated into the air, its edges singed. Wooden splinters flew in all directions when the barrier could no longer hold up and exploded in a shower of sparks, the fallen structure hot and jagged. The remaining chakra swept across the village like a shock wave accompanied by a blast of wind, alarming everyone in the nearby vicinity.

The lady who once resided in the demolished house, the supposed Nanadaime Hokage that never took up her role, disappeared from the timeline without a trace.
Twenty-Two's Repentance

Repentance
/repˈɛntəns/ noun
The activity of reviewing one's actions and feeling contrition or regret for past wrongs.

When she opened her eyes to wind brutally slapping her face, her first reaction was to flail.

For a moment, she genuinely questioned what she was seeing because it felt surreal to her as she took in the expansive scenery that was hindered by clouds. *I'm never trying time-travelling again*, she concluded in horror.

"KURAMA!" Naruto finally screamed, her voice unheard due to the whistling air. "WE'RE FUCKING FALLING, 'TTEBANE!"

The jinchūriki struggled to unseal the beast in her stomach against the persistent air resistance, her arms weak and chakra coils abused. The wind worked against her and flapped her clothes viciously, stinging her eyes and prickling her skin like she was a pincushion. The velocity increased as she hurtled closer and closer to the ground and now was not the time to appreciate the clouds her favourite Nara always stared at, because in the name of Hokage, she was going to *die*.

"Shut up kit, I know!" the fox snarled back at his host's dramatics and lung capacity. She shrieked again, the decibel echoing in their mindscape and it made him wince. He clapped his hands together frantically as he gathered the chakra that was not invested into protecting her body from the whiplash, trying to focus on giving his chakra proper form. If she hadn't been adamant about shouldering the entire cost of transport, perhaps the situation wouldn't have been as bad as it was now.

'We can't pull off a full transformation, but two tails will do,' ordered the Kyuubi, manifesting himself as her cloak without her command. Internally, he prayed to the Sage of Six Paths that it was enough as he pushed for a third tail, dread filling the pair as they descended closer to the ground.

They looked like a bright red comet plummeting rapidly, lighting up the dark skies with its fiery color as if it was a harbinger of death. The figure of a deformed fox blurred with its speed into a singular line, becoming faster and faster as it was enshrouded with heat, blasting into an empty clearing with an intense boom that shook the ground.

Both entities simultaneously groaned when they collided into the earth, although the human's was more akin to a gurgled scream and she nearly blacked out. Dozens of lacerations mutilated her still inked body and she felt some of her bones break, sharp pain converging on every muscle and bone in her frame. She convulsed violently under the stimulation, her synapses firing as she let out another guttural moan, the red chakra running amok in her system as it tried to repair the damage of the fall. Her lungs felt like they were on fire as she exhaled the hot air, her hands digging into the ground for a steady hold while the ancient mended her with its blistering power that she could not filter in her weakness. Smoke danced across her tender skin at where it healed, melding her broken bones rapidly with proportional pain and her teeth grinded against one another to produce an ear-shivering sound, trying to hold back another involuntary protest.

She was panting heavily when the majority of the red chakra receded back to her stomach, delirious
from the pain as her vision of the world spun around her. Parts of the ink on her body faded from her end of her limbs in leisurely slow pace while she tried to recollect herself, the painful memory of now phantom wounds still discernible to her.

"Did we make it?" Naruto croaked hoarsely as she sat up, holding her pounding head. Another wave of pain shot through her veins and she groaned, her back hunching further forward and her hair in utter disarray.

Kurama squinted his eyes slightly. 'We definitely returned to the past,' he deduced immediately through his host's blurry vision, 'but the timeframe is unknown to me. It seems that the contraption used the chakra we stored as the anchor to gauge the time we would travel back to down to the very last drop.'

"Were there any complications?"

'That's the peculiar part, kit,' assessed the Kyuubi. 'The effects of the time travelling have yet to take hold of you because of the damnable seal. When you used your creation, you became its core and it "suspended" the time in you,' he air-quoted, gesturing at her inked body, 'and until the marks wear off, we won't know the true repercussions of our actions.'

"Do you think that death is a possibility?" The fox nodded reluctantly.

She checked another question off her list, blowing her hair out of her face. There was still daylight, but her world was still bleak. "How many days do you think I have?"

'At worst, four is your minimum. But if you can control your chakra usage, I would say nine.'

The kunoichi struggled to her feet. "And why is it related my chakra usage?" she choked out while her limbs screamed for more time to recover. She trembled as she tried to grip onto her knees for support, attempting to adjust her body to the ache.

'Chakra was the fuel of the seal,' reminded Kurama, his voice laced with concern. 'Naturally, the same train of thought applies to you. Right now, you should think of yourself as a storage rather than a replenishment, and the moment your current chakra runs out, the side-effects will happen.'

"So if I don't use my chakra at all, my time here will be unlimited?" Naruto theorized.

The Bijuu shook his head again. 'You mistake the concept of chakra, kit. Chakra is energy itself – it is something that you use consciously or subconsciously – and everyone has some of it, no matter how little. It can never be destroyed but it is always converted and used. No matter how hard you try to get around it, your days are inevitably numbered.'

'It is quite absurd for you to think that you can restrict your chakra usage though,' he added in an afterthought.

Her eyebrows scrunched when she looked at the fading ink on her palms, clenching it into a fist tightly as if she was trying to still the time that was literally slipping out of her hands. "Is it wrong to want more time, ttebane?" asked Naruto wearily. "I was hoping that I would have more, although I am well and aware that I might even have none."

'It is not wrong to want more time to change things around, kit. There were no conditions or rules to the discourse we attempt to uptake and perhaps the greatest atonement is the little time we have. It is in human nature to be selfish,' retorted Kurama in a matter-of-factly tone before it became one
of provocation. 'And this is the withheld consequences that your actions have wrought. Are you regretting this already, Naruto?'

The jinchūriki's blue eyes hardened, "No."

After giving her clipped reply, she promptly pulled out a storage scroll and nicked her thumb to unseal it with her blood. A brush coated finely with chakra ink and a piece of aged parchment appeared in her grasp and she started to draw an elaborate seal. With practiced hands, she drew the needed symbols with finesse, her brush strokes flowing like smooth water – as if her previous altercation never happened - and reached completion within minutes. Naruto lifted her ruined jumpsuit and pasted the seal on her lower back, breathing deeply as she coaxed her chakra into her recent creation. Her imaginings became reality just as her seal glowed, her inked, sun-kissed skin becoming alabaster and unmarred and her blonde hair decolorizing into black. Cerulean blue changed for vermillion red, the new color dyeing from the pupils to the edge of the iris, transforming the knuckle-headed kunoichi to one with a seemingly elegant disposition.

The Kyuubi couldn't help but comment, 'Who was your muse for this appearance?'

The lady brushed her fingers through her black tresses before she admitted one name: "Hinata." She became silent as she recalled the Hyūga heiress who had built a quiet confidence behind her shy demeanor, snippets of the strength that she wielded in her fist and lilac eyes mounting onto her mind before it reached a grim expiry of nothingness.

'Black was a common color for many,' deliberated Kurama.

Naruto quirked her lips at her partner's contemplation, shaking her head slightly before she observed her surroundings once more. "If geography and coordinates still apply," she spoke her thoughts aloud, "then we should be bordering Konohagakure no Sato." Her nose sniffed the air, ignoring the smell of her own blood, "and it would be in that direction."

She frowned when her senses picked up even more than that, a faint apprehension looming like a cloud. She hoped that she was wrong although her senses never lied because she knew the scents of bloodied events like these like it was yesterday. Blood and Metal, she surmised unwillingly as she knelt on the ground to feel for vibrations, extending her own sensing abilities further with the tailed beast working in symbiosis.

"Could it be…?" Naruto murmured, one hand gripping onto the wrist of her other hand that was placed flatly on the ground. She dreaded the answer that she already knew, but she asked her partner anyway.

'It is,' confirmed Kurama grimly. 'It had slipped my mind to check but it seems like my other half dwells in a healthy living vessel rather than the Shinigami's stomach.' The fox wrinkled at the bitter memory, 'If we want to support the theory that this is the Third Shinobi War based off all the activities, then my only possible jailor would have to be Uzumaki Kushina.'

Naruto shivered at the prospect. "So my mother is alive?"

'Unless you have another mother that gave birth to you, then yes.' She rolled her eyes at the beast's sarcasm. Apparently, time travel wasn't enough to knock out his antagonism.

"If the fight is still in Yusagakure no Sato, it means that the Kannabi Bridge is not destroyed," Naruto recalled as she broke into a sprint. Her mind was running through the plans she formulated given the timeline and information she could scavenge before stopping at a specific point. "That
would mean that Akatsuki was still peace-loving—"her red eyes softened at thought of all the people that had previously impacted her life – "and my father and his team are still alive."

The intended Nanadaime Hokage paused for a moment and looked back the direction of her home longingly. Emotions flickered across her expressions before it settled on determination and she turned back her head.

We have much to do…

Seeing Konoha would have to wait.

…

If there was one unchanging constant whether it was the past, present or future, it was that Amegakure no Sato was weeping when she arrived at its outskirts.

The blonde kunoichi would have paused to admire the tragic beauty of the village that was still half-standing from the perilous, ugly war, but the rude welcoming committee decided to ruin her plans with a much anticipated ambush. She couldn't help but sigh loudly when they flanked her shortly after she entered the borders, wondering what she had done to offend the world – Oh right, I committed taboo.

She looked up the dark skies as if she was willing the rain to baptize her for her mistakes. She was tired from all the running, her bones were still aching but apparently that was not enough suffering for her.

Is it that difficult to take pity on a poor girl that looks like a beggar? Naruto lamented internally, turning to look at her tattered and soaked outfit in shame like the lecherous and uncomfortable stares of Iwa-nin were none of her concern.

'You ran to Ame at high speeds fitting for a ninja of your caliber and you're still wearing your "Kill Me, I'm Orange" jumpsuit,' stated the Kyuubi calmly as if he speaking to an idiot. 'You don't act like a beggar—' he paused for effect—'and I don't think they actually care.'

And as if to prove the Bijuu's point, the Iwa-nin decided that he had the jurisdiction to interrogate. "Who are you and who are you affiliated with?" he ordered harshly.

"None of your goddamn business, 'ttebane," retorted Naruto tartly, her posture still loose as she spared them a fleeting look to analyze them. Mid-Chūnin, Low Jōnin at best, she quickly deferred, feeling slightly disappointed at the results of her conjecture. She almost giggled at their glaring weaknesses that made them child's play to her.

They encircled her tighter at her reply, their stances threatening and ready to strike. The focus of the men on her left and right constantly flickered between her and their leader, waiting for their signal to pounce. She resisted rolling her eyes. How obvious could they get?

While Naruto disregarded them, the beast in her growled at their audacity in gesture, making her eyes flare into an involuntary crimson and narrowing her pupils into slits. Like a huntress incarnate, she airily spoke. "The better question to ask, perhaps," She cheered gleefully before her voice became feral, "is what business an Iwakagure Shinobi has in the lands of Amegakure no Sato."

She knew her sentence was ironic but she couldn't find the heart to care. The jinchūriki reviled in the fear that was omnipresent in her initiators' fluctuating chakra. It was never her intent to participate directly in the Third Shinobi War that she had no part of, considering the fact that she wasn't even
born then, but an Uzumaki never backed down from an outright challenge of power. She really would have chosen to ignore them if they didn't confront her but they were clearly begging for their deaths.

Before they could speak, Naruto interjected once more, a pleasant yet sinister smile apparent on her face. "But pleasantries are often dry, don't you think?"

In a swirl of leaves she disappeared from their sight, and in the next, she was behind one of them who held a tanto, hand augmented by wind chakra and chopping down at his neck. Unfazed by the blood that blossomed in the cold rain, she grabbed the tanto from his dead grasp and finished off the two unexacting Shinobi. Seamless actions were what she offered to their provocation, finishing them off faster than they could actually blink.

She stared at the three dead bodies that unceremoniously fell before her feet, disenchanted. They looked distasteful in the rain, their blood quickly diluted and washed off by the falling water.

'They were foolish to challenge what they do not understand,' was her tailed beast's bored commentary. She agreed.

"And who said you need strength in numbers?" Naruto asked rhetorically, swinging her borrowed tanto. "The second coming of the Yellow Flash is enough," she bragged, flinging her blonde-now-black hair behind her shoulder before giving a theatrical bow to her lifeless audience.

'Your idiocy still astounds me,' he informed bluntly while rolling his eyes in amusement. 'But corpses aside, I've taken the liberty to search for the triune that you were seeking while you were otherwise occupied.'

She raised her eyebrows at him, prodding him to continue.

'They're a few miles ahead.'

Naruto hummed in acknowledgement and picked up the scabbard that was abandoned on the ground and sheathed her tanto, running towards her renewed destination. As much as she would like to body flicker rapidly or use her own adapted Hiraishin, it was a conscious decision to preserve her chakra as much as possible which felt odd to the jinchūriki who boasted large reserves and could afford to be wasteful.

Her run was uneventful other than the fresh corpses that were littered on the way, some deaths more gruesome than others. It confirmed what she already knew about war in general – although she would argue that the one she lived through was far worse – it was painful, disgusting and the culmination of brutal stupidity from humans who prided themselves in intelligence. She never understood why anyone would want to do it, even if it was out of blind loyalty to the village, because the moment the fight begun, any participant had already lost. It was sacrificing good people pointlessly for worthless ambitions, staining soil and ruining infrastructure, gaining absolutely nothing from battle other than the status of war-mongering and cruel.

But perhaps, she digressed, sinking into a melancholic mood, the worst part is that I am so desensitized to the deaths.

She was so used to the mangled bodies, some that she even held in her arms, so used to the various death throes and the essence of war. She lived and breathed in the toxic, wasteful atmosphere for years, so much so that she didn't even remember some of the people she had once killed. Her preaching with blood-stained hands was a ridiculous notion, and suddenly, the kunoichi missed the naivety she possessed when she committed her first kill. When she actually felt guilty about a
singular death, that she actually showed the humanity she was bred to have.

"We're Shinobi. We kill, we steal, and we lie to survive. That's just how it is," it was a simple line but defining of her career, she realized, when her sensei said it to her after her first kill. It was something that was reiterated to her but it never really registered until that day. Her first kill wasn't particularly the easiest or the simplest because she walked straight into a bloodbath, having to kill dozens of bandits and unable to stop in fear of her life. It was a chaotic 'kill or be killed' situation and her actions didn't really sink in until she stood in the middle of corpses and her supply of projectiles in her pouch were empty. The poor silver-haired scarecrow was tasked to hold back her hair as she puked out her contents from dinner. He offered her aged wisdom, one that sounded so tired with a hint of remorse, as if he wished that things could have been different.

Naruto smiled sadly, her mood plunging even further as she forced down the old memories of her sensei. The loud clashing of metal and the screams of agony snapped her back to her reverie, her eyes immediately searching out for the three unique shades of hair. She cocked her head slightly in puzzlement when she saw only red and blue angling themselves to protect the entrance to a building with the ginger nowhere in sight.

She was comforted by the fact that her relative still retained his classic Uzumaki hair which meant that Yahiko was still alive. Not for long, her mind whispered hauntingly.

Pursing her lips at the morbid thought, she shook her head before jumping into the fray, her jump propelled by her affinity. She screamed for attention with her choice of clothes as she landed behind the assailants of the pair that she wished to protect, slashing at them with quick efficiency. The jinchūriki spared the frozen Akatsuki members a semblance of a wary smile to make her loyalties known before her lips thinned into a grim line. There was a lot of work to do, she admitted exhaustedly as she embedded a kunai in another of Hanzo's cronies.

Talking and suspicions will have to come later.

Her other temporary allies found it difficult to accept her sudden presence while others merely went along with it. On several occasions, some of them nearly wounded her with their weapons and Ninjutsu, although she took it all in her stride. She never retaliated back, easily discriminating friend from foe and engaged in a session of merciless, one-sided slaughter of their common enemy. Her old war cries and obnoxious declarations morphed into silent and systematic killing, utterly detached from the act and doing the deed simply because she had to. Taking neither pride nor shame, emotional attachments be damned, she worked like a machine, her mind blank as she made quick work of the other sycophants.

Dodge the sword that is swinging overhead. Cut off his arm. Shove him towards the enemy on the side – kami who taught them how to throw – take the shuriken from the ground and throw it back.

It was instinctual; a second nature to her. Push the sword between both ribs. End their pain quickly. Stamp the head that is on the ground – oh wait, that's his arm, try again. It was repeating the same actions again and again, and the time she did stop was when everything went silent.

When the fighting finally ceased, she gazed impassively at the pile of bodies along with the other Akatsuki members, her grip on her bloodied tanto trembling, finding it difficult to drop the weapon. Her red eyes looked dull and emotionless as the black-cloaked individuals approached her cautiously, unsure whether to call her their savior or a demon. Some were hypnotized by her lethal performance she gave as she danced across the battlefield, dispatching them with agile speed and clean precision, like swirling wind amidst torrential waters. Some feared and admired the same prowess, grappling onto their weapons for security, prepared to counter at a moment's defiance.
Those that wielded such power and grace, they realized, were often more dangerous with their intent and layered deceit. Everything about the kunoichi before them reeked of veteran – her suppressed bloodlust, her simplistic movements and the lack of chakra usage. It shrieked experience and a sense of foreboding as they crept closer, not wanting to be the target of her wrath.

Naruto said nothing as the adrenaline in her veins cooled, observing the crowd that was gathering around her with fewer reservations. She pushed her tanto to the ground by its hilt and raked her fingers through her matted hair, pondering on how she could convince them that she was non-hostile in nature. Instead of trying to win over the common followers, she redirected her gaze towards the pair who clearly ranked higher on the hierarchy, her vermilion eyes nudging them to speak.

The blue-haired leader stepped forward to speak at her prompt, offering her hand tentatively. Her angelic voice cut through the cold air, easing the tension by the declaration of statuses. "On behalf of all the Akatsuki members, thank you for helping us. May I ask for your name?"

A heart-warming grin enveloped Naruto's face as she bounded over to Konan for a hug in lieu of a handshake, her dispassionate facade of a warrior replaced with her old bubbly self. "No need for formalities," she chided lightly into her ear, feeling the lady freeze up from her proximity of her voice in her sudden embrace. "I'm Uzumaki Naruto, and I've wanted to speak to you for a really long time, Konan."

"Do I know you?" asked Konan in confusion, her arms awkwardly hanging by her side. Her red-haired companion seemed shocked by Naruto's gesture, choosing to stand there stiffly along with the rest of organization rather than save his companion from her dilemma, wondering if they invited a lunatic into their midst.

His Rinnegan spun as he subconsciously scrutinized the guest, frowning when he noticed a muddled, thin red coating sticking to her skin, making her true details obscure. Curious, he noted dubiously, his senses heightened against the foreign subject. Not many could evade his exalted eyes; and he was certain that they had never met her before. Even if Konan had met her before, she would have brought up such a distinctive person in the passing but even then, the familiarity and friendliness that the black-haired kunoichi exhibited didn't seem like a lie either.

"You don't," conceded Naruto softly, proving his train of thought. "But you will," she amended in determination, giving Konan another squeeze before she let go.

Her red eyes flickered towards him, and for a moment, he swore she saw through his soul. Her doleful gaze knew everything about him, even the parts that he had yet to discover or acknowledge. It was filled with utmost sincerity that it made him regret his doubts, baffling him as the unbidden grin remained on her face.

She crossed her arms behind her back and leaned towards him, peering closer without judgment. "I haven't forgotten you either, Uzumaki Nagato," she informed with merriment.

"How did she—" his eyes widened, turning to share a look with Konan. She shrugged helplessly in equal puzzlement, already resigned to following whatever the enigmatic kunoichi planned.

Wanting to take some attention off, the Uzumaki queried hastily, "What are your intentions, Naruto-san?"

What business does a Kage level Shinobi have here? And which village is foolish enough to allow her to be alone in the times of war? He had wanted to add, but restrained himself because it would be impolite to question her lack of affiliations when she helped them.
The said ninja twirled a strand of soaked hair, ominous intent flashing as her grin thinned. "Well for starters," Naruto quipped, tugging at the ends of her hair, "I would like a bit of your time as repayment." Her short beat of silence was shadowed by a clap of thunder, and her gaze sharpened at the pair accordingly, "Alone."

*Definitely curious,* he decided, a shiver going down his spine.

…

Water dripped from the ends of her hair and trailed off her limbs as she stood awkwardly in the doorway, watching the droplets of water stain the wooden flooring. She looked like a drenched rat in an organized room, a particular sorry excuse of neglect as she tried to wring out water from her torn jumpsuit. She frowned at the tears, *I actually like this one.*

*‘How tragic,’* he commented sarcastically, although he would be glad to see the jumpsuit burn. *‘Perhaps you should cry a river about it,’* he suggested helpfully.

She scowled. 'Just because you didn't like the jumpsuit doesn't mean that I didn't.' He snorted and rolled his eyes. 'And it wasn't my fault,' she argued for her sordid appearance, chalking it up to her violent entrance.

*‘Sure.’* The fox laughed at her misery, *‘Are you going to blame the contraption for knocking out your common sense and old lessons about packing as well?’*

She gave him a stink eye at his fledging humor before sighing. *Well, my hindsight was 20/20.*

The jinchūriki fidgeted in her seat when the coarse material of the couch touched the exposed parts of her skin, her soaked, tattered ensemble hardly providing her any comfort. Discarding her self-consciousness for open curiosity, she focused on surveying the room instead. Her legs swung back and forth while she took in the warm feeling that the house brought, surprisingly humble for the leaders of a growing organization.

A faint nostalgic scent hit her nose when she inhaled deeply, causing her to smile bittersweetly when she realized the mark that her Ero-sennin left on the trio as well. The flip in and flip out cards on the installed shelf near the door – and their instinctual habit to use it – did not go unnoticed by her. His practices were deeply embedded in the Ame Orphans and she could see the imperceptible influence of Jiraiya everywhere around the house that he once resided. She choked back a giggle that almost slipped past her lips when she saw the familiar drawing of a toad on the cards, something that was so characteristic of only one gallant man.

*I could probably find a toad suit in the house if I tried hard enough,* she mused.

Her musings were cut short when a folded fabric intercepted her vision, startling her slightly before she accepted it graciously. Naruto wrapped the blanket around her shoulder, cozying up against it and allowing it to absorb moisture from her cold skin.

Her host settled three cups of steaming hot tea down on the table before she sat on the opposite couch next to her red-haired companion. "Shall we begin our business proper?" Konan proposed.

"Sure," Naruto replied, her back straightening subconsciously. "But before I voice my true intentions —"she reached towards her lower back to deactivate the *Henge* seal – "will you allow a dying woman to tell you her story?"

Her feigned appearance melted away like snow in turbid heat and was replaced by blonde hair and
inked, tan skin. The lines seemed more alive while it halted slightly above her wrists, its spirals still complicated such that it almost hid her exotic birthmarks. Her smile was like jagged glass as she revealed herself; her outward expression incongruous with the true emotions that was in turmoil inside. *I'm running on borrowed time.* The kunoichi's lids were purposefully crinkled shut to pull off false happiness, a trick she learnt from a certain scarecrow because sometimes she felt like the only way she could project her old self was through carefully constructed acts.

"Just who are you?" whispered Nagato, his Uzumaki blood screaming at the ingenious and terrifying designs that decorated her surface. He felt compelled to study the conception that stained her skin, eager to seal away the abomination that she created and wary to know her story as to why it forced her down this road. This road of taboo that only madmen dared to tread, because his exalted eyes informed him the treacherous nature of the opus that she embodied.

"My name is Uzumaki Naruto," she repeated sincerely, although she knew that it wasn't what the pair wanted to hear. She took the initiative to stretch her hand out towards her relative this time, "And there are some things better left untold, and some, that are better shown."

She conjured tangible chakra in her palms that weaved around her fingers like a breeze before she sent it flying towards the direction of the inconspicuous privacy seals that were pasted on the walls. And throughout the entire process, her outstretched hand never wavered. "And all I ask of you is for your time."

The said man chose to respond by placing his hand in hers, cold fingers slipping across heated skin to grasp her properly. He sucked in a breath when an entire sequence of images hit him, information of every facet flooding his mind from the most basic senses to the full worldview through her eyes and her memory.

She apologized in her head for burdening him with the thought of his own future, dredging up the memories from the time she landed in the middle of the Konoha he leveled with his power, concaving the ground into an empty gorge, making the old structures obsolete.

One by one, she laid them bare in front of him, refusing to censor that the actions that had yet to come to existence. She showed him the fight that she engaged him in viciously for the home that he destroyed. She made him see the bodies he carelessly used because he could, treating them like rag dolls and tools in pursuit of his own twisted ideals. The helplessness she felt when she was nailed with chakra manipulators and watching the Hyuga Heiress save her when she trained so hard so she would never feel like that again, and the loud thuds of her body slamming into the ground with a flick of his finger.

Naruto made him feel the anger and sadness that overwhelmed her that day, allowing her darkness to overcome her, and the bloodied hatred that got her absolutely nowhere. She was so angry at everything that she almost gave in to the beast and allowed him to go on a rampage, which would have led to even greater destruction. She told him the greatest lessons that their teacher wanted to impart on them and it was to let go of the hate – to end the vicious cycle that they were perpetually trapped in when they sought for vengeance – because that was the only way they could finally try and understand each other's pain. She gave him a view of how low and gaunt he sunk for the sake of accomplishment, and his faithful partner that stayed next to him even till the end, no matter his appearance or status. She thanked him for his sacrifice to bring those that were lost back to life and ultimately – she showed him hope, the light at the end of the dark tunnel, something that was worth fighting for.

"Is this my fate?" he asked emotionlessly, finality edging his tone when the viewing diminished to black.
"It was, 'ttebane," Naruto said with much poignancy. "But it doesn't have to be," she squeezed his hand reassuringly. Konan looked at the conversing pair with uncertainty, sparing a glance at her exhausted friend.

"It's fine to trust her," confirmed Nagato, retracting his hand from her grasp. "She means no harm and her intentions are benevolent." Or else she would never have returned. He added as an afterthought, wondering how much internal strength the woman before him possessed.

"Can I have your promise that Konan will not be harmed?"

"I never back out from my words," the time-traveler swore, her blue eyes cool like the frigid sea. "I will ensure her safety but her decisions will not be held accountable by me."

He nodded in acquiesce. "What is you intend to have me do?" he questioned.

Naruto folded her hands on her lap, her gaze intense. "Memory is a dangerous thing, Nagato. It can be a blessing but more often than not," she sighed, "it is a curse. And while I have willingly shown you, I cannot allow you to change the course of events."

His body acted up slightly in protest. "Why can't you let me change it?"

"Because I'm running on limited time," she elaborated, gesturing at the ink that receded to her wrists. "If I let you change everything, it could breed even more calamity. Your participation in the entire plot is necessary due to your Rinnegan – that doesn't actually belong to you, in case you weren't aware – and I aim to minimize the damage."

He quirked an eyebrow, "Even if it meant sacrificing those that people all over again?"

"Even if it meant that." Naruto's gaze became even more resolute. "I've considered this many times, Nagato." Her eyebrows furrowed as she spoke. "I would rather lose the same people again –"a lump formed in her throat as she recalled the previous deaths – "than pursue an idealistic world where I might end up saving none. If it is to persuade you, my only guarantee is that you and Konan will be alive when the arc ends."

"You must understand I can't let things change," she pleaded. "Your final involvement is the last trigger before the new war and I don't ever want to see it end the same way," she rasped, voice full of contempt. The pair's faces visibly paled at her declaration. The prospect of another war when they were currently caught in the middle of one was a terrible thought.

Konan swallowed audibly. "Another war you say?"

Her fists clenched at the remembrance of the cataclysm, "Yes."

"Is it unpreventable?" Her sorrowful eyes gave them their answer.

"Then I never had a choice to begin with, did I?" Nagato said in resignation. He didn't even try to change her mind, knowing that she would never take 'no' for an answer. She didn't come back to be rejected and from her taut posture, she was willing to make him submit to her by force if necessary. His relative had the grace of adorning a thin, apologetic smile of her own.

May as well save myself some pain and go along with it, especially if it's for the better good.

"So what do you need me to do?"

"Give me an hour or so and some of your blood," she requested simply, tossing to him an empty ink
bottle. "I'll also need some space for the seal layout and your undivided cooperation."

The Uzumaki obeyed despondently as he snatched the bottle from the air, twirling a kunai in his other hand. He slashed his open palm lightly and allowed the crimson to pool, not allowing a single drop to spill over as he poured it into the container. She smiled appreciatively when he threw the corked bottle back at her before she followed Konan into an empty room.

And as if she was a woman possessed once more, she started moving the moment she was left to her own devices. The kunoichi pulled out a blue scroll and unfurled it, her fingers swiping over several portions of the open scroll. Papers fell on the floor in a uniformed manner, every piece perfectly aligned with no gaps in between.

Her trusty brush appeared in her grasp just as she threw the scroll to the corner with a soft thud, her shoes and jacket treated similarly when she decided that it was a hindrance to her art. She measured the entire width and length she could use, the blank canvas already filled with innumerable details in her mind and the end goal completely in her sight. In the quietness that was unlike the knuckle-headed Shinobi, she worked with an almost fanatical intensity, her arms constantly in motion as she drew out her plans. With every segment, she improved the seal array, running through the process of trial and error and adding further ramifications to the gnarly seal.

The old standard became her own as she added her distinctions, even procuring vials of blood from another scroll at some point and added it to the seal. Deep in her extreme concentration, she didn't even notice when the pair entered the room and settled themselves down in a corner to watch, eyes wide with inexplicable fascination as they watched her work.

It was exquisite; the Akatsuki members concluded as they watched the master design the intricate seal painstakingly, her brush strokes only pausing to dip her apparatus in ink. Her Fūinjutsu made her physical prowess pale when it came to delicacy and unique art, to the extent it was almost magical to see the smooth lines develop from capricious hands. The world was blind and dead to her as she immersed herself in her craft, slowly working her way out from the core.

This was the element of the Uzumaki; surrounded by paper and ink, wholly content with the propensity to create. No matter normal goods of preservation or deadly ones that brought about ruin, they were feared for their ingenuity. And with their extended life expectancy from their powerful blood and lineage, they possessed the time and health to become a virtuoso.

"Do you understand what she is making?" whispered Konan in awe, her voice low as if she was afraid that she might distract the specialist.

"It's a memory seal at its basis," Nagato responded. "But the extra details that she incorporates that truly matters."

They sunk back into pleasurable silence for what must have been hours, strangely never tiring from watching their guest work. They stiffened when she rose from her hunched position like a feline, her back arching as she stretched her limbs outward. Audible sounds of bone popping reverberated around the room as she held the position for a moment before she refocused on the pair.

"Good timing," Naruto greeted, unaware of their presence previously.

Her stained fingers beckoned the future leader of Akatsuki forward, and he followed as if he was in a trance. He settled before her in the empty space of her seal, staring back at cerulean blues that were engulfed by a spectrum of negative emotions. Nagato wondered if doing this would ease her heart as his gaze flickered towards her exposed limbs, studying the ink that barely moved.
She shadowed him from the light that hung overhead, and now his vision was concentrated at her chest. He gazed up instinctively with mauve cheeks to look at her bare throat, his head shifting upwards to her touch as she brushed away the locks of red hair that covered his forehead. It felt weirdly comforting to be in her caress like he was under her steady protection, his mundane problems suddenly inconsequential under her nurturing. She painted a simple symbol on his temple, allowing the blood to dry under the aid of her own heated chakra before she placed her chapped lips against the mark.

"This will only hurt a little if you do not try to fight it," she murmured, replacing her lips with a thumb, pressing down on the symbol. Her other hand formed a series of half-seals proficiently. But this pain will be temporary compared to what you have to face later, she mourned woefully. Figure flaming with chakra as she empowered the seal, her regret was secondary in the entire process. But nonetheless, she still apologized. I'm so sorry that you still have to suffer.

'I hope you understand what you intend to undertake,' the Kyuubi deplored after hours of silence, dragging her into the mindscape for an impromptu conversation. His host remained silent at his need for dialogue, her fist enclosed as her eyes refused to rise from the tiled grounds.

'You are going to burn out the time you have with this seal, kit,' he began, trying to make her see sense. You are attempting to power this seal for two odd decades until the infernal event comes to pass,' he bemoaned. You are giving up the chance to see them for the last time. Are you going to allow yourself waste away without seeing the village that you swore to protect even once?

'I don't have time to think otherwise, 'ttebane.' her voice broke grievously. 'Pain's invasion is an important event. It sent baa-chan into a coma and elevated Danzo into power. It damaged us from the roots and if we can stop it, we can have a better fighting chance against Madara. It would mean keeping Nagato out of his grasp and Jiraiya alive-

'You could have stopped Akatsuki from rising, that you cannot deny,' interjected the Kyuubi sharply. 'You still can.' He knew her plans and the multitude of ways that the event could go but she always managed to stupefy him to silence by choosing the worst given the time she had.

'And then to what end?' she thundered back with equal ferocity. 'Allow an even more dangerous organization to rise to do Madara's bidding? Or should we stick to what we know? We handled the organization well previously, they can do it again.'

'I know that we are capable of dealing with the Akatsuki in due time. The village while hardheaded, is not weak. But you lie to yourself when you pretend that the deaths of mortals like Sarutobi Asuma don't weigh on your mind heavily,' he accused blithely. The intended Nanadaime Hokage flinched as she recalled Yuuhi Kurenai raising their child fatherless – the same child that died later in the war when Madara decided to spare no village.

He continued to dig deeper into her wounds. You regret each death more with each passing day and you blame yourself for your powerlessness and how everything could have been better. You feel as if this suicidal ploy is not enough and you intend to show your bogus repentance by denying yourself the euphoria of seeing your family again despite being on death's door.

'The seal doesn't need that much chakra to power it for a long period of time,' she argued weakly.

'And what if it does?' he questioned back scathingly, his eyes crimson as he glared at her. While it is large under my influence, it does not mean that you have the capacity to use it so sparingly. Your current limits are based off what you had when you first arrived to this timeline and your reserves..."
were scant at best. This will kill you and you subconsciously know that as well.'

'It'll be fine,' Naruto spoke with uncertainty as if she was trying to convince herself more than the beast. 'It'll be fine,' she repeated, her voice wavering.

The interaction in reality only happened for a few short seconds, long enough for the seal to start working as it should. Shakily, she delved into Nagato's mind and sealed away specific parts of his memory, careful to not retard his senses. The man groaned audibly underneath her touch as his forehead glowed, falling into deep unconsciousness to save himself.

Taking three cleansing breaths before she proceeded with the next step, she drew the words from paper and into his mind, keying specific chakra signatures as its switch. The next segment of the seal came soon after without pause and she watched with labored breaths as the ink on her surface started crawling up her arms and below her mesh armor unseen. She felt the slow drain from her system as she invested her energy to preserve the seal, counting up the seconds to years as a faint itch rose beneath her skin.

'That is enough, Naruto. You need to stop.'

The itch beneath her skin became a tad bit worse. Naruto ignored the warning, determined to make the seal last a few more years just in case.

The beast growled at her defiance and forcefully detached her from the seal. The loss of connection made her jolt back from Nagato as if she was burned, her hands trembling with blistering red against her own free will.

'I have given you my counsel and yet you refuse to listen.' his voice was earth-shattering in her mind, 'While the previous incidents had its own sound logic, what you run on now is impertinence and foolishness at its extreme. If you are so interested in repentance, I will grant you what you seek.' hissed the Kyuubi icily and left her to silence.

Her vision blurred momentarily when he left her to bear the consequences on her own, her exertion and fatigue claiming the fringes of her mind. Her chest heaved while she coped with the strain; her head swooned from the oncoming pain.

"Naruto-san," Konan called out in alarm, catching the frail specialist who nearly fell backwards. "Are you okay?"

The said kunoichi forced a smile on her pale lips. "I'm okay," she reassured hoarsely, clapping her mouth with her hand to stop the bile from rising up her throat. She swallowed back the rancid taste before she spoke again, answering to the double meaning in the blue-haired kunoichi's question. "Nagato will come around soon, rest assured. Everything went as planned, 'ttebane!"

Her false cheer did not convince her acquaintance who continued to rub her back in soothing circles, uncaring about the heat that she was emitting.

"I need to go before Nagato wakes up."

Despite her declaration, Naruto permitted her body a few minutes to recover its equilibrium before she raised herself to her feet with Konan shadowing her cautiously, walking slowly towards the personal effects she tossed sloppily to the side. Noticing that her jacket was mended and folded neatly on the ground, she picked her jacket and slipped it on, her cerulean eyes full of gratitude as she gazed at her hostess.
"It would be best if you don't remember me either, Konan," stated the blonde lady seriously.

She shook her head demurely in response. "I'm not the one that knows more than she should have, Naruto-san. As long as I don't bring this meeting up, I think I'll be fine. Do you need an escort out of the village?"

"I'd be better off on my own," she said dryly before cringing at the formal address. "And calling me Naruto is enough."

"Naruto-chan," Konan allowed. "Will we be meeting you in the future then?" she asked tentatively albeit hopefully.

Naruto paused at her honest query, slightly surprised that she would even ask. "Probably not," she finally admitted after much contemplation. "This will probably be the last that you will see of me."

The reminder that her time was limited brought up a sudden compulsion in her that she desperately tried to turn a blind eye to since the time she arrived, and she bowed her head deeply at Konan impulsively, her hair falling over her shoulders. "I'm so sorry," were the first words that slipped from her lips. "I'm so sorry," the time-traveler attempted to convey her broken sincerity in her voice. "For making you face the difficult times that you will face in your future. For making you lose the person you love. For making you watch your friend descend into darkness. She grieved."It's my fault for not helping you better."

Naruto couldn't face the grey eyes that actually understood her vague words despite the fact that she had never shown the Akatsuki leader her recollections. She couldn't help the guilt that wrenched her heart painfully at the thought that she was going to allow history to repeat itself for her selfishness to stay true to the plot, terrified to diverge in fear an undesirable aftermath.

Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto blamed herself more than anyone else because she knew that there were different solutions which she denied. She knew the truth of the ancient's words more than she would care to admit, knowing that she purposely inflicted onto herself to feel something rather than nothing at all. But the one who had to pay the most ultimately wasn't her, but the clueless Konan who was loyal and stood by it all.

Unable to help herself, she fled the house at her fastest pace, not even offering a farewell to the lady who looked so lost at her hasty disappearance, wondering if she had wronged her in any way.

Konan left the door unlocked, just in case.

…

_Gears can be removed,_

_But this one remains;_

_With a small crank,_

_It begins (again)._
She swung herself from tree to tree like an agile monkey, her hair flying wildly with the erratic wind, her trademark grin apparent on her face. She breathed in the quintessence of nature – moving in rhythm with it – as she ran, climbed and ventured the maze, moving in the general direction of east. Every step she took was in its free-form while she maneuvered the trees, her steps never rustling the leaves as she merely brushed past, allowing the dead matter to continue rotting in a singular spot.

Born and bred in the expansive scenery, Naruto loved the tall trees and the short shrubbery that surrounded her home, encasing it in its vibrant colors and hiding it under its ingenious canopy. The forest offered it protection in disguise while they worshiped the Earth, bringing about civilization in the dense, green world.

The treetops were shorter than she remembered, but she thought nothing of it since they would be a decade older when she was born. She was just elated to that she could immerse in the nature that she was used to, soaking in its humid heat, moisture and the forestry paths, the place where had invested much of her youth exploring. While other sceneries were equally appealing, this was her home.

Desire danced within her crystalline blue eyes, every fiber of her being imagining Konoha reverted back to its former glory before all the different disasters struck it. She has been through a lot, she ruminated, thinking back about Kyuubi's Attack, Orochimaru's attempt at a takeover, Pain's invasion and Madara's ploy.

Her stomach lurched when she realized that she was directly involved in all the incidents. With each calamity she lost and gained, watching her village fall and rise and return to ashes once more.

Twelve more miles, her mind distracted, pushing her yearning feet forward one at a time.

The itch beneath her skin became stronger. Things will be different, Naruto swore.

Eleven, it taunted, prickling relentlessly at her brain.

The closing distance made everything seem okay.

Ten—she retched, her chakra circulation suddenly cut short before it jerked to a start again, flooding through her energy channels like an unstoppable flood, causing her body to react violently to the change.

Naruto nearly keeled over the moment's deprivation, her bearings lost as she stumbled, barely able to find support with her tanto pushed to the ground. Blood spluttered out of her mouth as she was reduced to a fit of coughs, her knuckles sickly white as she clutched onto her weapon, desperately trying to stop herself from falling.
The growing itch started to get worse. She gasped at the burning pain and the heightening intensity, like someone doused even more oil to fuel the fire. She was fucking burning. Her skin was boiling – torn asunder – her muscles torqueing as it respired, fighting the seal that was determined to eliminate anything that lived.

"Fuck," she choked out. The word repeated itself. One of her legs gave way and she stumbled.

*Make it stop,* a small shriek surfaced from the back of her throat.

More blood stained the soil as another mouthful rose from her tortured systems, her skeletal structure grinding against one another with the muscles that pressed heavily against bones.

She collapsed onto the ground screaming, her fingers digging into her chest and pressing onto her hot ribs. Red tears were streaming down her eyes as she screamed again, body hunched over pathetically and trying to breathe. Black words started dancing, as did her vision.

Relief came from another source as it tided over her chaotic system, an achingly familiar presence that originally left her to silence. It shrouded over her chakra like a soothing blanket, turning down the pain to a tolerable edge. Her pants was the only sound that she could heard, each inhale and exhale loud as it was accompanied by a wet splatter.

*You need to get to somewhere more isolated, NOW.* The Kyuubi roared out the last word in urgency.

"But—" the kunoichi protested through gurgled gasps, her limbs trembling as she tried to crawl towards her home.

*Brat, this is not the time to be arguing,* he hissed, eyes smoldering with undiluted fury. *If you do not put more distance between you and Konoha, you could risk it getting caught in the radius of your side-effects.*

*I'm going to die.*

Unable to formulate another reply or doubt his words, she followed his command through the heightening pain, getting up unsteadily and falling again. Her struggles repeated itself as she stumbled every few steps, making slow progress to find shelter from natural structure while trying to not tear at her own skin. No matter pit holes or roots that she tripped over or rolled, she kept moving, leaving a desperate blood trail while she put more distance between her destructive form and the home she loved. Her head pounded while her beast undertook the task of blunting the agony, although each step she took felt like she was stepping on a field of shards.

Letting out an inarticulate sound, she blew up a huge boulder with the rolling chakra in her hand, hollowing it into a minimalistic, slipshod cave. The kunoichi collapsed into the cavity as a miserable mess of limbs, another strangled moan slipping from her lips while she tried to cut off the pain. Animalistic claw marks were left in her nail's wake as she dug her hands into the soil, writhing like a poisoned animal without its fix. The coolness of the ground did nothing to soothe the lava in her veins, a war engaged between two origins that fought for dominance.

One tried to save her while the other still destroyed, the latter's warpath unstoppable as it tried to eradicate her existence.

The fox grimaced as he ameliorated the threat that wanted to run amok, buying his host precious seconds that might be her last. He growled involuntarily as another defense that he built up broke, the change forcing itself through while he was knee-deep in regret.
Why did everything have to end like this? He asked morosely, wondering if wanting one mortal to be happy was too optimistic a demand for a demon to ask. The girl had nothing left – her home, her friends, her reason for living was ripped away from her – and now Death wanted to steal from her the only thing that she did have: Life.

The Kyuubi no Kitsune knew that he would continue to exist for eons to come but she was inconsequential, becoming as irrelevant as her schemes that would never come to fruition. He could reform as long as his chakra existed (and it always will) but she would merely decompose back into nature, just as her predecessors did. It was truly regrettable that all the time she invested into her creation only resulted in her own destruction.

Yes, just another in the void, he thought pitifully for the first time as he watched the last barricade slowly break.

Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto was one of the only humans that intrigued him, and perhaps, she would be the last. She, who was once his hope for humanity, could no longer exist.

"Just—"Naruto suddenly grated out with effort—"Just let it go, Kurama."

They both knew it was the end of the line for her. She was resigned to her death while he was the unwilling contender – an awful twist of fate – struggling to salvage the little time life gave her in scraps. He let out a growl of indignation.

I won't let it end like this. He held up the defenses with greater fervor.

The jinchūriki's forehead knocked against his snout in their shared mindscape, her gaze filled with adoration he couldn't comprehend. Lifting her head to place a chaste kiss on his snout, she gave him her personal brand of a bruising sweet grin and spoke. 'Thank you for sticking with me for all these years even though I was an idiot at times. Thank you for everything, Kurama.'

He didn't know where she found gratitude from, but he wasn't sure he could ask without sounding bland. He couldn't ask without having damnable regret erode his mood and she didn't deserve to see that in her last stretch. But a moment of hesitation was all that it needed. The Kyuubi no Kitsune stared helplessly at his vessel as the last defense broke and the blues, blacks and reds consume her once more.

In the blinding light, colors shown out of the shallow cave while the dweller started screaming again. The sound tore out from her throat one after another without a pause and in varying degrees, some bone-chilling and hoarse. Her body rebelled against her with red matter oozing out of every pore on her skin, seeping into the dark soil or coagulating. Too overwhelmed to even form a plea for her life, her insides clenched tightly while her limbs twitched and swung in reckless abandon. Chakra pulsed out of her in sickly dark hues, words scattered within it and some crawling across her skin and embedding deeper into flesh. With red-colored skin and matted crimson hair, she looked like a zombie, although her heart disputed the fact as it pulsed at a furious speed in attempt to keep up with the alterations. She tore at her oversized clothes in a spasm. She screamed in agony as she raked at her own face and limbs, her back arching while she tried to cope with the pain.

She felt like she couldn't breathe because it physically hurt to. She couldn't think because her brain felt like it became a sick science experiment with the jabbing it was placed under. It was an excruciating feeling to have the blistering heat reach her right down to her bones and endure it being pounded into paste – or the only way she could describe in her haze – and feel like her energy channels were ruthlessly razed to nothing.

It was excruciating to work against the torturous current of torridity, because it wasn't gentle like her
beast's – no – Kurama's chakra always protected her, this ripped her into shreds and attacked her mind, wrecking so much havoc that she couldn't even differentiate time, like each second dragged out into infinity.

And when the unforgiving, insufferable side-effect reached its apex, her shriek cut right into its crescendo, sheeting over her with its terrible intensity and her consciousness collapsed.

Konoha was a disaster zone.

Craters upon craters laid waste in the main village, houses disintegrated into pieces while some burnt with inferno's heat. The Hokage's office was reduced to rubble, its entire structure demolished with parts of its metal frame jutting out, the symbol of authority dismantled and extirpated.

The Hokage's Monument was in similar despair, the stoic faces that once stood proudly now a hollowed wall. Segments of their visage laid scattered below, disfigured beyond recognition, their eyes a blank, pupil-less state of horror.

Yells of terror echoed in each street where white figures ran rampant, driven by the single motivation to kill every life. Demolition was their secondary objective but they achieved both aims concurrently, their undirected movements bringing ruin in their deadly pursuit. Dead villagers, her own kin – the kunoichi's heart wrenched – littered the ground as corpses, foaming, organs gorged and tendons exposed, their limbs hanging carelessly next to them. Others were choking out their last breaths as they drowned in their own blood, holding onto wounds that were bigger than their palms.

Naruto didn't know who shrieked in staggering anger first. All she remembered was the enraged snarl that she produced in the midst of the madness, her heart pounding in her ears, infuriated – livid – at the scene of carnage. Shikamaru's barks of command, loud and emotional, so unlike the lazy strategist was faint in her ears, her eyes incredibly red with bloodlust as her chest heaved up and down violently.

Her blood ached for their demise. Her beast agreed as it stood on his fours, roaring out for vengeance and for her to live up to his namesake of a demon. She only remembered that she summoned enough clones for her to feel the drain in which all of them simultaneously shouted for the hordes of Zetsu's death, energy spiraling in her hand before she sent it flying. She doesn't know which of the Konoha 12 hopped into action next – she frankly didn't care, her own emotions fuelled by their bloodlust as well, feeling their anger boil over and seeking to unleash the power that gave them their collective title.

The Konoha 12 was to be feared. And Madara and his cronies would pay twelve hundredfold.

They tore through the destroyed streets and foes, ruthless in execution as their Hi no Ishi burnt in fury. They covered areas in seconds, pulling off a myriad of brutal combinations with chakra flaring brightly back and forth. Sounds of consecutive palms and kicks colliding resonated throughout the streets. Subhuman roars and the sound of buzzing followed soon after, with large puffs of smoke appearing that signified their own summons. A barrage of weapons flew in an intricate pattern, woven in with large hands crushing enemies within their grip, an odd dark shadow linked to it and a platinum blonde deep in concentration pressing her hand on the head of the origin.

But even when they eradicated the threat, there were no cheers. There were no celebrations other than the howls of despair and the looming failure, because the ruined landscape refused to let them
forget. It etched in their minds what devastation look like in a plethora of colors, and the disturbing, empty stares of the villagers who had to experience the invasion.

And the worst blow perhaps, came in a form of a broken child and a mother who cradled her still life in her arms.

"You were too late," Kurenai said in an anguished whisper as they towered over her seated, small frame. "You were too late," she shook, running her hand through unruly black locks with quivering fingers, her tears streaming uncontrollably in her eyes.

"She was my last hope—"choked the Genjutsu mistress between sobs, bringing her child's head to the crook of her neck—"she was my last connection to him." She embraced her pale, mangled child tighter, her arms wrapped around it protectively. Her harrowed red eyes swept over every single Shinobi that she witnessed grow up; forcing them to look at her honestly and she delivered the heart-shattering ultimatum.

"And you failed to protect her, the future of our village. We failed to do what we sworn. What Hi no Ishi? What will is there to uphold when this might be the retribution for our sins?" Her miserable laughter rang out with her heartbreak. "Isn't it ironic that we always have something stolen from us because we steal from others?" One hand clasped onto half of her face as her frame shook. "Do we ever win?"

Kurenai expected no answer from her questions. She returned her attention to the deceased; rocking her poor toddler back and forth, urging and hoping it awake. She wept even harder, her hoarse cries undisguised as she kept trying, refusing to get up even when her own students tried to persuade. They hugged her and they grieved, attempting to stay strong for her but damn it all – it was hard. They couldn't be strong when they had all lost, and no matter how they could wish and pray to whatever deities that was still listening, dead was still dead.

No matter how hard the mother tried, orbs of the same red will never open.

And the next day, the sensei of Team 8 was found dead.

. .

"Reporting in urgently, Hokage-sama," relayed Eagle, falling onto his knees respectfully before his superior.

The said person waved his hand slightly, not bothering to look up from the mission scroll that he was perusing, "At ease. What is the report, Eagle?"

"Kibana no Sato that was attacked by Iwakagure at 0000 hours on October 15 received unknown assistance at 0125 hours today."

Hiruzen raised his head in surprise. "Unknown assistance…?" He tested the words carefully, doubt clouding his mind. While he wanted to ask more, there were priorities that he needed to attend to first, "Casualties?"

"Civilian casualties number at ten, Hokage-sama."

A blessed low number, he noted, "Enemies?"

His operative seemed to hesitate, as if to properly recall or confirm the information he received. "The
entire Iwakagure Squadron was eliminated, sir. All 24 corpses were accounted for and most of them died by the sword."

He leaned forward with interest, "And what of this… unknown assistance?"

"That is the troubling part of the report," Eagle confessed, rare emotion seeping into his professionalism. "The civilians we managed to question reported that there was only one long black-haired, red-eyed swordswoman who eliminated all of the Iwa-nins. They reported that she finished them in less than ten minutes and left."

"Were there any signs of struggles in the time span?"

"Most strikes were fatal enough to kill eventually, Hokage-sama. The unknown subject dispatched them effectively."

"How curious," he pondered with keen interest.

The door to the Hokage's office abruptly slammed open with another Shinobi ambling in, looking like a muddy mess. The Jōnin saluted hastily, his chest moving noticeably as he tried to regain his breath, "Reporting in, Hokage-sama!"

"What is it?" said the Hokage, propping his arms on the table and interlocking his fingers, eyes glinting with amusement as he shared a brief look with his protesting secretary.

"Our border patrols have found a girl with black hair in a cave ten miles out westwards, Hokage-sama," accounted the new Shinobi dutifully. "We found her passed out and bleeding profusely when we reached her after hearing her screams. We have deemed her a neutral party since she has no visible affiliations and only has a tanto equipped. How should we proceed?"

The Hokage looked at his elite soldier in alarm. He pushed away some of the scrolls on his table to reveal a map, his fingers immediately tracing westwards towards Kibana no Sato. This is too much to be a coincidence, he quickly deduced, his mind's machinations turning to reach the most suitable solution.

"Retrieve the girl," he ordered, silencing Eagle's bodily objection. "Tend to her wounds and place her under lockdown in the T&I hospital division. If there is any information involving the girl, I want it on my table ASAP. And notify me when she is awake and I will be there to judge if we should continue with the normal procedures. Until then, no direct actions or harm should come onto the girl. You are dismissed."

"Yes, Hokage-sama!" reacted both ninjas simultaneously, their tone crisp.

…

Darkness eclipsed her consciousness.

It shrouded her like thick blinds that cut off her perception, hearing and touch, leaving her a vegetable with an active mind.

Death is a certainly interesting experience, Naruto sarcastically thought, attempting to twitch a single finger but to no avail. She was paralyzed as she floated aimlessly on a bottomless standing pool, the waters weirdly tranquil and warm on her skin.

Or perhaps I'm drowning in suspended liquid? She guessed with aberrant fascination a few moments later. The girl received no answers to her inane question, utterly alone in the endless space that she
couldn't move or speak.

The absence of sound or light suited neither her morbid assumptions of atonement nor the ideas of freezing cold or blazing fire that other conceived, because death now seemed like a blank and boring slate that lacked entertainment, even if it came in the form of torture. Her only company was pitch, black darkness and the strange emptiness in her gut, where she could not find a single soul in her premise and only answering silence.

*But perhaps, her mind haunted, I am meant to be alone.*

What most often neglected was that only in tame, unmoving waters could pests breed. It was the pestilential silence that caused many good men mad in their sleep. It was where there was too much time to contemplate and relieve, to regret every action in different perspectives, providing too much space in the endless void to corrupt what her sanity tried to safe keep.

It was the poor reminder of the chair that was carelessly knocked aside in the cozy nursery, next to the crib that cried out no life. Or the legs that dangled off the ground, swinging back and forth in a soft pendulum with the wind that wailed from the open window like a banshee. It was routing the trickle of blood and spit upwards to an awkwardly tilted head that inclined to the opposite side of the knot, her visage blue with the symptoms of oxygen deprivation. It was to trace the ligature marks on the snapped neck, the coils of sturdy rope wrapping around the frail structure leading towards the hook on the ceiling, and to meet protruding red eyes that once fought for breath.

The dark hair of death's recent possession often transmuted to a different person, into one that fought to save her and sacrificing herself in the process. Each palm strike in its unique sequence would abruptly expire mid-way, unable to hold back the blitz of dry, husk-like figures that ripped her apart. The same lilac eyes, no veins burgeoning, would become another person with a large, gaping hole in his chest when the wooden splinter was removed, using her body as support because his own body no longer had the strength or substance to.

The stillness tormented her because it reminded her of another cold day in the morgue where she committed pale features to her mind, letting her fingers wonder, and the sound of tolling bells that still rang in her ears in the quiet. It reminded her of the dark tent she isolated herself to, of the funerals she stopped attending, the speeches she stopped giving *because she was so tired of having to say that she lost them* and the graves she had to dig, the names she had to carve on the memorial because one became two and *two became more and more until they needed more space* –

Her heart wrenched painfully at the thought.

If not for the tremor within her chest and the pounding outside of the abyssal darkness, she would have been sucked into the repeat. She would have been stuck in a perpetual review of death and aftermath, until her sanity became worthless. If not for the crack on the shell of her void that allowed light to seep in, and the deep, feral tone that yelled…

Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto wouldn't have believed that she was still alive.

'*Wake up, you worthless mortal. It is about time to meet your maker, considering how long you take to drown in your sorrows.'*

She really wished that the deities killed his sense of humour at least.

---

The room smelt heavily of disinfectant and medicine. Her sensitive nose wrinkled at the stench that pervaded the room, displeased by the fact that they had tried to cure her of something she never had.
In the name of holy trinity of questionable Sannin, I'm seriously alive? Naruto's eyes sprung open in shock, before clenching her eyes shut. Too bright, far too bright, 'ttebane, she winced, shielding some light with her hand before exposing herself to her normal vision again.

She blinked. Wait, why are my hands so small?

The girl brought her hand closer and studied it, flipping it back and forth like a piece of meat on the grill. She used her other hand to poke at the pliant flesh, peering closer at both palms. The old calluses, the roughed up palms and knuckles were no longer there. The kunoichi resisted the urge to fondle her breasts which seemed to have shrunk as well.

"Kai," said Naruto out loud, the question apparent in her tone. The fact that nothing happened worried her, so she threatened her partner instead.

'I swear to the Sage of Six Paths I'm going to kick you into non-existence if this is a prank, rabbit-ears,' she warned, mentally glaring at her partner with the ferocity of an enraged tadpole.

"Kai!" She commanded with more force this time, trying to break the hallucination that she was trapped in. She raked her black hair in frustration—

Wait, why is my hair black as well?

An immediate conclusion came to mind: I'm going to fucking wreck him.

'KU-RA-MA!' She screeched, blonde hair blazing in the mindscape.

The fox winced, but his fixation on grinning didn't seem to recede. 'You are overreacting over a subtle Henge that I placed over you, kit. Your general proportions, however... Well, I suggest you should check the mirror when you have the time,' Kurama replied in amusement, committing her angry albeit tribal-like dance in his mind. 'You will find quite an interesting sight, if I do say so myself.'

She glared daggers at him. 'And does it look like a have goddamn mirror?' she hissed, 'This room is barer than my old apartment so I would really appreciate if you stop speaking in riddles and actually tell me what is going on, 'ttebane.'

'The cost of making business,' explained the Kyuubi simply, gesturing at her smaller frame. 'You understand that you need to use chakra to do Ninjutsu right?'

Naruto flipped him off in the mindscape; 'Because I'm not a ninja, right?' she deadpanned back in aggravation.

'Tch, mortals,' Kurama huffed out at her refusal to continue the banter, looking at his own fur uncharacteristically before meeting steely blue eyes. 'My implication is that your contraption works like every other jutsu. It requires an equivalent exchange and in this case, by sending you back in time, it required you to sacrifice the time in you.'

She pressed her hands to her chest, whispering, "No way."

'There clearly is a way, since you are the prime example for it.' He cackled madly. 'You should be grateful that you can relieve your time as an eight year old.'

'EIGHT YEAR OLD!?' She yelled, tugging on her own blonde hair. "I am a twenty-two year old woman, 'ttebane! I haven't been eight for Sannin knows how many years and you—' she stabbed an
accusatory finger in his direction—'want me to relieve the years of my powerlessness?' she ranted. 'And stop laughing you stupid rabbit-eared, overgrown, human-eating fox!'

'I would appreciate if you stop insulting the lifestyle choices that I am no longer allowed to indulge in. Human meat was an acquired taste,' he clicked his tongue dismissively.

'That's not the damn point, 'ttebane!'

His eyes twinkled with glee. 'Is this the fabled temper tantrum that you mortals speak of?'

'Is this the idiocy that you have culminated to after millenniums?' She countered back, dangling on the verge of screaming.

'Ah, what a wondrous discovery of your youth. It does become of you, kit.'

'I'm going to feed your flesh to the toads,' Naruto snarled, her hands itching to throw something at the beast.

'How terrifying,' he mocked.

'You insufferable shit!' she yelled, her fists clenching with conflicting emotions, unsure whether she wanted to punch the living daylights out of her partner or hug him for all the reasons that they were alive. Chances were that she was more likely to hurt her own hand if she acted on the former and the latter seemed much more appropriate.

Realization finally dawned her. Holy Sage of Six Paths, we are alive.

She was living and breathing – existing – in this world, her time extended despite the having attempted the forbidden. Here she stood against all odds, fighting with her own partner like nothing has changed, confirming the fact that she was indisputably alive. She didn't want to say that she was surprised.

It felt like a bizarre revelation that she could live even as a child when just days ago, she thought her world was going to end. She had actually believed that she was going to die and she willingly embraced it. No, she forcefully rejected, trying to be honest; I accepted it because I didn't have any other choice.

She fiddled with the hem of her shirt, taking a hesitant step forward. 'This isn't fake right?' she finally asked softly, her voice holding an unexpected quiver. 'I'm not going to wake up one day and suddenly realize that this was just a dream and nothing has changed?'

The Kyuubi no Kitsune sighed, his vermillion red eyes closing briefly. It seemed like reality had sank in for her as well. His tails beckoned her forward. 'Your fears are groundless, Naruto. Our present state is indeed amongst the living and this neither a dream nor a nightmare. I have tested all the possibilities and it seems that time has become stable for us once more. This is the reality that we have to bear. We have succeeded and we have lived.' He raised his head grandiosely. 'And it is time for you to start looking forward and consider what you want to do with the time and information you have in your hands.'

'Time.' She laughed miserably. 'Why does it feel like such a foreign concept suddenly?'

'Being on death's door does change perceptions. You are not exception to it.' He supplemented.

The said kunoichi reclined against his side and slid down mutedly. Silence stretched between them
for moments before she spoke again. 'It's nice to hear that we won't be disappearing any time soon,' she murmured. The fox grunted in agreement.

'And honestly,' she confessed, 'a bigger part of me thought that this wouldn't succeed.' Her tone was bleak. 'I didn't think that I could be given a second chance after all I have failed. It's feels wrong and surreal.' She leaned her head back, her eyes closing with a lone tear threatening to drip, 'and I admit that it scares me to see everyone again a second time.'

'What if I fail, Kurama?' The prospect scared her. 'What if I fail again?'

His tails curled around her protectively but he doesn't console her. 'There is a reason why humans are called mortals, kit. It is an euphuism for your fragility, of the time you have compared to the things that can never disappear. No one was made to last and they will still die, with or without a natural cause. You cannot prevent every death – not even I can brag about such a thing.' The ancient thinks of his departed father and his words. Death is a curious and irreversible entity, and she is often cruel just as she is merciful. Your future failures will only lead to additional claims and they will undoubtedly weigh on you heavier than the burden you already carry.'

'But we are all susceptible to mistakes. We were not created to become flawless vessels, and we were made imperfect so that triumph might be sweeter. There is no sound advice for the living;' he opined, looking out into the real world through her eyes, 'and the safest thing to do now is to take it one step at a time.'

The door to her room was unlocked and slowly pushed open to reveal a man donning the usual dark grey attire of the Torture and Investigation Force, alerting Naruto of his presence. She forced a pleasant smile on her lips and pushed herself into a sitting position to greet the interrogator respectfully.

"Good afternoon, kunoichi-san," said the man, pushing the door shut. He walked briskly to the chair in front of her bed and sat down, his eyes never straying from her face.

She swept her dark hair to one side of her shoulders with small fingers. "Good afternoon, Shinobi-san. Can I ask where I am exactly?"

"You are in Konohagakure no Sato," the man informed amicably. "Our border patrol members found you ten miles out and you were in desperate need for medical attention."

Tactical answer, the kunoichi noted. "I see, then I must thank you for your hospitality," her gaze shifted towards the blank white wall in front of her, "or perhaps I should say it to the people behind these walls?"

Unfazed, the man merely laughed, echoing the thoughts of his superiors unknowingly, "You are quite observant and mature beyond your years, kunoichi-san."

The spike in his chakra, however, did not go unmissed by the said girl. "Thank you for the compliment." Her false smile remained on her face. "Have I outstayed my welcome, Shinobi-san?"

"Never," he answered too quickly. "May we ask you a few questions?"

"I am not in the position to reject."

"What is your name, kunoichi-san?"

"I prefer if you call me 'kunoichi-san' rather than anything else," she deflected.
Her interrogator moved on, "Age?"

"T-Eight."

"Your affiliations?"

"I have none," she told him. Not yet anyway. "I would presume that you are privy to that information, after having searched through my personal effects." Naruto tilted her head to the side, her stare still fixated on the wall instead of the man. "Although I must warn you that attempting to open the scrolls might lose you a hand."

Her interrogator rose to the threat. "And why are you so sure about that?"

"I made those seals," she replied simply. "It will only respond to my blood and only I hold the configuration to opening it. Naturally, I would place extreme consequences on those who intrude on my privacy."

Somewhere, a poor Chūnin was being tended to for having second degree burns.

"And what were your intentions in approaching our borders?"

"Would you prefer the truth or the lie?" She deferred.

"Both."

"Then I have come to seek refuge from the walls of Konoha. My secondary intentions, however, are not for your ears." She leaned forward towards him, her stature hardly posing a threat to the male. Her low tone on the other hand, was a different matter, "Because if I told you, I would have to kill you."

Her emphasis made the man flinch. It evoked fear with its refined threat, its thin bloodlust speaking tales of dead men that once fell before her feet.

"But you have nothing to fear, do you not?" She continued airily, resuming her original position. "You have chakra suppression seals all over the walls, and any attempt to externalize my own would only result in my death. The seal you placed on my back is an ingenious creation; a repeater implanted in the seal and made to amplify my own chakra to kill me, should I use it."

The one red eye that was not covered by her black hair glinted dangerously. "And I would like to dissuade you from achieving answers through the mind-techniques that the Yamanaka bloodline is famous for. You would only be reducing an able bodied soldier into one with mental deficiencies."

Naruto mentally groaned when she analyzed the structure of speech, regretting the fact that she was starting to sound like a certain ancient. It's a sign of getting old, she would have cried out but her interrogator was already traumatized enough as it is. The said fox chortled at her thoughts but not before pointing out that it worked wonders for intimidation.

Sadly, his host refused to agree.

Seeing that she forced her interrogator into silence, she decided it was an opportune time to formally request: "May I speak to your Hokage instead?"

And behind the walls, Hiruzen burst out into a peal of unexpected laughter, causing his underlings to jump at the sound. He didn't know who this young kunoichi was, but she certainly was a breather from all the paperwork that was piling up. If eloquence and cheekiness had to tie to one being,
perhaps the girl would have to take the throne.

He glanced at the thin file before him that mentioned nothing other than what the medics and the patrols have found. She was nameless and faceless – nothing in their Shinobi system – and no one in the plains of the Elemental Nations. Odd.

But she is a Shinobi, born and bred like one. So how did she managed to escape all records? He rewinded the entire interrogation (or casual conversation) thus far. She's knowledgeable about Fūinjutsu... A skilled killer... Prodigious for her age and unprecedented if she is the rumored assistance from Kibana no Sato. He pursed his lips in discontent and discarded rationality for empathy.

Perhaps it is an effect of our dark times where children have to grow up faster than they should have. He thought about young Kakashi and the new graduation age of Genin. Either way, it would be too dangerous to allow her to fall into enemies' hands.

With his judgment made, he started to walk towards the door of the viewing room. "Send Chūnin Mikio out," he instructed.

"And what are you intending to do, Hokage-sama?" Inoichi asked in alarm, hastily getting out of his seat to follow his superior.

The God of Shinobi pointed at the girl in the room, a small smile playing at the corner of his lips. "I'm going to entertain her bold request. It isn't every day that a child would dare to request for my presence, and it would be impolite if I didn't. She asked so nicely."

Blue-green eyes pleaded him otherwise. "Hokage-sama, I can be the one to do it."

His superior merely smiled at him, his hand resting on the doorknob. "Didn't you hear what the child said?" said Hiruzen nonchalanlty. "Throughout the entire interrogation, she either chose not to answer the question or told us outright that she couldn't. She hasn't lied to us once and I daresay her warnings should be taken as the truth as well."

The Head of the Konoha Torture and Investigation force protested, "But they are the words of a child—"

"That has never spoke like one since the beginning of the interrogation," reminded the Hokage. "From her posture to her answers, she is a Shinobi in every sense of the word. She will be treated as such, no matter her age or size."

Old enough to kill, old enough to step into the world of the cruel, he morbidly thought, gaze sharpening. "It is a detriment for any person in our career to underestimate the cunningness of the youth. You understand that right, Jōnin Yamanaka?"

With his words hanging in the air, he left the room, leaving his underling to slump back hopeless in his seat.

Meanwhile, the subject matter braced herself for a mind-wrecking interrogation with Yamanaka Inoichi when the door opened again. She could genuinely swear that she didn't expect them to comply with her request because she knew it was frankly absurd and no one would ever listen to the demands of a child.

And yet for some inexplicable reason, the Sandaime Hokage stood at the doorway with mischief apparent in the look he directed at her, as if they were sharing a secret that no one knew. Tears prickled her eyes. If asking was all it took, why has it never worked in the past?
Whatever scenario she planned fled her mind as she drank in his kind brown eyes with lines that extended slightly below, returning back to the time where she was the same stature and protected under his watchful gaze. It had been far too long since they shared the conspiratorial look that he reserved only for her, one that agreed to her ridiculous notions as a child. It had been too long since she tried to wrap her thin arms around the circumference of his waist, her fingers barely touching each other at the tips.

The last time she saw him was on a photo frame during his funeral, the beginning of rainy days, placing a white rose on his memorial while she remembered everything he did for her. The countless of times he willingly treated her to ramen despite her huge appetite, the stupid fights she got into with him, the pranks he forgave her for, moments that piled up to tantamount importance in her childhood – her eight year old self – came crashing down on her.

*It has been a long ten years, jiji,* she wanted to say along with many other things, but the words were lodged in her throat. There was relief and pain and many others that she could not name but she doesn't want to. If she gave it names, the simplification would cheapen its beautiful complexities and the ardent respect that she held for him.

She missed the Sandaime Hokage more than she cared to admit because she didn't think she would have made it through all the tough times if it wasn't for him. He was the first person that recognized her as a human and beyond the demon that dwelled within her. He was the first person she looked up to as a family and someone she dared to trust unconditionally. He took her in when no one wanted to, talked to her while others feared, acknowledging her for her worth when she needed it the most. Sarutobi Hiruzen gave her a home and taught her love, and to forgive and how it felt like to lose.

Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto never explicitly told him that she loved him the past, perhaps because she was damaged by the vitriol, but she knew that she *loved* him without a doubt. And one of her greatest regrets was that she never told him.

But the most amazing thing about time travel was that she had the chance *now.*

So for him, she fought back her tears that he hated to see on her face and gave him the trademark grin he loved as he settled down in the chair. She smiled so wide that it nearly reached her ears and it hurts, but she does it because she loved him.

This time she spoke first, her tone affectionate, "Hello there."

The Hokage reached out and ruffled the rascal's hair. "You're a cheeky one, aren't you little kunoichi?"

She giggled at his comment. "I'm not," she merrily denied, painful happiness brimming within her.

"Then can you answer my questions honestly, kunoichi-chan?"

"I can offer you more than honesty, Hokage-sama," Naruto replied, reverting back to a more professional tone. "But it is only meant for your eyes." *I trust you more than life.*

She spoke even louder, clearly directing her next line at the captive audience behind the walls. "I would appreciate it if you could close your eyes for a minute. That's all I ask. A ninja is entitled to their own secrets, are they not?"

He signed a few symbols towards his underlings. *Do as she says.*

When she received confirmation from the older man, she breathed out a sigh of relief and released the *Henge* that her partner casted over her.
The Hokage froze as he watched the change, wondering when she managed to dismantle the seal they placed on them. Her obsidian black hair transcended to the unique shade of blonde and the streak marks on her face appeared, making her features look softer than before. But beyond her likeness to Namikaze Minato, her vast cerulean blue eyes were the first thing that caught his attention.

"Eyes are the windows to a person's soul," his wife had once kindly advised him, but he doesn't think that the line could be as accurate as it was until he saw the agony that her red irises once buried. It did not belong to the doe eyes of a child who was never meant to see the cruelties of the world at a young age.

"War," his mind first conceded, trying to measure the darkness in her heart. No, it continued to whisper, she has seen far worse than that. Far worse.

"Who do I look like to you, Jiji?" She asked quietly and he doesn't reply immediately.

"Namikaze Minato," he mouthed and she nodded, her eyelids drooping a little.

"Just who are you, child?" inquired Hiruzen gently, but the word felt wrong in his mouth. The word referring to adolescences did not give justice to the veteran trapped in a small body, and it did not justify why she was mature and yet tormented.

She sighed as she donned on her disguise, eyes changing color as if it bled blood. "I know you have a lot of questions," she trembled slightly as she spoke, pain flitting her expression, "and if you allow me to, I can show you what you want to know."

He felt the strange urge to bring the child before him into his arms and shield her from the guilt that weighed down her shoulders. He shifted his chair forward and closer to her bed, stretching his hand out in invitation, "Then show me."

She will always trust him. She clasped his hand with her smaller hands like she had done many times before without hesitation, whispering a short apology before concentrating on channeling her infernal past that was a field of living graves.

"Someone help me…"

Omake: Kibana no Sato

Naruto felt the beast stirring in the dark recesses of her mind.

She exhaled quick, short breaths as her hand dug into bark, her fingers curling right into the solid in a vice-like grip. The rigid wood shattered under the pressure she exerted, its ligament deposits fodder to appease her agitation, utterly defenseless against her building rage.

It took almost everything out of her to contain her gnawing bloodlust that fed off her odium, her irises bleeding crimson as she witnessed the raid that was happening before her eyes, the inhumanity
expounded in her mind. The veteran kunoichi didn't know which was worse – a mindless white chaff boring human limbs ravaging the lands or actual human beings conducting the deed, because she appreciated neither and loathed both, her heart brimming with a capacity of accumulated abhorrence she had never known.

"Kurama, we said that we wouldn't interfere directly with the Third Shinobi War unless we are ordered to, right?" Naruto spoke, her voice eerily low and devoid of her verbal tic. She watched the thick smoke billow into the air with sound of pleading screams as its background, her hand completely obliterating the object in her grasp.

The said ancient treaded carefully. 'That was the plan...'

"But if they stand in my way while pillaging a village, it doesn't count right?"

A similar blood-thirsty smile ghosted on her partner's face, utterly monstrous and a perfect portrayal of a demon incarnate.

'If that is the case,' he muttered nonchalantly yet eyes alight with slaughter, 'then I would suppose all bets are off.'

The cacophony of screams escalated to a higher octave, with monstrous laughter and slashing metal joining the fray. Innocent civilians ran for their lives before they were overpowered and the image of it branded itself onto her retina, unblinking as it recorded the horrific scene. The sound of structures being knocked over and women being forced to the ground nearly made her break the tree like it was a twig but instead, she chose readily agree to the words her beast.

"All bets are off," she measured with each syllable, drawing her borrowed tanto from her sheath. The metal glinted ominously against the flickering wildfire that consumed the village.

She leaned her weight against the balls of her feet, using it as a springboard to rush in. She struck with far more vengeance and proportional blood, her slaughter fest nothing compared to the last. A different set of screams rang in the inauspicious night, filled with too much death and plundering all the same. It was different from her previous encounter where she ended lives quick, because this time she stalled those caught in the midst of defilement, allowing them a gracious chance to feel how it felt to bleed out of mortal wounds. How helpless it felt to be at the mercy of another, begging for the clemency that they would not receive. Her left eye twitched violently at the thought.

Judge, jury and executioner – roles she played with excellent aptitude, half-wishing that her affinity with genjutsu was not as abysmal as it was. With the darkness shrieking murder unheard, the thoughts about becoming the monster she swore never to become was discarded away for another, one that sang sweetly for the revenge that was far too short.

Illuminated by the blood red moon that gave spotlight to her cruel ways, the luminous planet followed each vicious, loud movement with disinterested hate. Naruto made them pay dearly for their reminder and its trigger, old enemies confused for new as she tore through them with her sword and hand.

The jinchūriki frowned at the changed moon and rubbed her eyes with her sleeve, before she peered closely at the sky. Perhaps I'm just dreaming, she decided, the smudge of maroon on fabric merging with darker orange.

Perhaps, you're still sinking, another echoed in the crevices of her subconsciousness.
Trivia: There will be some snippets/parts that I wrote out that did not manage to fit into the actual chapter itself. It will be featured as an Omake, and it will still be relevant to the entire gist of things. Think of it as... tidbits of information to develop someone or something.

And Kibana is suppose to mean yellow flower.
"Get away from my child, you vixen!" the woman screeched, pulling her daughter away from her. She stood imposingly between her and her new playmate, eyes spitting fire, attempting to harm the blonde girl with her scorching glare.

"Um, I didn't mean any harm—"Naruto stuttered, reaching out towards her confused acquaintance.

Immediately, the sound of flesh meeting flesh rang through the playground, and the place fell into pin-dropping silence as she flushed from embarrassment under their collective stares. She barely registered the stinging pain that enveloped her right cheek as she gingerly pressed her fingers against it, unable to process what had just transpired.

Tears started to well up her eyes. She didn't understand why this only happened to her. She knows for a fact that no other orphan has ever been screamed at by any other parent for playing with their child. It only ever happened to her.

She counted her eyes, nose, fingers and toes every day before she slept and sometimes in the middle of the night just to be sure that there would be no extras. She tried to look for horns or a tail like the villains in her bedtime stories had in the bathroom mirror, but she found none.

So why did the adults always scream at her and whisper behind her back and call her mean names? Why was she deemed a monster when she was like everyone else?

"Stay away from my daughter," the woman spat acidly, her hand trembling in disgust. She turned and crouched before her child, taking out her small towel and wiping her down, as if she was afraid that she contracted a disease. She searched her child's eyes, and brushed back her hair, completely ignoring the monster that stared.

"What did I tell you, Aiko?" scolded her mother lightly. "I told you never to go near that fox."

"But kaa-san, I don' understand why—"

"Do not talk back at me," she snapped. "And just do as I say, Aiko. The next time I see you talking to that fox, you are not getting dessert for dinner." The woman leaned in closer to her daughter's ears, but spoke loud enough for Naruto to hear. "She's a monster, you hear me? She will destroy you if you get close to her."

Aiko nodded hastily with fear in her eyes, searching for features that differentiated a person from a monster. She saw none but she was still afraid, mind crying for logic but she dare not defy. She involuntarily shivered as she was yanked away, leaving Naruto alone in the playground with disparaging glares.

The poison about a monster was already placed and it always spreads. She is alone again with another enemy and one against the world of discrimination.
The said girl really didn't understand, but that didn't mean that big, fat tears didn't stream down her eyes.

She looked at her limbs, her careworn shirt and shorts.

She really didn't understand.

.. "Jiji, why do people always ignore me and call me a fox?" A young Naruto idly asked, her legs swinging back and forth in the chair that he placed her in.

The Sandaime Hokage paused for a moment before he looked at her sternly. She always liked how the old man would look at her in the eye without flinching. "Who called you a fox?"

She shrugged. "I dunno, the people at the sweets shop and the playground." She scrunched her eyebrows, trying to recall the rest but there were too many, so she gives up and elaborates on the situation instead. "They keep telling my friends that I'm a monster and the next day they just ignore me, 'ttebane."

Crystalline blue eyes pleaded him for answers and her honesty demoralizes him. "I'm not a monster right, jiji? So why don't they want to be my friend?" She speaks quietly, but the effect is only amplified as her string of questions continued. "Did I do something wrong, jiji? What do they mean by 'fox'?" Her voice trembled. "Am I not wanted? Is that why I'm alone?"

His aged hands crumpled the paper in his grasp and she looked at him in worried concern. "What's wrong, Jiji?"

He lets out a long breath he didn't know he was holding and placed his broken pen down gently, reaching out for his tobacco pipe. He took a long drag and indulges in the burn, exhaling the heated air before he beckoned to the child. "Come here, Naruto."

She was confused by his request, but she complied nonetheless. She trusted him with her life. He pushed his chair out and pulled her onto his lap, his arms wrapping around her small frame. He refrains from squeezing her tighter in attempt to offer the love she lost, searching for the right words before he speaks again.

"You're not a monster, sweet child," he murmured, wisps of smoke floating to her nose. She wrinkled at the smell, but remains content in his hold. "Nor are you wrong for wanting a friend. You are a kind, sweet child that deserves only true friends, ones that will never leave you through thick or thin."

"They are hard to come by," he sighs in quiet epiphany, shaking the girl slightly to ensure her attention was on him, "But finding and keeping them makes everything worthwhile. Can you promise me something, Naruto?"

She tilted her head upwards to meet his eyes upside down. "What is it?"

His gaze is warm. "Don't ever believe what they say."

She gave him one of her biggest grins, "Okay, Jiji."

.. Naruto looked at him with bright mischief and pressed both her hands on the crown of her head.
Her next words catch him by surprise.

"You better watch out, Jiji, because I'll be coming after that hat!"

.. The world doesn't need you, demon," sneered the man, stumbling into her room with a dangerous-looking knife. She held her breath because the haggard-looking man smelt like alcohol and she didn't like it. It reminded her of the dark allies that some mean people dragged her to. Of dark nights and broken bottles and wounds that healed by the next morning.

"And guess what?" he laughed crazily, "I'm going to finish what the Yondaime started!" He swung his weapon at her, tottering and stumbling, his arms in wide arcs with no sense of distance.

Her only reaction was to back away in fright, her eyes blurry with unshed tears as she screamed, so loud and full of terror that it shocked the man backwards.

"Stop screaming, you stupid bitch!" He threw the knife at her and it misses by a large margin, but the proximity of the blade still scares her. She can see her own reflection off the glinting surface and she can only feel fear. She screamed again, this time louder than the last.

He lumbered forward at her shaking frame, one that was backed and curled into the wall, his nails digging into her skin painfully and bruising her. She could barely crawl or struggle against his vice-like grip, and he presses his weight onto her legs. Naruto felt the cold air on her skin as he tore at her clothes – ones that Jiji gave her – and she screams again, scratching at him like a feral animal as she sobbed.

She tells him to get away from her as his hands drift towards her navel, begging for someone to save her although she knew that no one would. No one ever had.

No matter how much she screamed or yelled or pleaded, no one ever came. She broke down grievously at the realization, because she knows she's always alone no matter what her jiji says. She's always alone. She probably always will be. It wasn't the first time someone broke into her house and this certainly won't be the last, and more often than not, she barely escaped unscathed.

Her apartment door smashes open but she barely noticed, too consumed by her fear and desperation to save her own life. She continues her attempt to wound her attacker, even as the man with a dog porcelain mask wrapped her in her blanket and brings her to a comforting embrace, trying to calm the poor girl that was broken by revelations and the hands that once griped for flesh.

She sobs until she can barely breathe and her voice is hoarse, and at times like this, she wasn't sure if she was ever going to be okay.

.. "Jiji can I attend the Academy?"

Naruto asks the Hokage days after the incident, her cerulean blue eyes serious and it reminds him painfully of his successor. He doesn't know where she found her courage from to move on from the traumatic event but it was the same strength that made her so precious to him.

"And why do you want to attend the Academy, Naruto?" asked Hiruzen gently.

"I don't want to be weak," was her honest reply. "I want to protect my precious people one day so that they will never have to go through the same thing."
Her gaze is unwavering as she skipped towards his table and grabbed hold of his hand. "And you're one of my precious people too, Jiji." She said earnestly, placing her other hand on her heart and tapping it lightly. "And you belong right here, 'ttebane."

He doesn't think he has heard a genuine statement as hers as he sweeps her into a hug and treats her to bowls of ramen but deep inside, he knows she deserves more than that.

.. "I know acknowledged her as one of my greatest students," Iruka spoke truthfully albeit weakly as he leaned back against the tree. She froze from her position behind her cover at his declaration, not knowing what the strange, hot, feeling in her heart was. "She's not the hardest worker," he explains fondly, "and she's so clumsy so no one accepts her. But she knows what it feels like to feel pain in your heart and how terrible loneliness is."

Her grip tightened on the scroll and she was shaking, her gasps of breath coming out shorter and shorter. She lets her blonde hair shield her eyes and she's trying to really understand why her chest felt so hot like it was burning but it felt okay –

"She was never the demon fox. She's a member of Konohagakure no Sato: she's Uzumaki Naruto."

The tears won't stop flowing out of her eyes no matter how hard she tries, so overwhelmed by his honest speech. Her heart was bursting and she knows crying for the weak, but the happiness that she feels from gaining acknowledgment nearly floors her.

She loves Iruka like family – she later realizes and she smiles so hard that it hurts.

.. "In the ninja world, those who break the rules are trash."

His grey eye sweeps across them, and for some weird reason, she feels the need to brand his words in her heart. Kakashi looked up at the clearing skies.

"But remember, those who abandon their teammates are worse than trash."

And time and time again, she does.

.. If Naruto had a first impression for the white-haired man in a red sleeveless Haori who was perched on the roof of the bathhouse, she would have said it. Because seriously, it took a lot of guts and a level of perverseness to pull it off.

And by saying, she meant holler, "Hey, Ero-sennin!"

His attempt to hush her into silence fails as the more perceptive women in the bathhouse heard her shout, and she nearly dies of laughter when she witnessed the sequence of events.

Dozens upon dozens of objects were thrown at the pervert, ranging from wooden tubs and bottles (she swears she saw a rubber duck) and he hopelessly tries to balance himself on the tiled roof. He probably shrieked once or twice in the ridiculous hilarity as he was forced into awkward dodging positions, and she sincerely believed that he would run an excellent stretching class with his skills.

The man tries to taunt the women for their failing accuracy before a wooden tub lands solidly on his
face, and he lands gracefully on the ground on his head.

And despite all his setbacks, he could still burst out into his introductory dance with a frog summon, yodeling out a strange tune that nearly made her want to turn away because she didn't want to get anywhere near the self-proclaimed super pervert.

"Thanks for asking!" he boasted, stopping at his final pose. "I'm Mount Myobokugama's Holy Master Sennin, known as the Toad Sennin, the gallant and majestic Jiraiya-sama!"

She rolled her eyes at his goofiness but she smiled nonetheless.

"Sennin?" she snorts incredulously. "You meant pervert, right?"

He had the grace to be offended. "It's not pervert!" He holds her in suspense, grin widening like a maniac. "I'm a super pervert!"

"...I don't think that's the point."

"Don't run away..." she weakly called out, clutching onto her side in pain.

She struggles to her feet pathetically while the Hyūga Prodigy turned, his lilac eyes condescending when he gave her ragged appearance a one-over. Her shoulders heave up and down with effort, and her entire body aches from the blows that she took, but she refused to stay down against the boy who walked around with a stick-of-fate in his ass. She refused to bow down to the boy that injured her friend, even though she was his kin.

"I won't run," she pants. "I won't back down from my words," her cerulean eyes were glowering and spitting fire. He hates that look on her face. "That's my nindo!"

He scoffed, a self-righteous smirk curling at the corner of his lips. "I've heard that line before."

It reminded him of his weak cousin that overshadowed him with her position in the clan. It was too alike that blasted girl that scorned him with her silence and her malignant kindness. His curse burned painfully at the thought, and his fists clench involuntarily.

Her head rises higher and she still managed to add mockery to her tone. "You and your fate bullshit... I won't lose a jerk like you!"

The girl was absolutely ridiculous. Absolutely infuriating, out of the world, a complete idiot and so blindly optimistic. But why was she crying for fools, yet again (and again and again), those who dreamed for heights, for the burden of a village that led to their deaths? Why was she so desperately trying to save this... this child that reminded her so painfully of her brother and the lover that she lost in tragedies?

Her hands don't stop glowing and Kami, she prays for the decades of experience and her healing soul to make the girl live, and not just another stupid regret that she would drown in with acidic beverages.

Senju Tsunade didn't want to lose her.

don't want to lose again, not like this, not this soon after I regained something –

"I'll be taking that cursed necklace… baa-chan."

The sob that leaves her lips had never sounded so bitter and relieved. The movement of limbs and the beating of her heart, had never been more rewarding.

"You… stupid, stupid, child."

And yet, the Slug Princess finds her endearing and she wants to protect the fragile dreams that were once crushed.

--

Her smile was controlled.

"Ero-sennin," she begins pleasantly, her knuckles cracking one by one, the ominous sound of bones popping making his hair stand and limbs twitch.

"When I received a letter from Gamakichi about you needing help, I didn't expect this." Naruto stressed irritably though her eerie expression didn't fade. Her steely blue eyes stare at the metal bars and the lightbulb hanging overhead before it returned to him, her gaze a glacial nightmare. "So pray tell, 'ttebane, what are you doing in jail at 3AM in the morning?"

Jiraiya laughed nervously. The pleasant tone reminded him of his old shrewd student with similar features, so much so that he could parallel their features and actions back and forth. But now was not the time for nostalgia, he concludes, because the same look was often a death sentence of humiliation for him.

"Well," he shifted his Haori uncomfortably, "I was doing my research and I ended up here."

She raised her eyebrow. "Oh?" was the one-worded reply that she gave, drawing out the syllable carefully. Her tolerance for his late night peeking sessions were wearing thin – he knows that much since she wouldn't stop complaining about it – and he was really starting to fear for his life because his knuckle-headed protége was never this quiet.

"Have you identified him?" asked the police that came into the room of holding cells.

The falsetto that she puts on gives him creeps. "I certainly don't know who he is, officer," said Naruto with false calmness before she pitched her voice higher, a choked sob cutting her sentence awkwardly. "But he definitely was that damn pedophile that tried to prey on the kids at the playground a few days ago. It was horrible—" she gave a strangled cry—"the way he tried to drag them away while they were screaming for help and if not for your excellent work at stopping him, I don't really know what would have happened!"

"I knew you were despicable, but children, really?" The police gave him a glare. "So that is what you seek when older women aren't enough for your palate? You need children that are a third of your age?"

"A fourth," she quipped in, adding insult to injury. The enraged croak was music to her ears. She took a conscious step back from the cell and shuddered. "You are such a horrible person, 'ttebane. I hope the inmates make you their sweetheart for all you have done."

Translation: I am not paying for your bail for the next few days, have fun. If anything along the lines of penetration, choking and screams come as a side-effect, I am not to blame. In fact, if you want to
write a book about it, I will gladly be your impassioned editor. Sincerely, Uzumaki Naruto, your
dashingly amazing goddaughter that you may or may not disown.

Jiraiya couldn't even protest as the man believed her and nodded his head seriously. "We will ensure
that he receives the punishment he deserves, madam."

She laughed, although it was directed at her victim to spite him. "You are so righteous, officer," she
coos.

The police's voice turned gruff. "All part of the job, madam."

Naruto turned to give her teacher a winning smile. "Of course, I'm sure this pedophile will fit right in
with the others since he can't quite fit in with children."

'Get served,' she silently preached, goading him when the police officer's back was turned. He
snarled again, rattling the bars with herculean strength, swearing that he was going to run her to the
ground when he got out. No one messed with a Sannin, especially the gallant Jiraiya-sama.

Meanwhile, Naruto hummed as she turned around, wondering if she should write a letter to Tsunade
about the misadventure, knowing that the Godaime would love to read about while drinking her
warm sake.

.. "Why? Why did Gaara have to die like this?" She asked feebly, her fists clenched as she stared at his
corpse. "You're the Kazekage," she desperately said. "You just became the Kazekage," she stressed,
hoping that he would react to her taunt.

It doesn't matter that she knows that he was mature enough to know it was just a taunt, but she had
to try something – anything – to change this.

"Calm down, Uzumaki Naruto."

Anger welled within her as she swung her body backwards, glaring at the perpetuator who spoke.
"Shut the hell up!" screamed the kunoichi in anguish. She didn't want to calm down because it
would make this incident feel like a farce. More than anything, she was angrier at herself for her
incompetence, for not trying harder.

But that was not who she chose to blame. "It's your entire fault! If you stupid Suna Shinobi hadn't
sealed that monster inside of him, this would never have happened! For your stupid, fruitless
ambitions, do you have any idea what kind of burden he had to carry?!

She brought her sleeve up to stem her flowing tears, because she knows that they don't understand.
They will never understand the terrible loneliness that plagued them because they were branded as
monsters and her heart wrenched when she recalled that Gaara had even less. He didn't deserve
this. No person – even the worst criminals – deserved to become the jailor of a tailed beast.

What stupid power of a human sacrifice? At what cost were they keeping this corrosive power, and
why did it have to be them?

She started crying even harder. "Damn the jinchūriki," Naruto sobbed bitterly, mocking every sense
of the word. She was filled with so much scorn that it surprises her. "You have no right to act like
you're better, calling us names and shunning us, and using us to your whims."

And the fact that she was still useless despite the possessing the same power, broke her.
"I couldn't save Sasuke... I couldn't save Gaara... So what's the point—"she paused, trying to stop her voice from cracking —"so why did I train so hard for the past three years when nothing has changed?"

..

"Kakashi-sensei," said his students in a reactive fashion, looking at him with resigned and exasperated expression simultaneously as he approached the training ground.

He finds sick amusement that they were used to his clinical tardiness, such that they had already begun stretching and running to prepare for training. It is an improvement from the time where they would use the time for chatting, he supposes as he gave them a casual two-finger salute like nothing has changed.

Naruto looked up the sky, squinting at the sun. "Sakura-chan, should we be more amazed that he is only two hours late?"

The pink-haired kunoichi gasped, a hand fluttering onto her heart. "You're right!" She ran towards their teacher, shifting his hitat-ate upwards slightly. "Kaka-sensei, have you perhaps, fallen ill?"

"Or has Gai-sensei finally got to you?"

"Do you need Tsunade-sama to look over you?"

The knuckle-head questioned winningly, "Epidural, perhaps?"

"I'm not pregnant," deadpanned the scarecrow before they could add another insult. If there was something they definitely inherited from teacher to student and expanded on, it would be his skill in making outrageous statements.

"You're pregnant with bullshit," offered Sakura sincerely.

'Well at least they have originality,' Kakashi appreciated bitterly.

It takes him thirty years' worth of maturity to not bite back at the remark. He looked over them with one grey eye, deciding that this was karma after all the things he had done.

But until the day he admits it –

"Maa, since you are so fond of healing, shall we spar?"

..

Her mindscape was dark.

The jinchūriki stumbled mindlessly towards the wide gates; each step was laboriously slow while she shifted from right to left, her stomach bleeding black.

'Rip the seal off me,' intoned the Kyuubi no Youko from its cell, staring intensely at its host that was now its puppet, eager as it lifted her up towards the seal. Internally, it laughed at the stupidity of mortals to give the key to the lock herself, especially one as tempered as she.

It leaned closer to the gates, a primal grin giving way to gleaming teeth. It could taste the freedom that was taken away from its being. No longer would it be subjugated under the whims of mere mortals that underestimated eternal power and eons of practiced patience. His nostrils flared. It would make them pay.
Alas, its plans were always thwarted by a Wight. It snarled when it saw the ill-omened cloak, pounding angrily at its prison. 'Yondaime Hokage!'

The said person ignored it as he pulled the vessel away from the seal, preventing the paper from ripping. Crimson silted eyes faded back to cerulean blue as Naruto promptly fell on her butt, her pupils dilated while she took in the man in front of her.

Her mind screamed for logic, wondering what her role model was doing in her mindscape as if he belonged there. The unmistakable shade of golden and blue – characteristics that were reflected onto her – shocked her and she couldn't help but gape openly.

'Yon... daim... Hokage?' she voiced almost soundlessly, accepting the man's outstretched hand. Her thoughts were an incoherent mess, and she struggles to comprehend why they were so similar and why he was here when he was supposed to be dead –

'I worked into the seal spell so that I would appear in your psyche should the seal be broken to the point you sprouted the eighth tail,' he explained while Naruto deflated. 'I really wanted to avoid that,' he added before he turned to glare at the demon, 'since I had no intention to see you again, Kyuubi.'

It roared in defiance.

A wry smile appeared on the blonde man's lip at its reaction, and the fond look he sends her way frightens her. 'But I did look forward to seeing my daughter grow into a beautiful young woman,' he murmured while he brushed away a tendril of her blonde hair back, 'so I guess I'll call it even.'

She blanked out.

'I dare you to come closer, Yondaime Hokage! I'll rip you to shreds!'

He gave her a knowing glance. 'Well if that is the case, I'll stay away. Right, Naruto?'

She couldn't process anything. His words entered her ears but she wasn't really listening, and all she could recall up to the current moment was losing control of the ancient chakra and the searing heat of the forbidden running across the skin. So why was Namikaze Minato doing here and how—?

'How do you know my name? Why does the Yondaime Hokage know my name?'

The said man chuckled. 'Well, I was the one who named you. You are my daughter, Naruto.'

Her eyes widened. 'Then... I am...'

Minato took another moment to wander over her blonde hair that hung down her back like her mother's – pity it wasn't the crimson shade of sunset – his cerulean blue eyes and her exotic birthmarks, a twinge of happiness imprinted in his heart. She grew up to be as beautiful as he thought she would, the perfect combination and culmination of their love.

Pride coated his statement. 'You heard me. You are my daughter, my flesh and blood.'

The water in her mindscape rippled. She doesn't know why her first reaction was to laugh. She wrapped one arm around her own unclothed waist while the other hand covered her face as she bent over and laughed with disjointed notes, split between happiness and sadness.

Tears rolled down her mauve cheeks as she realizes that she actually had a family. It was alleviating to know that she wasn't some worthless orphan that was sacrificed because no one would miss her. That she wasn't just a child with the name of a ramen topping because someone named her in a
careless haste, and perhaps, she hopes while her heart recognizes, she might have been loved. But the past tense of the entire family situation was still undeniable, and she no longer knows what to do with her limbs.

'Loud fellow, isn't he?' Minato remarked as he gestured at her beast. He snapped his fingers. 'Let's go to somewhere else.'

The crisp sound of his action reverberates through her mindscape and the entire scenery changes. She was in awe as she takes in the glowing pastel colors of yellow, white and greens, her eyes following a string of chakra that was akin to a firefly. She wiped away her tears because she understands that this wasn't the right time to cry and she didn't want her first meeting with her father – her heart surges with pride – to be an unhappy one.

The blonde man watched her impassively as she recollected herself. 'The Sandaime Hokage didn't tell you much, did he?' He asked despite being aware of the answer. 'I guess it was only natural he wanted to suppress as much information about the Kyuubi as possible.' And part of him hates himself for that. 'If people knew you were my child, you would be in great danger.'

'Dad…' her fingers flexed. She promptly punched him in his stomach, sincerely hoping he feels pain because it was just a small measure of everything she has been through. She feels vindictive but she supposes she deserves to be.

His groan of pain gives her a strange satisfaction.

And then the dam breaks.

'Why would you seal the Kyuubi in your own child?' Her tone was raw and accusing. 'Do you know how much I've been through because of that!? All the grown-ups looked at me with contempt and I couldn't make any friends! They called me monster and vixen and they always avoided me and so—'

She gesticulated wildly. 'So I trained really hard to get them to accept me. Then I met Iruka-sensei, Kakashi-sensei and Ero-sennin— 'she's screaming now—'and I was so happy because they helped me become stronger! But because of a group called Akatsuki coming after me, I had to become stronger.'

The image of Konoha being leveled comes to mind and she's just vomiting words at this point and she can't stop because she hasn't told anyone how she felt – 'And I got stronger, I really did, but I still couldn't protect my friends. The Akatsuki still killed them.'

She thinks of Hinata who was thrown around. She thinks of Team 10 that were torn apart by Sarutobi Asuma's death. Or the lifeless bodies that were sprawled around Konoha that she felt with the power of senjutsu. It fucking sucked.

'But then I met you,' she heaved, messing up her blonde hair. 'I don't know if I'm supposed to be happy or mad! I'm just so glad – I mean frustrated – ugh, all this doesn't make sense! Nothing makes sense! Not the reason why they want the Bijuu or how you can be here even though you're supposed to be dead and so many more things!'

He wishes that he can provide answers to her plight, but despite being the prodigy he once was, he can give none. Instead, he just smiles affectionately, asking the question that he had in his mind: 'How old are you this year, Naruto?'

'Sixteen,' she sniffed.

He sighed, 'You're already sixteen years old, huh?'
Sixteen years of missed birthdays, of missed experiences that he can never see. Sixteen years where they were never there for her when she needed them most and a pang of regret stabs him. He looked forward to being a father. Kushina wanted to be a mother. His wife yearned to rebuild the family she lost but the privilege was ripped away from them – it has always been duty before blood. But he doesn't feel the worry as much because he knows that their legacy lives within Naruto and she has grown into a strong, wonderful woman like her mother.

He ruffled her hair, cerulean blues softening, 'it must have been hard for you. I'm sorry, Naruto.'

His apology feels cheap. 'But I suppose after putting my daughter through so much, I have no right to act like a father and apologize.'

The kunoichi musters a smile. 'It's fine; I can handle it, since I'm the Yondaime's daughter, 'ttebane.'

His non-beating heart felt like bursting.

It was one of the rare moments where they were allowed peace.

She sat on top of her father's head on the monument as she watched a section of the village rebuild, new wood and bricks stacked up from even ground to form proper structure. Everything seemed so insignificant from afar; the workers were akin to ants and the pile of rubble their mound from her vantage point, moving achingly slowly with the hours that passed and yet progressive. Somehow, it was almost magical to watch her destroyed village recover in the matter of weeks – with the helpful abuse of shadow clones – rising from devastation and back into its familiar orange and red tiled roof glory again.

"There you are," a smooth voice drawled out, and she tenses momentarily before she pinpoints the distinct baritone.

Naruto shifted her head slightly. "Kakashi-sensei," she acknowledged.

He peers at her curiously, "Isn't the Rookie 11 meeting up for a meal today?"

Underneath the underneath, she reminds herself, breathing before she replies. "Are they?"

He hates beating around the bush when it comes to serious matters, and he knows that she knows because he has been her sensei for nearly four years. He dropped his usual uncaring facade and forced the matter through.

"Are you going to keep ignoring her?"

"Who?" she asks.

Two could play at the game, his grey eye chills, "Hyūga Hinata."

He measures her reaction: the tensing shoulders, the slight raise of her hand to reach for her hair, and the fast answers that she gives. The biggest sign was that she refused to look at him.

"I'm not," she insisted.

"She spoke to me about it, Naruto. Do you feel guilty?"

She stayed silent, refusing to tell the truth because she hated the entire event itself. The conclusion was a miracle, not a conscious action, a victory but still a defeat. She doesn't lie to herself about the
fact that they might have won, because she grew up knowing that she never wins. Of course she feels
guilty – unbearably so – because she knows she has failed and if it wasn’t for Nagato’s amnesty, she
would be chiseling names on basalt. Naruto chose to keep quiet; it simply didn’t leave any space for
lies. And Kakashi-sensei was one of those people she respected too much to want to lie to.

But her hunching shoulders give all the honesty he needs.

"Look at me," the Jōnin commands."Are you a coward?" He continues, and his tone was anything
but comforting, the provocation sharp as he enunciated the derogatory term.

Without a moment’s hesitation, she body flickers in front of him, her cerulean eyes fierce as she gazes
at him. Her body stands taut while he was an image of crafted laziness, and she audibly growls.
"What do you take me for, 'ttebane?"

The staunch determination living within her made him smile beneath his mask, reminding him
dearly of his late sensei. It was a look more fitting for the ninja he taught and his daughter, while
sulks deserved no place on her face.

"What do I take you for?" sounded the scarecrow nonchalantly. "A coward," he offhandedly lays,
not sparing a thought for her feelings. The blond-haired girl flinched as if she was scalded.

"Hinata does not blame you for what has happened, Naruto." Kakashi continued sagely. "She
understands sacrifices and she knows you've tried your best."

She can't answer him without remembering and remembering was pain because there were things
she could have done better, and a teacher she could have saved. Her voice is thick when she finally
speaks, but it by no means meant that her thoughts were organized.

"But everything happened because of me," whispered the kunoichi hauntingly, pressing one hand on
the seal. "I am the prison for the Kyuubi. The Akatsuki was looking for me – for it 'ttebane. I don't
understand how the village can see me as the hero when—"she wrapped her hand around her throat
—"when I was the reason for destruction. I brought the Akatsuki to our village and caused all this
damage." Desperation edged steely blue eyes. "You don't understand how close I was to losing
control fully Kakashi-sensei. I almost—I almost let it out. I almost killed everyone."

She couldn't – wouldn't live with it if that happened, and she knows how disastrous the darkness in a
person's heart was. And it distraught her to know that she nearly let it happen. She might have
become another Nagato that believed that peace could only attained by working together as a single
entity, one that understood pain through experiencing it themselves. She knows she's been that
person – in that trench – because it was scarily easy to fall and yet agonizing to get up.

"If it wasn't for Pain doing that jutsu, Hinata would really have been dead." She can't look at her
teacher because it hurts her. "You would have been dead."

Hatake Kakashi doesn't ask her how she found out that he had been dead for a period of time. He
knows because he has loved and lost, he's broken everything he touched but he has stopped blaming
himself for it. But hers was just a voyage, where the pain of watching a friend die was still raw and
ugly, and his left eye twitches violently in response. The only thing he can think of was what her
parents once did for him and he reenacts it, trying to be there for even if he was emotionally stunted
and not as kind as the couple. He pries her hand gently from her bruised throat and gives her a
warm albeit awkward hug, holding her fractured pieces together and perhaps, lighten the pain a
little.

..
Her smile was false when she gazed up at him with sad cerulean blues, gripping onto her arm behind her back.

His features were more angular than the time of his youth but the brooding expression stayed the same, tarried onto adulthood unchanged. She decided that she hated that stoic expression and preferred the arrogant smirk he occasionally donned on, because that look always reminded her of the brother and rival she lost.

It reminded her of her broken promise with the shaken pink-haired kunoichi beside her, of her broken team that she wanted as a family and how she was always getting into fights with him. The only way she could ever properly talk to Sasuke was always through a fight and she finds it tragic.

He also decides that the smile on her face was probably the saddest he had ever seen on the knuckle-headed ninja.

His thoughts ring true.

"How can I become Hokage when I can't even save my friend?"

..

There was nothing memorable about the war.

Not the clanging of metal, fighting their loved ones that were reduced to puppets, or the evolving monsters that came in the colors of white or dry husk. Not the inexhaustible chakra and the never dulling reflexes against weary and worn humans that needed rest.

It was always death where ever she turned, always another person she couldn't save. There was nothing that could remedy the emotional strain on her heart as she watched each ally collapsed while she remained a beacon – one of their main targets in the war.

How could she save another when she could barely save herself?

And he was the first to fall.

She watched as the majestic bird erupted into a splatter of ink in the grey skies, its raspy brushstrokes losing its shape as projectiles pierce it from different directions. Its flight disrupted and figure destroyed, she doesn't remember what compelled her to start running. The rider flailed slightly on broken wings as red meshed with black, his dominant arm useless as he pulls out another scroll.

No sound of fear comes out from pale pursed lips as he unravels it, a motion he practiced a thousand times, only to have another barrage aimed at his falling figure. He was helpless as he has nothing to grab on in mid-air, and he has no way to dodge. He watches as they come closer and inch towards his flesh at hurling speeds.

And thus it led to his impending doom.

Some of the wooden needles miss but most meet its mark, and none of them could run to catch him fast enough before they hear the sickening crunch.

"Sai!" someone nearby screams, a flash of platinum blonde blinding, and all she hears is the sound of death tolling in her ears.

...
Her hand started trembling as the images of war flashed past, each memory more blurred than the next, her emotions deluged with angst as they continued. They were too brief for the Sandai me Hokage to comprehend, too bizarre and distorted to make out any details and all he knew was how tortured the child holding him was. Sarutobi Hiruzen didn't need to see the pictures clearly to know that she had lost everything to death herself, some so gruesome that her own mind had censored them to preserve her own sanity. The girl was crying as her frame reeked of bloodlust, untold stories of anger and anguish gushing out of her and it engulfed him whole even though he was a mere bystander in her recollection.

Her story was devastating and it took a lot out of the Hokage to even move. He moved blindly in her entrapment of memories, forcing his free hand to clasp on top of hers, his sudden contact making her flinch and shocking her out of her own Hell. Their heads knocked back from the backlash of an abrupt cut but the kunoichi had it far worse. Her expression was distraught and disfigured by so many emotions that he could not name, and part of him wasn't sure if he could. She gasped like she was short of air, her distant eyes a watery purgatory as she clutched onto his hand like it was her lifeline.

The images still flashed in her mind, one after the other, gaining prominence with clarity and the time it occurred. She can't escape from her memories, that she was aware, and it wasn't something she wanted to forget.

*A white dog attempting to stop the weight of a Cyclops from damaging its owner. Its shadow looms like a mountain – tall and ominous – as it descends.*

*Stop it stop it stop it stop it stop it*

*Purple clothes that ripped with speed as it pushed someone out of the way.*

*There's blood, there's flesh, she's bleeding someone help her, stop the bleeding, keep breathing, oh my god, please stop screaming –*

Hiruzen pulled the hyperventilating kunoichi reactively into his arms and held her like she was fragile glass.

*There's blood on her hands, its warm and it drips onto her thigh. She sees the vacant eyes— someone please please please please please please stop screaming I'm sorry okay—*

She shrieked gutturally as the next image faded, but her hands won't stop shaking, her mind wouldn't stop spinning – and Hiruzen ran his hands through her long hair under compulsion, trying to soothe her wounded soul. She calmed down marginally from his touch, focusing on his even breaths, his beating heart and his warmth, trying to come back to the land of the living from the field of graves.

"No more," she finally rasped out in her throes, clutching and sobbing into his robes, her temperament so different from her actual age.

She didn't remember when was the last time she actually allowed herself to be vulnerable; it has always been you need to be strong for them and it was war. It has been a long time that she could openly cry in front of someone and ironically, it was only when she reverted back to a child. It was just so relieving to be in the arms of a man she knew that she could trust, even if he didn't know her anymore. Everything about him was familiar but different from his older years, perhaps less frail and more of the man that had gained his title as the Second God of Shinobi.
"No more," promised the Hokage as he repeated the same motions as before, his gaze sharpening slightly. He would not let the young leaf of Konoha be harmed any further if he could help it. He knew so little when he meant so much to her and he thought it was regrettible.

Sarutobi frowned. With due time, I will change that. But first,

"I declare the girl a non-hostile and eligible for a citizenship in Konohagakure no Sato from this moment forth and I want no information of her leaking out. I want all records of her wiped off the cameras from the moment she stepped into the village until the instance she leaves this building and the only copy that should exist should be the one on my table by two hours. Tell my secretary to prepare a citizenship form and the Shinobi registration readied for another kunoichi. Now leave us," the Hokage ordered.

His tone left no room for protest and his elite guard begrudgingly left him with the unknown element. His sudden over-protectiveness of the girl worried them, but his words were their law. Their chakra signatures begged for him to take back his command while they walked out of the door, even pausing for a moment in hopes for a change.

The change did not come.

Only when they all left did he deactivate all the chakra suppressing seals in the room with a verbal command to let her breathe easier. And gently, he told her the esteem he held for her. "Thank you for all that you have done for Konoha, Naruto. Thank you for coming back despite all you have seen."

It took her seconds – or was it minutes? – to register his words.

And it was her undoing. She burst into tears, loud and wailing, but this time, she doesn't cry for all she has lost. She ran that river dry more than she could count and she doesn't want to continue crying for all the deaths that she's known. No, Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto cried for herself, a painful realization that her contributions were finally acknowledged and perhaps, that this reality had just set in. She had her loved ones to protect – some alive and others unborn – and she was a little less alone, even if she didn't quite belong.

"Thank you," she stuttered back.

He continued to caress her hair as he placed his lips against the crown of her head. "You wear your heart on your sleeve despite all the heavy secrets that you hold, child," murmured Hiruzen. "It won't do if you're a constant open book when you are idle. You have things to accomplish, do you not?"

The girl shook in agreement and he sighed hollowly.

The Hokage knew that the kunoichi showed him her memories selectively. He was aware that there was a greater evil lurking at the edges of her memories, one that she purposefully hid from him and far more heinous than the history of the beast that she contained. It was discomforting that his fate lied in her hands and he was just a simple player in the grand scheme of things despite the power he boasted.

But the fact that he will die doesn't scare him. He was a Shinobi and ultimately human, invested in a career that stole life. He does not pursue the elusive immortality like one of his foolish students, content with the short life he was destined to have. There were worse things that scare the Second God of Shinobi other than his own death, and the entire world in ruins, or so he deduced, does.

He thought about the blonde-haired girl in his arms that carried an indomitable will within her broken psyche, and the bright grins that were abused out of her. He wanted to protect her until his last breath
because she has done more than that, and anxiousness welled within him as he thought of the inevitable future, of her experiences and demeanour and he found himself trusting her.

"This is not the place to continue this conversation," pondered the Hokage as he gave a wry glance at the cameras that were silently recording. The barren, white-washed room of the Torture and Investigation Force was never meant to be a place for casual dialogue, considering the amount of people that were tortured to speak.

"Is a day sufficient for you to recollect yourself before you find me in my office?"

"Y-Yes, Jiji,"

He gave her a light squeeze. "Then I will speak to you then."
Eight's Troth

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Troth
/ trɒθ / · noun
Faith or loyalty when pledged in a solemn agreement or undertaking.

It's so weird to only see three faces, Naruto thought as she stared at the stoic, sharper features of the village's watchful guardians that were carved into the mountain wall, their blank eyes unseeing and yet encompassing all. The space next to the Sandaime was oddly empty, devoid of the new faces that now only belonged in the figment of her imagination. And if she closed her eyes, she could almost see them again: the weathered sculptures next to the head of the Yondaime she always sat on, followed by the first Female Hokage wearing her rhombus-shaped Byakugō no In and her teacher with his scarred lid and Sharingan.

And I was next in line, her heart wrenched painfully. She was supposed to join as one of the faces that marked Konoha's history as one of the strongest. She was promised a title that no longer held any value, left to succeed was a hollow oath; a diminished flame that she could not ignite without the main core of Shinobi nor hold the torch for. She was meant to inherit a broken village, a desolate land where there was nothing to restore, where deities had fled and would no longer hearken to.

A bitter laugh slipped past her lips as she was stumped once more by the damage inflicted onto her soul, its grimy hold rooting so deep that she could no longer return to the time where she could foolishly dream. Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto couldn't see herself declaring her ambitions that were smithereens at her feet, smashed so thoroughly and beyond disrepair.

Was this one of your ploys as well Madara? She trembled while she thought, like some sort of mania overcame her in the streets. The Uchiha killed her more ways than one and there was more wreckage that she never wanted to acknowledge but would have to someday. He made her heart a vast nothingness when he stripped away the things that breathed in her humanity, making a terrible enemy out of her that desired success more than his decades of schemes. He had flung her into his abyss, knowing she will never rise again, watching with dark eyes at the madness he borne into his fragmented world.

She clasped her hand to her left eye, her vision a sporadic dance as her past and the current present collided in the darkness and light. The ruined faces were a stark contrast to the lack of three; one an image of devastation whilst the other of untainted completion.

She loved her village but it was burnt out in her mind, she loved its vibrancy but it was painful to stare. She loved the people she used to take into her arms and smile at but she couldn't stop comparing them to the pale faces and their stillness, and she realized that she was not okay. There were too many nuances to the things she loved – uncomplicated they once were – too many triggers of what it had been and what it will be. She had to walk away from the disorganized streets that made up the heart of her village because the kunoichi couldn't stand the wonderful smells that were diffused into the air, the constant laughter that she yearned to be part of and the bright lights that lit up the streets while the innocent civilians basked underneath its beauty.
She knows she doesn't belong, nor does she deserve to stand where they stood.

She needed to draw a line to keep her sane, a distinct one where monochromes could never mix, to tell herself that she had more things to do than enjoy what she already has in another time. She came back with an agenda; she enforced strictly, to ensure that that the fragile peace remained the way it was.

Before she realized it, the kunoichi found herself in a small clearing in the midst of imaginary graves, rows upon rows of white stone placed on bloodied soil, its distance from one another equal and apart. There was enough space for kneeling but not enough for one to lie prostrate, its burials different from the norm as tombs were cramped into the limited land.

Half-expectant to see a wide cenotaph engraved with a thousand names materialize from thin air, she stared unblinkingly at the empty space in confusion before she caught herself again.

"Right, this is the past," Naruto said out loud. "This is the past," she repeated to ground herself, raking her fingers through her hair out of habit and relief. The piece of land she stood would never have to be hollowed out for graves and the line of trees that skirted the edges would never have to be cleared to make room for more.

Her mood lightened at the realization, but her hands ached as if a hammer and nail were in her grasp, with a list of long names scribbled roughly on paper that burned her pockets. The phantom pain that crept up her arms forced into motion, slightly numb from the hours it was made to rise, to chisel each name carefully into basalt, both in respect and regret.

Naruto meandered around hallucinated structures with closed eyes, sometimes pausing to ponder and pray. The path she traversed was long and winded as she took her time, inching closer to the fringe of trees with each stop where she buried him last.

Finally sequestered by the greenery, she knelt down on the ground like a dutiful soldier, her hand tentatively caressing the air as if it was the stone that was cold to the touch. Her palm move along the elaborate structure she carved, feeling every ridge, groove and imperfection and words of veneration unconsciously slip from her pale lips. Her fingers imagined that it traced the name that was etched into solidarity, each kanji stroke mapped out with his clan symbol next to it. She traced the words son, teacher, friend and another that was scrapped off in the process of engraving, before it stopped at the bolder indented words of his final title.

Her hand abruptly clenched into a fist and she shattered the illusion.

"Why do you always spend so much time here?"

"Maa, someone has to pray for the dead when there's no one left."

With a graceful flourish, the girl rose.

"Promise me,"

Her eyes slowly open, the colors flickering from crimson to cerulean and vermillion again.

Naruto inhaled and exhaled deeply, her body posture loosening slightly.

She had things to do, and places to be.

Like every well-respected Shinobi she knew, Naruto came through the window of his office in a
swirl of leaves. The door was an obsolete invention that hung off its iron hinges and the secretary was an illusion of forewarnings with her methodology since she decided to disregard the existence of both, choosing her own alternate route.

She paid no heed to the imminent danger she was in when she came to a halt, completely unperturbed by the masked men that descended upon her with glinting metal in their grasp. The kunai were pointed dangerously at the back of her throat, heart and spine, but she casually smoothed out her skirt that fluttered close to her skin.

"Hokage-sama," she smiled, flicking away the imaginary dust on her shoulder.

The kunai poised at her throat swiped towards her face at her display of insolence and she merely shifted her head backwards although it was slightly more than she intended. The weapon quickly veered off-course just as a sharp gust of wind intercepted, simultaneously disarming the elite assassin and sending the offensive object flying towards the wall.

The sound of metal splintering wood echoed in the silent room.

"Did I command you to attack the girl, Tiger?" demanded the Second God of Shinobi icily. His killing intent washed over the entire space and the perpetuator flinched as he was forced to a kneeling posture of submission. The other two of the cell knelt down soon after, their kunai abandoned on the ground next to them.

"It was not our intention to disobey you, Hokage-sama," another elite guard uttered.

"And yet you have," condemned the Hokage. "I will not tolerate such a mistake next time and I expect you to reflect on your actions later. Get out of my sight. Leave."

At his words, the ANBU disappeared as fast as they came, not even a visible trace of their involvement except for the awkward metal that stuck out of the wall. His murderous mien receded as if it was a switch and he offered her a harmonious albeit apologetic smile.

"I'm sorry about that, Naruto."

She shrugged and waved her hand dismissively at his apology. "It's fine. It is not every day an unregistered civilian shushins into the Hokage's office, 'ttebane."

He gave her a conspiratorial look. "It happens more than you realize."

Rolling her eyes at his insinuations, she resisted from sticking out her tongue childishly at the older man and settled for the chair instead, "Whatever makes you sleep at night, Jiji."

The affection term that she addressed him by made him sink into a somber and contemplative mood. By association, the term was inextricably linked to happier moments and its tragedies, but the latter was more potent a reminder. It dominated majority of her memories nearing the end and even without them, her emotions had warped her joyous ones with a darker tone.

Hiruzen was no stranger to war and the disgusting happenings exclusive to it – he lived through two and was living through another, and he knows how it can plague a person.

He propped his arms up on the table and steepled his fingers. "Can you release you Henge for me?" he requested softly.

Don't ever hide from me, he silently conveyed, his eyes trained on her changing appearance that occurred with the brightening privacy and barrier seals that was her background.
He compared the two – one young and another in her prime – where the haunted dark blue eyes remained constant in the difference of stature. One raised hackles with the power storm she brought overhead, her body well-toned, trained and beautiful as she stepped on the battlefield. It spoke nothing of her plight that she hid within her experienced bones but it was the perfect portrayal of the power she attained through sheer will. The other, perhaps a better description of her broken psyche, was small, vulnerable and frail, her lanky limbs needing protection from the torrent of woes. She tried to bear the weight of the world that only she understands, but she was still powerless even with a straightened back.

"What is your full name and who are your parents?"

"My name is Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto, coded under the Shinobi Registration as 0102607. My parents are Uzumaki Kushina, the second Kyuubi Jinchūriki after Uzumaki Mito: 007310 and Namikaze Minato: 006510."

He counterchecked the information he had with a slight nod, "How old were you when you arrived?"

"Twenty-two,"

He does not equate maturity with a number. "What was your position?"

"The third Jinchūriki of the Kyuubi and Elite Jōnin of Konoha," she instantaneously replied before she hesitated. Her voice is lower than before and he strained his ears to hear her answer, "And next in line for Nanadaime Hokage."

His eyes hold pain as he took in her fragility. What shattered you so irrevocably, child? He wanted to ask, that you would refuse or abandon the title you sought for and were bequeathed?

"Was there another war?"

Her nails dig into the leather of the chair as she spat her answer out through gritted teeth, "Yes."

"Was Konoha…?"

"Destroyed? Ruined? Vanquished?" She intercepted with a few choice words, overwhelmingly bitter. She trembled. "But—" she paused, her chakra briefly flaring a dangerous color—"never again. It will never happen again." She sounded ferocious as if she was speaking to the enemy himself, her beast's anger combined with hers in a show of red.

He shivered at the killing intent that was far denser than his own, but his Hi no Ishi burnt equally bright. "And what are your plans?"

She calmed and responded in riddles, but it was all she could afford.

The blood left her eyes but deep blues held more devastation than red ever could. Naruto sighed and gazed at him with tiredness that did not belong to a child. "Everything began before my actual birth, Jiji. I'm not sure when exactly, but it does. I know little beyond the fact that the Third Shinobi War has dawned upon Konoha," she looked at the distant setting sun behind him, "And when it ends, everything will begin anew. We will have a few years before everything starts spiraling again. I can't offer you much details for now, but I swear that when its closer and I have more accurate information, you will be the first I confide in."

He felt humbled by her trust. "That is not what I meant, Naruto," he chided lightly. "My question was what are you going to do?"
Confusion flitted across her expression. "Recover my strength..?" she replied, her words trailing off.

Hiruzen barked out a short laugh and shook his head. "You still misunderstand me, Naruto. Before you can execute you plans, have you ever considered how you are going to reintegrate back into the village? You have no connections to anyone as it now stands." He continued to list. "You are just a refugee, a civilian applicant and a potential Shinobi as far as your records are concerned."

_Oh shit_. Her mouth gaped open in horror. _He wouldn't_—

"You would either have to be reintroduced to the Shinobi system through the Academy—"

"Please don't make me go back," she cut in pleadingly, praying that her eyesight was failing her and there wasn't actually an evil glint in his eye.

"—or have an apprenticeship to explain your absence." Her thoughts drifted to a certain toad-loving Sannin that was akin to a father figure.

The Hokage gave her a knowing look. "And of the two choices, we both know which one you would prefer."

She nodded reluctantly. There was no denying that the terrible experiences of book reading and bullying would always stay in the confines of the classroom that she called her childhood. It was the main center of the baseless vitriol she was exposed to, and even as the sharp words dulled with the eventual acceptance she received, it still scarred. The girl preferred if she never had to relieve the time where she was perpetually glued to a wooden bench, in the midst of laughter, nasty teachers or kind smiles and the screech of chalk across the blackboard.

Catching the scroll he threw at her, she unraveled it, her nails scratching across the paper in a slow drawl. Her eyes widened in praise as she studied the arrangements he made specifically for her.

On the scroll, the documents she needed were already sealed in one segment of the storage. It covered everything from her new birth certificate and credentials to her housing lease and stipend, making her a bona fide citizen of Konohagakure no Sato.

Majority of the space, however, was taken up by her old personal effects that he had managed to reclaim for her through biased clearance. Her fingers brushed against the ancient character that held her only tangible reminder of the past, feeling gratitude towards the man that sat in front of her.

When Naruto finally read the last portion of the information, she looked up at the Professor in surprise. "You actually got me an apprenticeship?"

"Yes," he nodded solemnly. "In fact, it will be the reason why your entire cover story will work. Your teacher is reputable but little of the current generation actually knows about her since she chooses to live in utmost secrecy. Her specialization will be of use to you in the future and an apprenticeship is often more flexible in nature when it comes to schedules which I presume you need."

She nodded seriously at his correct assumption. His gaze became increasingly stern. "I must forewarn you that this teacher will not be like the rest that you studied under. She has little tolerance for juvenile acts and I have assured her as such. I had to call in quite a few favors for this and I would appreciate if you do not embarrass me."

She scoffed. "What do you take me for, Jiji?" He stared back at her impassively.

Naruto sighed and raised her hand in surrender. She supposed that she should take this more
seriously or there would be complications later. Running through the description that the Hokage
gave her again, her eyebrows scrunched at a certain peculiarity. She raised her head to look at him.
"No names?"

"You will receive it when she allows it," he explained. "Her name, like her respect, is earned."

"And what did she specialize in..?" There was nothing beyond the brief details of what was required
of her and the address where her apprenticeship would be conducted.

Hiruzen gave her a cryptic smile, "I will leave that for your teacher to address." He paused
momentarily, "She would prefer that. So what is your official alibi?"

"My unknown teacher—"there was distinct mockery present—"took me in as her student after she
found me on one of her missions when I was just four years old. I don't remember much beyond the
fact that I lived off the streets and that I have no recollection of my parents and so she pitied me. She
resigned as a Shinobi soon after and has been training me ever since," recited the girl monotonously.

Nodding in acquiescence to her words, he pushed himself out of his chair and walked to the spot in
front of his table. She followed his actions with curious eyes as she rolled up the scroll and carefully
stored it in one of her pockets.

"Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto," intoned the Hokage, his tone suddenly grave. The said kunoichi
tensed when she recognized the domineering aspect in his tone that demanded for obedience, and her
expression faded into a blank mask. She stood up from her chair, her movements noiseless as she
dropped to her knees like she had done thousands of times, staring at the ground respectfully. She
waited with a bated breath for his verdict.

"As of 15 October, 53 years After Konoha's Founding, your identity as Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto
will be classified as an S-Class secret. Any information about you preceding this moment will be
sealed away in the Hokage's storage and no one will be privy to your information unless you choose
to reveal it." The jinchūriki shivered because it felt like déjà vu all over again. "From this moment
forth, you will bear the false name and identity of Kara: 011007 and under the Hokage's jurisdiction,
you are promoted to Chūnin for your efforts in our allied village of Kibana no Sato, which is now an
A-rank mission. Your status, however, will only be conferred to you officially when you have
recovered your strength appropriately. Until then, you will be known as a Gennin who will not be
eligible for missions and information about your contribution will be suppressed. Any further
promotion will be granted based on merit and no privilege will be given to you despite your special
circumstance.

"Hence, I ask, are you willing to bear the weight of the Hi no Ishi once more and protect the leaves
of the great tree, Kara of Konohagakure no Sato?"

Her heart pounded thunderously. "I solemnly swear to protect the village of Konohagakure no Sato
until my last dying breath."

"And what will you sacrifice to protect our village?" implored the Hokage sagely.

She spoke clearly with fervour. "I will sacrifice everything I am—"she placed a hand on her heart
—"including my life, body, soul and future."

"Will you proudly bear the mark of a Konoha kunoichi, fighting when you are called upon and
under the absolute command of the current and succeeding Hokage?"

"I solemnly swear that my loyalty belongs only to the village and that the Hokage's words are my
command. I pledge to be the sword and the shield of the village, and that every word I swear is the absolute truth. My body is at Her disposal and it will be my hand that strikes down Her enemies."

"Then rise, Kara of Konohagakure no Sato," Hiruzen ordered, his voice powerful.

She obeyed, eyes crystalline blue as she stared at the man before her with undying devotion. He placed a familiar blue hitat-ate in her hands, smiling at her with satisfaction. "Bear the village's name with pride just as you have done before, and may your glory make the nations tremble with your affiliation and name."

The said Shinobi returned his smile with her own trademark grin. Her fingers curled around the metal and cloth protectively. "I humbly accept."

A set of teeth gleamed in the dark mindscape, 'At last.'

At last, she agreed, the symbol of her village weighing heavily in her hands.

…

Naruto pursed her lips as she stared at the house before her, counterchecking the small slip of paper in her hands before looking at the address again.

The house looked like something that she would find on the Senju or the Uchiha clan grounds, deriving straight from the older houses that were built around Konoha's Founding. In its wide expanse in width and length, it only had a single floor and stood on stilts that separated wood from soil. It looked slightly out of place in one of the isolated districts of the village as most of the houses surrounding it had upgraded to two storey buildings or more to match up with the current times.

She shrugged and allowed herself into the open door, her hand dragging across the nameless nameplate, feeling the smooth unmarked metal underneath her skin. The inhabitant did not bother to carve their own family name despite having lived in the house for a long time, and it was clearly not neglected as evident from the small garden that was well trimmed. Naruto walked through many doors and she closed each one as she passed it, going deeper and deeper into the house. But she made sure that she was not being routed around in circles like an idiot as she took note of the general direction that she moved, leaving chakra imprints on every furniture that she periodically touched.

The Shinobi was not blind to the temporary partitions that were set up although it was directly positioned in the middle of the tatami mat lines. Well-placed as they were, some were too dependent on the shadows of the night to hide its imperfections and seals could never hide from her trained eye. It irked her, however, that she could not pinpoint the chakra signature that faded in and out of her sensors, a deficiency that she was not used to.

The entire scheme didn't end until she finally arrived at one of the larger rooms that were dimly lit, with the smell of incense and its smoke wafting around in a spectre-like manner. The wisps danced as they rose, drifting around the room and partially irradiated by the light that hung overhead. It was not an unpleasant smell; she concluded, for the fusion of dried lavender and smoke was pleasing and calming to the nose.

The kunoichi shut the door cautiously before she settled in the cushion in front of her clumsily, her eyes searching for clues. Beneath the almost intoxicating scents, she could vaguely make out the smell of natural earth seeping in from the small gaps on her left. The faint sound of water meeting water only confirmed her thoughts, and with every five seconds, a bamboo shoot would knock against another before tilting back upwards again. A Zen garden, she supposed, which wasn't an uncommon feature amongst older houses and generations alike.
On her right was another closed door but there was nothing to make of it as it smelt like the rest. The open entrance in front of her on the other hand, had a curtain hanging down from the frame, the fabric thin and motionless, allowing some light to enter the dark connecting room.

She squirmed uncomfortably as her apprehension of watching eyes got worse. The dried lavender did little to soothe her nerves while her thick chakra coils pulsed faintly beneath her, irritated by something unknown.

"You are intelligent and observant, child," a voice suddenly called out, its timbre soft and alluring. Then the speaker sighed melodiously, "But not enough."

The air before her distorted slightly and a woman clad in kimono materialized behind the curtain, her features hazy due to the thin blinds that separated them. Her womanly curves and the sharpness of her face were obscure but green eyes still pierced her despite the slight obstruction and Naruto felt bare and silenced underneath her scrutiny.

Quietly, the girl cursed at herself for not realizing the subtle genjutsu that was casted in the room ever since she entered and her complacency towards the remnants of chakra still hanging in the air. It was her mistake, and it would be a lesson she would learn.

Her new teacher continued to speak ponderously. "Your clumsiness and your vulnerabilities tend to show your darkness and that will not do. They are habits that will have to be erased and it will be one of the issues that I will have to tackle." She clicked her tongue in distaste. "Shame. We have better things to do than that."

Her tone was like a sharp knife and cold intent seeped out from the woman in a purposeful manner. "And I would prefer if you refrain from bringing an imperfect disguise into my household, Kara. It is a blatant mockery towards my old specialization and in this household where I rein, only my truths exist."

With a snap of her fingers, the Henge that Naruto donned on disappeared into nothingness. The exposure made her inhale in shock and her hands gripped onto her skirt as she watched obsidian strip down to blonde. Her prominent, deepened birthmarks appeared on her face but her eyes remained red as she hissed at the provoker who took away her cover.

The woman was not intimidated by the child who made up for her powerlessness with presence. She gave her ultimatum with an impassive tone, uncaring about the primal growl that ripped from her student's throat. "If you are disgruntled about it, overwrite my truths with yours and I will accept it. Until then, you will play by my rules in my house and you will retain your real appearance unless you can hide it flawlessly."

Her teacher rose to her feet. "Now tell me child, what do you know about being a kunoichi?"

Red returned to blue as she breathed, "A female Shinobi that proficient in the basics of Ninjutsu, Genjutsu and Taijutsu. Like most Shinobi, they tend to branch out into their own specializations."

The curtain shifted aside and the girl felt awed by the beauty that stood before her, the lady crowned with salt-and-pepper hair and eyes the colour of jade, utterly mesmerizing in appearance and not a year over her early forties. The delicate heart-shaped face shook in disapproval at her answer, slightly disappointed.

"The definition and the job scope of a kunoichi have changed with the times," she lectured softly, her left foot heavier than her right. "With bloodlines, we were honoured for our skills that came with it. With the popularization of the Iryō-nin under Tsunade-sama's strength and the clauses she
established, it has become another healthy alternative for us to seek."

"It is not wrong to have more choices," she said mildly. *Ideally choices I wish that were available earlier.* "But there is something about our profession – an uglier part of it – that will always remain, hidden in the dark and sometimes scorned upon."

Her teacher settled behind her and Naruto did not move. Her long, aged fingers slowly gathered tendrils of hair to the back of her shoulders and nails slowly combed through her blonde tresses that reached the floor.

"Kunoichi in my generation were often casted into the roles of espionage and seduction, you see." She sighed, tone wistful. "Those were the humble beginnings of the kunoichi: we were risen from the brothel houses and theatres behind enemy lines where we used our bodies and learnt craft for information, and it is one of the dirtiest and most damaging jobs that anyone could do. It is little surprise that not many are willing to uptake such a role, no matter how necessary it is to drive a village made out of our profession. It explains why the number of kunoichi – civilian or noble born alike – were so few. We started our careers early and ended it with marriage as soon as we could since the village leader was not allowed to order married kunoichi to compromise their fidelity for the sake of the mission." She chuckled lightly, the bitterness within her tone undeniable.

"No one would want to condemn themselves to such a vocation that hardly aspires trust, and it is far crueller than the current alternatives." The lady could still feel their rough handprints pressing against her body and the things they did to her. "We do not receive recognition for the work we do because the most successful ones are the cleanest; without trace or sound. It is neither forgiving nor easy. It is demanding for both our mind and body to cope with the fear that comes along with it, but someone has to be willing." *And in the past, that person was me.*

Under her deft hands, Naruto's hair was a woven tapestry, an intricate braid forming with each twist and tug of fragile strands.

"Always remember: your body is a temple, Kara," her teacher murmured, nails raking across the back of her neck pleasurably. "It can be a formidable weapon or the reason of your demise. And my job is to teach you how to wield it like a tampered sword."

"And what will you teach me, sensei?" Her scalp prickled under the tight pull.

"Under my guide, you will learn the art of language, seduction and observation," she listed, pausing in between each topic to place emphasis on it. "You will learn how to turn everything into a weapon, be it poisons, emotions or anything and everything that surrounds you. Your body and looks will become your craft and with it, you will learn how to gather information from places and how to escape. If need be, you will also learn to keep your mouth shut."

She tightened the braid with a hair tie and she gently draped it on her right shoulder. Her hand remained on it for a moment before it moved down her arms slowly. "Your mind is my mould and you will absorb what I teach within the given timeframe. I cannot promise you that this will not break your perceptions of the world because it definitely will. Just as my teachers broke my naive perceptions, it is only kind if I do the same for yours, if only to ensure your future success. Everything from here on out will be difficult on your psyche and your body."

"Your body is a temple," she reiterated quietly. "It is a tool for the village to wield and She expects your obedience. Your identity will be nothing in the missions that you will have to uptake. You will become deceit, and all that it is, even it means nothingness."

Cerulean eyes remained resolute with a certain darkness as it stared ahead. She committed each word
to memory, her respect for the woman rising because she could sense the truth in her words.

"But if there is one important thing I hope to impart, is that no one can be your ruin unless you allow them to," The sound she made was a haunted whisper next to her ear. "I will teach you how to live with them, with the demons you attempt to hide. I will teach you how to survive."

"Remember: in this house, nothing will get out." The last open door shuts.

In the dim darkness, blue eyes dull. "Yes, shishō," Kara replied, bowing to her teacher who had a small smile on her full lips.

She doesn't care for pleasantries when it concerned her but she suppose it was good to start practicing early. "Your lessons will begin this instant, and I expect you at my house every evening until midnight."

The girl repeated her reply again in obedience, and momentarily, she forgot her woes.

She was just Kara – an empty entity with much to learn.

"Promise me," his eyes implore.

...

"Survive. When this all ends, I want you to come out alive."

Omake: Tamamo Ezume

"What brings you here, Hokage-sama?" asked the lady politely. His title rolls off her tongue like a melodious tune from a siren's lips and she does not look at him as she speaks. Her actions were deliberate as she distractedly pushed a cup of tea to him, her body leaning forward with an elegance of woman bred in pedigree.

Hiruzen accepted the beverage with wary hands, his eyes and nose searching for a foreign element within. "I have a favor to ask of you, Tamamo Ezume," he begins demurely, his voice soft and compelling, "A favor of utmost importance that I am hoping you will allow."

Calculative green eyes glowed in the dimness with false surprise. She places her hand on her unblemished cheek with a faint scar peeking from her sleeve of her garb as she purses her full lips. "I have long retired from my field of work, Hokage-sama. You have graciously allowed me to do so, have you not?" There was an unknown edge behind her tone.

"Not for a mission, Tamamo-san," he corrected, "For an apprenticeship."

She frowned. "Is there truly a need for the likes of my skills once more?" Her lower lip jutted out slightly.

"The eight year old girl that you will teach needs the training."

Her gaze slices him but he holds it steady. The liquid in his cup shake slightly while she reveals nothing about the sentiments she conjured, a reaction befitting of a skilled disguiser. "With all due respect Hokage-sama, my specialization is not meant for children." She said the last word in disdain.

"The girl—"he emphasizes back to her slowly—"is not an ordinary child. She is a qualified and graduated Shinobi with potential. I guarantee you she is mature enough to take up your
specialization." He doesn't continue to brief the lady about the mysterious child, and similarly, she was quick to understand that there were far more secrets that she had to dig.

"And what do you intend to do with an orphan that has no roots to the village?"

"I want to nurture her growing talents. She has shown much potential and I believe that she will be useful for the village with due time," Hiruzen replied in a matter-of-factly tone.

"And I seem to recall that you were against my specialization in the past," Ezume gave back coldly. He thinks of the young man that once pleaded the lady to stay.

"I still do," he enforces, his brown eyes unkind. "But more often than not, necessity tends to supersede want, don't you agree?" He returns the fire she previously threw, spark for spark, although in this conversation he will always lose.

But the truth was clear, that she knows, because they were the exact same words that she offered when he once pleaded her not to go.

"Necessity is more important than want, Hiruzen. It is always duty before desire and the sake of all rather than one. This is for Konoha, for the greater good of more."

"If you truly require me to teach, then I have a few requests to make," she declares after taking a sip of her tea. "I am past my prime," she murmured, self-aware as her fingers thread through the end of her loose braid, "And you often say: without Heaven, seek Wisdom and without Earth, run the Fields."

He nods calmly in agreement. "So you expect her to seek her physical training elsewhere while you teach her the theoretical and practical aspects of your specialization?"

"Precisely," she praised and her kimono shifts. "There is much to be taught, but I do not intend for her to become my replica. She will develop her own style while still retaining my legacy, and she must find company elsewhere while training her body. It would be beneficial for her to know more people than less."

He swears he hears some regret in her sentence, but he does not comment about it. "That can be arranged."

Her set of white teeth peek through her smile. It was small with an underlying coldness that screams of danger, but he remains calm as if he was desensitized to the scene. "And I expect strict obedience from the child. She will learn what is necessary in a few years under my tutelage, no more, no less. If she forgets, it will be the fault that she has to bear. If she listens well and absorbs, she will thrive. She is her own person, and she will learn what she lacks from experience and blood. I will not coddle her just because you have a vested interest in her, Hokage-sama."

The man thinks of the girl's memories and sighs inaudibly. Perhaps if she truly possessed the temperment she had as a child, it would be a problem. But the world had hardened Naruto into a stoic and tormented lady, clinging onto a shred of her idealist optimism she finds hard-pressed to believe in her pessimism. He knows the determination that crawls beneath her exterior which was empowered by darker matters and that cannot be fixed by anyone but time. He did not doubt that the time-traveler would take to those lessons like a man who reached oasis after being deprived of water, soaking in the liquid information as a distraction and need.

"I promise you her obedience," he finally swears with much pathos.

Her eyes dull from a lustrous jade to the color of a forest snake in scrutiny. "She truly isn't an
ordinary child, is she?" she asks, realizing darkness that looms overhead from cold reading.

He shakes his head, and the sadness in his expression is something she hasn't seen for a long time, especially since he became the leader of the village. "She isn't and I truly wished that it wasn't the case."

"Has much calamity befallen that girl that you would take pity on her, Hokage-sama?"

His reflection on the translucent liquid ripples. "Far too much," he sighs, feeling the fatigue creep up his mind. "Far too much." He looks up at her with a helpless frown. "And more than just pity, perhaps there is some empathy buried within it as well."

His vague description reminds her faintly of herself and she draws her lips into a thin line subconsciously. "Then I accept to tutor the child under the conditions that I have already given. I expect her presence at tomorrow evening in this house."

He clears his throat and takes the last gulp of his tea. It leaves a bitter aftertaste in his mouth but he accepts it and moves on. "Thank you for accepting this favor, Tamamo-san. It was selfish for me to ask that of you, but I am grateful that you allowed it. I apologize for staying longer than I should have as well."

The Hokage gets up to leave.

She doesn't stop him because she never has and she doesn't have the right to. "It was humbling to see you again, Hokage-sama. It has been awhile since we have been able to talk while sharing tea."

"It has been," he agrees.

Deep inside, he knows that the next encounter will be unlikely. The retired kunoichi slowly gets to her feet but she falters slightly due to her right foot slipping. Yet, she expects no assistance from him as she recovers herself.

"Shall I show you out?"

"No need," he muttered, his fist clenching slightly.

He turned his body away, his movements strong and smooth even for his age. He was reaching the end of his summers as a man, and the slight hunch and the graying hairs spoke volumes of his phase.

"Say, Ezume," he pauses at the sliding door as he reverts to an informal tone. "If you were to ever name a child, what would it be?"

"Kara," she replied, her head still bowed in his direction.

"And why did you choose that name?"

"Sometimes it is far easier to have a name that reflects your personality rather than one that is a cruel irony, Hokage-sama," she said lowly, pausing for a moment before she speaks again. "And sometimes, it is far easier to be empty rather than be full of emotions."

He raises his eyebrow and his brown eyes are filled with even more melancholy, but she does not see it. "Speaking from experience, Ezume?"

"It is what it is asked of from Shinobi, Hiruzen," replied the lady tiredly. "It always has been."

"And yet, you once possessed the chance to change that for yourself." But you did not take it.
She does not reply as she settles back to her seat with careful movements and the grace of a courtesan. He does not continue the fruitless conversation, knowing that it was somewhat a sore spot for both of them, and this time, he was the one that leaves.

There was once a time where he loved her as a foolish boy, enthralled by her mere presence and dazzled by her beauty. He loved the girl with almond-shaped eyes that were cast in jade with sharp features that were framed by the darkest ebony of hair. She was older than he was and seen more darkness than he has and he could not turn away from her, stuck onto her like a leech or a man who had seen the light for the first time.

But that was a time in the past.

He soon came to realize that she was unable to reciprocate the love and admiration that he held for her, and she believed that she was always meant to be alone.

She was duty-bound to a different role than he, and it was a role he could not understand in his youth. While he took on the position of leader and did many heinous things he would never be proud of, she thrived in his darkness. It gave her missions to finish off what he started, to instill the fear of an invisible yet tangible monster under his command in his enemies. She was excellent but such skill came with a hefty price he could not pay.

Her craft could never offer him the fidelity he wanted. She could never give him the trust that a partner needed, neither could her companionship be constant with the missions that could stretch on for years. She tries to deny it but her changing characters always affected her imperceptibly, no matter how hard she tried to erase them.

She was disguise and deceit, and her reach and ability knew no bounds. Tamamo Ezume was a valuable soldier and a powerful weapon, but she was not a lover other than one that sought for a night's rest. She could be a loyal friend but never a wife, for she believed her body was too experienced and tainted by the pleasures of other men. She could not live with the thought of sleeping beside another because she has always done such a thing for a mission and missions alone.

Her exterior was superficial as she treated it like a tool, using it to get what she wanted. Her inner workings were chained to duty, the rattling metal and locks wrapping around her like a dress that coiled around her and without its key. Similar to Danzo, neither could be separated from the darkness they willingly accepted, dwelling in the roots of the great tree, carefully nurturing from below.

He loved her but it would never bear fruit, her landscape an endless field in a basin but infertile. She held a place in his heart but he was only given a small part of her own mind. She was everything to him at a point in his life but he was nothing more than a fleeting thought, the casual warmth of a friend that she would return to after dark days.

He did not manage to break the spell until very much later and only because his own delusions could not hold water against the concept called reality. He does not regret having loved her, no matter how bittersweet or worthless, but he wished he had known earlier and pursued the woman that he currently loves who returned his affections with equal measure rather than the unattainable.

Tamamo Ezume was beauty and grace – but she belonged to no one and only to Konoha’s embrace.
Trivia behind the names:

Tamamo-no-mae (玉藻の前): A legendary fox spirit who possessed women which corrupted rulers and caused chaos in their territories. The women were typically known to be intelligent and beautiful.

Ezume: Pure water; pond. (There is irony in her name)

Kara or in full, Karappo (空っぽ): Empty, vacant.

From this chapter forth, Kara will be Naruto's new name. She is unlikely to claim her name again in this current timeline so you'll have to bear with this one. I like irony in names a lot.

And her appearance will be whisker-less, black hair and red eyes. I thought that the normal blonde hair, blue eyes was too obvious. There's a reason why I do this, so patience ;)}
Concurrent

\(kənˈkər(ə)nt/\) adjective

Existing, happening, or done at the same time

He was not omniscient.

But when he sleeps, he dreams.

Time matters naught when he enters this infinite plane, where he harmonizes with all that is around him and what encompassed of Earth; breathing in its quintessence and basking in its energy, feeling it brush against his leathery skin or become one with him. It is an otherworldly experience to be a part of Nature and Her greater schemes, where he watches Her weave out fates and its crossroads, threading them together into whatever creations She deems fit.

Sometimes, when She was feeling lenient, She would grant him a vision that She has already weaved, with its numerous possibilities branching out into smaller strings for him to perceive. In his old age, he discerns a little less, but he was more careful when he unravels these threads, seeking out the reasons behind Her gracious gift.

Prophecies comes sparingly and with a price; the Sage was heedful to not tilt the balance lest he lost Her trust. He was only a seer because She allows it and it is the role She means for him to play until She collects him for Her own again. So he sits quietly and watches Her work, his chapped and wrinkled lips tight, wary of the people he tells these prophecies to even if he was in his bouts of forgetfulness or immersion.

But today, his dream – his time with Her – was different.

The fabric of fate that moved languidly to Her movements suddenly ripped, the threads coming apart and seams exposed, its smaller structures burning away slowly with reds at its ends before it blackened and halted. It left an ugly hole in the intricate patterns She made, the beauty of what She wishes upon her children now imperfect. But She remains unperturbed as if She expected such an alteration, continuing on Her ends, imaginary fingers never straying from creating new paths. She does not bestow him any answers nor a fleeting look, leaving him to his own machinations about this development that came out of the blue.

Before he can decide his next course of actions, another piece of fabric appears from Below, its own edges singed as it rises and patches. It fills the hollow; the destroyed threads curling around one another to meet and form a new gradient but the awkward contrast in pastels and burnt orange tells him that the interference belonged and yet, it does not.

He glimpses an array of images when the final strings knit and the disturbance is now yesterday. The darker colours start to dye the fabric and he comes to an understanding.

"Fukasaku, Shima," he speaks.

Gamamaru was not the young toad that sits next to Nature in his dreams when he returns to his truthful form: brown skin paling with the age that had seen the Lands of the Ancestors; wizened and
large, the beads of his affiliation hanging heavy around his neck and the weight of his hat inconsequential.

With his awakening, he has another prophecy.

"Ōjiji-sama?" The Nidaisengama reply, yellow eyes staring reverently at the centurion.

"Summon Jiraiya. The fates have changed, and he shall be Her willing listener."

...

Skin and bones.

When she pressed her fingers on her torso, splaying her hand at its full length, she could feel her washboard ribs and the steady thrum of her heart beneath. Resilient as it is - unfailing to the present moment - the rest of her figure was another story. Her skin and thin muscles shaped her bones, forming grooves between the junctures that she could dip her fingers into, lining them perpendicular to her skeletal thinness. Her fingers were small; pliant and breakable, leaving spaces in what should have been full.

It was a throwback into the time where she was an underfed child, sustained by spoilt goods and cheap ramen and the obvious result of neglect and systematic ostracizing. She was once a social pariah with no one she could depend on (nothing has really changed), and returning back to her fragility disgusted her.

While the time period that she dropped into was backwards by four years of her actual birth, her internal time clock remained disappointingly similar. It stayed true to past happenings in terms of physical condition, regressing her to the beginnings of malnourishment. Eight-year-old Uzumaki Naruto of the previous timeline was one who had just escaped from living in squalor, who found solace and intermediate safety in a lonesome apartment, such that her only friends were stray animals that ran away from her.

Cooking back then was a foreign concept, having been dependent on the matron of the orphanage for food, and she had no means to acquire vegetables and poultry that weren't decaying or infested with worms. (She didn't even know that she had been drinking expired milk until the Sandaime told her kindly and in anger.) She could not reach the kitchen sink without a stool and she did not have the best memories with fire. She had no means to learn and literacy was not something everyone was innately born with, so the idea of visiting the library (coupled with the fear of being chased out) never occurred to her and a mentor was definitely out of the question.

Due to her unfortunate circumstances, her main sustenance often came from Ichiraku's. Even then, the bowls of ramen were not sufficient for a Uzumaki-born jinchūriki with high metabolism and her diet was often constrained by a small allowance that she had for the month. She did not think that she could actually ask for more (children did not eat as much as she did anyway) because she certainly did not feel that she deserved it back then.

(Her self-worth was pitifully non-existent; at eight years old, she was just an unstable child who was learning the cruelties of the world. After being exposed to the discrimination for so long, it was no surprise that part of her started believing that she probably deserved it, even if she did not know why.)

But Kara wasn't the same girl from fourteen years past; she was a grown woman that forgave the villagers for a majority of their prejudices and she stopped blaming herself for the things that she could not previously control.
Depressing back to the poor times was rediscovering why she loved that orange jumpsuit of hers all over again. It was not just that the bright colour attracted eyes and fulfilled her almost pathological need for attention. Neither was it because it was the only decent piece of clothing that anyone would sell to her. No, it hid her scrawny frame behind the bulk of fabric and it was the symbol of her quiet determination that she would live even in outrageous colours and her adamant refusal to show the villagers that their unjustified abuse had affected her so badly.

Nevertheless, there was one unchanging thing from past to present.

There will never be an immediate cure for the underweight.

Even if she stopped denying her deficiencies that were born out of negligence, acceptance would not give her back her stronger limbs. There were only wholesome meals and repetition of exercises to negate the effects of her terrible upbringing and this was something that her godfather often lamented about as he forced her to eat. Time that could have been used for better things were invested into fixing her damaged education, lest they wanted those mistakes to spiral down to the consequence of her death, and to be put back into the same situation again was just...

Terrible, to say the least.

Kara hated that weakness, especially when she finally knew true strength.

She hated being vulnerable and unable to protect herself properly.

What was the point of her coming back if she was just a liability?

Gnashing her teeth, her bandaged arms slammed into the training post with greater ferocity, speed unreleenting against the pain. The cloth the covered the entirety of her arms were long soaked in blood, bits of wooden splinters sticking out of her skin and the remnants of another broken log post lying feet away. Her limbs were shivering from the strain - the ache reaching deep into her bones - weighted like she was carrying a full-grown body for hours while her mind begged for the rest. Kara refused to give in despite edging on collapse, repeating the set of kata repeatedly until it was beaten into her.

Shorter limbs, she slammed her split knuckles into the post. The kunoichi grimaced. If only her thwarted muscle memory could reset itself. Faster. Stronger, she chanted, leg snapping up and ramming into the solid structure at hip-height. She punched the post successively, alternating her fists, until she formed marks on the wood with indents and blood.

BAM!

With a loud thud, the training post finally cracked, caved in by her small fist and splintering awfully inwards. The upper section flew from impact, rolling pathetically to a stop some distance away. Kara stared at the remaining portion of the broken stump in dissatisfaction, having wished for a cleaner or more violent ending.

Wishes. She scorned. She preferred to make things reality rather than just empty words.

Sighing, she fell back first. "I really hate time travelling," announced Kara, a raspy growl emitting from parched lips.

'I know,' replied Kurama dryly. 'You have taken the opportunity to profess your undying feelings for the concept every day thus far and your commitment to it is almost puzzling. I do wonder if you will ever tire of saying it.'
"I will stop saying it when comforting others becomes your strong suit," she offered.

'I do not need to comfort when I only hold conversations with either you or my siblings. Hardly ideal company, I would like to think,' retorted the Kyuubi as his host glared in reply.

'What would you have me say anyway? That if 'time-travel' were capable of thought, your feelings of hatred would be mutual as well?' He paused briefly, claws rapping on tiled grounds. 'While the hypothesis is probably correct, I find no use in pursuing an asinine endeavour of pointless hatred against 'time travel' when I tagged along willingly. Rationally speaking, fourteen years is a rather generous price when we consider the possibilities that time-travel has opened up for you.'

"It's only easy for you to say because you're not even affected by it," said the jinchūriki hotly. "Fourteen years is nothing to you considering how old and senile you are-" Kurama rolled his eyes-"but for me, it wasn't just time. Those years were my time of development."

'And all that has happened with time-travel is that the time for development has arrived once more.'

She lifted her hands skywards to look at her regenerating hands and the new callouses. "That's not it. I just- I don't like to feel weak," she conveyed in frustration, fists clenching as if to grab onto something that was tangible and yet intangible simultaneously, "I've been weak and I know how it feels but it never gets easier. It's not fun to have the strength that I achieved over the years through effort being ripped away from me like it was nothing. I didn't even have a chance to grab onto it, 'ttebane. I just became eight all over again," she concluded miserably. Powerless. Weak.

'Stop thinking about the lost strength and look forward to the new that you can create with the knowledge you already possess then,' said the ancient simply, as if it was an absolute in the world. While his sentience is no less complex than her own mind, his eons of existence allowed him to see the simplest answers in the most complex questions. 'Your progression is significantly better than your previous timeline and common mortals would laud you a genius in the making. The old potential that you once lost in the condemnation can be regained once more - a silver lining of sorts - and you can rise to greater heights should you truly work hard for it. Time has become your strongest ally; a gift that you have brought into fruition and it is one that you should revel in for the next two decades.'

She stared, repressing the urge to ask if their fall onto Earth had actually hurt his head. The fox was seldom withheld his opinions and hearing his genuine brand of kindness was odd.

"... I take back my previous statement, 'ttebane." the jinchūriki finally mumbled, silently honoured.

'What do you mean by that?'

"Don't ask." Despite raising his eyebrows, he dropped it the topic. 'Have it your way then. However, I do insist that you pull out those splinters in your hand though. Being used to the pain is hardly an appropriate excuse for leaving them in, unless splinters are good substitutes for knuckle bracers. Really, you would think that age increase the common sense that one possessed, not take it away.'

Annnnnd it's back. "Your very existence defies common sense," she replied drolly. "Who would ever have thought that a mass of chakra could have a consciousness?"
'I do not expect mere mortals to understand my greatness of my conception,' he informed her seriously. 'While I would extend on the ways in which I am great, I was talking about you lacking sense.'

"I make plenty of sense," she disagreed, "You just don't understand my train of thought."

'If the result of understanding your train of thought is insanity, I would gladly pass.'

"I am not insane," said Kara solemnly. "Genius, however?" she smirked, "I definitely am."

'I do not think that re-planning and redrawing the same time-travel construct constitutes as ingenuity. If anything, it sounds like actions of the mentally unstable,' deadpanned the Kyuubi.

"That's called hard work and commitment, I'll have you know!" she cried in mock outrage. Kurama scowled at her smugness. "I mean, it worked, didn't it? And don't speak like you don't constantly wish on your irrational desire to see your father again."

'I do yearn to be in the presence of my father again,' Kurama acknowledged. 'But it is only because I want to see the world as he saw it. I desired answers, not change. I draw the lines between what is realistically attainable and what is not, and I abide by those lines. You completely disregard it.'

Holding her ground, her posture remained defiant to his cynicism. 'You think it's impossible,' her cerulean blue eyes gleamed, 'But it does not make me insane to try and do otherwise. I don't care if it's forbidden. I don't fall until I die.'

'And is that not madness turned insanity?' He questioned, eyebrows quirking. Yet, the ancient admired her for unending strength (even in her brokenness, he later adds), a trait that synonymous to Uzumaki Naruto - the same trait that once won him over. It edged dangerously close to suicidal and he daresay that no other mortal could conjure up such intense emotions other than her.

'The world is already mad,' she shrugged, her grin sharp as she pulled out another splinter. 'I'm just following the trend.'

'No, you make your own trend,' said Kurama dryly. 'No one will ever match your desperation. And no one in the right mind would be up before the break of dawn - mere hours after your class, might I remind you - to train until they are verging on collapse. Only you do such a thing.'

"Eat your words," Kara told him indignantly. "There's a pair approaching us at top speed and I'm pretty sure it is for training as well."

'But the key phrase lies in 'verging on collapse'. The company that is approaching are healthy with restraints. You ought to take a leaf out of their book.'

"DON'T EVER GIVE UP GAI! LET YOUR FLAMES OF YOUTH BURN BRIGHT!"

Kara froze when the intensely green chakra signatures came under her radar.

"BUT TOU-SAN-"

No way.

"NO COMPLAINTS, MY BOY! PERSEVERANCE MAKES A GREAT SHINOB! IF YOU DOUBT YOURSELF TODAY, YOU WILL HAVE LESSER HOPE FOR TOMORROW! RUN
LIKE THE TORTOISE, MY SON! YOU CAN DO IT!"

"BUT TOU-SAN, YOU LEFT NINGAME AT THE GATES!"

"DID I SAY TORTOISE? I MEANT WIND! RUN LIKE THE WIND MY SON! SHOW AIR RESISTANCE YOUR MIGHT!"

"Oh, what the fuck," Kara blinked repeatedly, pinching her own arm as she watched the spandex pair closely.

They left dust in their wake as they dashed across the clearing - *no way that's normal running, 'ttebane*, her mind cried - black hair plastered to the nape of their neck and their magnificent eyebrows drooping with sweat. Like the literal wind they went, feeding off each other's energy to continue their tiring marathon, oblivious to the world as they drowned it out with their shouts.

It was tiring just to watch them.

(Part of it was relief that *he* was alive and well, even if he died honourably in the previous timeline. Decidedly, she doesn't ever want him see him burn out like a red beast again, even if it was glorious to witness the man at his apex.)

The time-traveller would never admit this to the future spandex pair in question -

But she never thought she would see the day where she was thankful for the bowl-haircuts they adopted, or the lack of facial hair.

"What were you saying about insanity again?" Kara asked soundlessly.

'*As long as you do not follow their style, I think we will get along just fine, kit.*'

She nodded soundlessly. "You don't have to try and convince me on this one, 'ttebane. I wholeheartedly agree."

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**Omake: The Thing about Destruction**

His head was throbbing.

Whether it was from amusement or the sheer ridiculosity of the fact that half of his Sigma Squad - ANBU operatives that were handpicked by him - were routed so easily by an eight-year-old girl or the amount of destruction that she managed to cause, the Sandaime Hokage could *feel* a headache coming along. It was a weird notion to feel respect for his future self who had to deal with this on a daily basis.

(Then again, his future self probably had it easy. He was currently dealing with *Kara* who was far more skilled than prepubescent Uzumaki Naruto was.)

"Now, Kara-chan, can you please explain to me how this entire situation came to be?" The Hokage asked, rubbing his temples in exasperation. He didn't know want to why his elite soldiers were doused in paint, with singe marks, cuts and ropes burns, but he couldn't run away from his responsibilities now, could he?

He mentally swore at the founding leaders of Konohagakure no Sato.

As if to confirm his thoughts, the prankster queen looked strangely proud. "Well the day begun with
me trying to attempt chakra control exercises," narrated Kara, her eyes distant. "I tried to tree climb but I ended up felling a tree - and wow, that was kind of weird and over the top - so I tried again and it happened again. I swear it wasn't intentional, 'ttebane."

*Ah, so that's why trees started falling.* "Okay, please continue."

"And so I kind of got mad," she admitted.

"That's an understatement," Hiruzen inserted, scratching down the details harshly. "You set a fifteenth of the west forest on fire. And not just *any* forest," he stressed. "It is a forest of great cultural value and they were raised by the Shodai himself. Certainly you see how important these trees are to Konoha."

"It was an accident, okay? I didn't want for it to happen." She mumbled under her breath before making her voice louder for the next line. "But it wasn't like I could just leave the trees I fell there. It's a hassle to get around them if anyone was travelling, so I thought I would get rid of them. Burning them was not an option since I have crappy chakra control and I thought that using explosives to blow it up was a *way better* idea as compared to setting the entire forest on fire."

"You just wanted to test out your new explosive tags, didn't you?"

The jinchūriki had the cheek to look offended. "What do you mean, Hokage-sama? I actually meant to remove the mess I made. It just got out of hand." She became silent for a moment under his glare. "Okay, maybe exploding them in the middle of more trees wasn't the best idea," she defended. "But it wasn't like I had the strength to drag those huge trees out and explode them in the middle of the clearing, with like - fifty tags - no big deal-"

"..."

"-and I thought it would be fine since I made sure to contain the entire blast radius when I changed the power levels."

"It's the number of explosive tags that you used, not the power levels of it, Kara-chan," muttered Hiruzen tiredly, switching his quill pen for a new one. "Just keep going," he sighed, refusing to meet her skeptical eyes.

"Well as you can see, things didn't go as planned," she gestured at the demolished forest on their left, "And when it exploded, more trees caught on fire, others fell and it was like dominoes and it led to a bigger mess. I *did* try to put the fire out with a high ranking water jutsu and that was pretty successful."

"Except you flooded the area and the outskirts of the village with the amount of water you conjured out of thin air."

"...That was not part of my master plan," she said at length, guilt tingling her voice. "I didn't expect there to be so much water, especially since I did try to restrain my chakra usage. I was waiting for the 'drain' that the scroll was talking about but it never came so I kept going. It's the scroll's fault for lying to me, okay; I was just following the instructions like a good student I am."

The Hokage repressed the urge to throttle her to the ground right then and there. He sighed, wiping the split ink off his hands. "How does ANBU fit into this entire equation?"

"I was getting to that, Hokage-sama. *Patience*," she hushed, completely oblivious to the building anger present in the room. There was a distinct sound of metal being drawn in the ceiling compartment but Kara ignored it. She smiled instead. "After the entire explosive and water sequence,
the ANBU came to check on what was happening and they tried to arrest me for being a public nuisance."

"I didn't take the idea of them being aggressive well," confessed Kara, her instincts still of that of a paranoid veteran. "I instinctively threw the rest of the kunai tagged with explosives at them and started running deeper into the forest and they pursued."

Okay, maybe that part might have been his fault. The time-traveller did tell him that she was going to be practicing her chakra control a few hours prior to the incident. He scratched out the expletives from the report.

"I didn't like them chasing me like I was a criminal so I rigged my entire path with more ninja wires and exploding kunai - this time with reasonable paint of course - and kept running. It's not my fault that they were shitty and didn't know how to set off traps without getting caught in it though. They were pretty obvious, since I made them in my haste."

The Hokage added them back in. *Where did the paint even come from?*

"And what was it that I heard about some ANBU being caught in animal nets?"

"Oh, I thought I would do the hunters a favour by deactivating those traps for them. It's going to be winter after all; majority of the bigger animals were going to hibernate anyway."

"Pitfalls?"

"Head-hunter jutsu gone wrong?" She offered sheepishly.

"Kara-chan, there was a sheet of leaves over it."

"Kage Bushin no Jutsu?" she tried again.

"...Kara."

"Okay, fine," she raised her hands in surrender. "I just wanted to mess with the ANBU after a few minutes into the chase. I didn't lie about the jutsu I used though. The head-hunter jutsu *did* go wrong."

A senbon whizzed past her cheek and jammed into the floorboard.

She clicked her tongue. "That was a waste of equipment," she noted, leaning closer to the senbon to inspect it. "Poor accuracy too. Ji- Hokage-sama, are you sure you don't need better operatives?"

It was at that moment where the Hokage decided that he wouldn't bother stopping his ANBU operatives if they shot projectiles at her whenever she entered his office. (She probably deserved it.)

Neither did he comment about the fact that her name had mysteriously ended up on the blacklist in the ANBU headquarters in big block letters that were thrice traced over and larger than the other names on the blackboard.

(He could probably find an already prepared bounty if he tried.

Sarutobi Hiruzen thought it was pretty justified; Kara was a dangerous specimen.)
Sorry for the late update - this being the first in the new year.

I had to re-write a lot because what I previously wrote just didn't fit in with what I had in mind. So basically, I had 11 different drafts for two chapters (I'm not kidding), and plus the fact I chucked it and rewrote everything it, it was more than 40k words down the drain. It was goddamn ridiculous. Ugh.

Thank you for your patience :)

Hit me up on tumblr: br0kenphantasy
Knocking on the door seven times in a unique sequence, Kara didn't even wait for a moment before she allowed herself into the room.

"Good morning," she chirped, head popping into the office like a mischievous imp. She scanned the insane amount of paperwork that was scattered around his table (and on the floor) with amusement apparent in her eyes. "Having fun doing paperwork, Hokage-sama?" she teased, closing the door gently behind her.

"I could think of better things to do," Sarutobi smiled aridly, briefly settling down his papers to make conversation with her. "But paperwork is a part and parcel of being the leader of the village, so I must."

"Don't you know it," she chortled, the teasing quality in her tone diminishing.

Red eyes looked at his exhausted appearance in concern, tracing his greying hair down to his darkening eye circles. The recent months have been increasingly unkind to the Hokage, especially when they were in the midst of a free-for-all war.

Resources were being spread thin with simultaneous attacks from Iwa and Kumo, barely scraping by with the food supplies that verging on exhaustion. Sarutobi Hiruzen was tired of having to lose his people to war - he had lived through three and he had paid respects to the hundreds of names engraved on the memorial - and he could not blame the civilians for echoing the same sentiment in anger. It was exhausting to have to read dreary reports one after another piling waist high, of casualties and atrocities, condolences and anger, allowing the cycle to perpetuate itself, rinse and repeat.

Konoha was still war-torn and recovering from the previous war and yet it was forced into another fight, only able to either retaliate or perish. They were forced to defend against external threats once more no matter how begrudging they were, pushing back the opposition’s troops and protecting what they could. It was natural for them to choose that option for no village would want to go down surrendering as a coward and it would be a huge insult to the unifying Hi no Ishi that every Konoha Shinobi swore to. They fought, they lived and they died. It was a vicious cycle of death and life that balanced on a precarious edge with war, where many returned to nature faster and some never to their homes.

Kara was not deaf to the rising dissent amongst the population. She could hear the whispers of the civilians that wanted an end to the warfare, voices haunted and harsh.

*Did you hear? There was another disastrous campaign near the borders of Iwa.*
**What was the Hokage even thinking when he stationed the battalion there?**

Could see the grimaces cast on the faces of the Shinobi who were deployed, like they were signed on to death. Everyone knew that there were on the losing side of the war and the turning of tables nowhere in sight.

*Will I come back alive? If I don't, tell kaa-san I'm sorry.*

She could see the frugality that everyone adopted, the food scarcity that led to higher prices and the sodden state of some men. All the bubbling negatives made up the village atmosphere; never had she been thankful for the fact that she was not in sync with her Kyuubi. It was a blessing to not feel their emotions as intensely as she did before and even if she did, she wasn't sure if she could handle it a second time. She wasn't sure if she could stay silent and not spout out answers to end the war quicker, or attempt to step on the battlefield where she was not allowed. (Yet.)

But it all comes a full circle.

When there is unhappiness, everything will fall on the Hokage's shoulders. All the blame, anger, anguish and distrust will become his legacy. His people's emotions will define his policies and those who rose him to power can make him fall. He will go through his bouts of frustrations and doubts but he will never show it in public, burying them deep in his heart and letting them fester in worry.

Sarutobi Hiruzen was not the first leader she has seen withering in war. He will not be her last.

However, knowing what the Third Great Shinobi War has done to Sandaime Hokage and what it will do was a different perspective to her. Kara could see his features morphing into the aged man he will become, the weight of the village hunching his shoulders and arching his back forward like a farmer who toiled the fields for far too long.

Mutedly, she strode forward to his paper-covered desk and arranged them properly in stacks before sorting them out by categories of various importance. From war reports, food supplies, complains to taxes, she only needed to give each paper a precursory glimpse before she placed them neatly in their pile in front of him. The Hokage looked at her in appreciation as she did so, treasuring her strange meticulous behavior that she had revealed to him months ago.

She once admitted that she was the previous Hokage's unofficial secretary and candidate-in-training in the later months of the war with much difficulty, and she had gone back to work.

The time-traveller was still a mystery to him even after four months. While she took it upon herself to give him weekly visits, she did not like to talk about the war or the future. She favoured the present; bringing news about the village, inquiring how a certain jutsu worked and perhaps fun facts about their rival villages but she never breached anything beyond that. She remained adamantly silent, playing the perfect role of a young spectator who has yet to step into the battlefield.

(He does question if she takes trips out of the village to fulfil her own nifty goals; while he has restrained the urge from asking his men to follow her, he knows that nothing will be achieved out of that action. The last thing he wants to do is risk losing her trust.)

The sound of fingers drumming on paper brought his attention back to reality and he met her curious eyes with a small smile of his own. They worked in comfortable silence as they fell back into a common routine, one flitting back and forth in the room while the other wrote and stamped. His paperwork decreased substantially because he no longer had to look through minor problems and he trusted her judgment on which documents he should prioritize first.
"Now that I think of it Kara, what brings you to my office for the second time in the week?" Sarutobi commented absent-mindedly.

His random question caused the sound of flipping pages to cease. "I thought you could use more help, considering how busy you were," came her tactical reply before she went back to sorting papers again.

"I appreciate the thought," he acquiesced, inking his stamp. "However, am I right to presume that there is more than one reason for your visit?"

"You presume too much about this, Jiji," she muttered. "It's just goodwill."

He stamped several papers in succession. "It never hurts to consider one matter from many perspectives, Kara-chan."

"And if there's none?" She avoided.

"You wish that it was such a case. Tamamo-san forbade you from training for the next few days, didn't she?"

Kara tensed at the mention of her shishō. "I didn't know that you were constantly communicating with her," the time-traveller said, voice stiff.

"We do not communicate often apart from one-sided reports." He admitted. "But coloured missives are pretty universal, don't you think? Black for defeat, white for surrender, red for injury, so on and so forth."

Brown eyes sharpened on the bandage that peeked out of her sleeves and her neckline, the cloth wrapped tightly around her limbs. The slight limp in her right leg doesn't escape his scrutiny, neither does the part of her hair that is slightly askew. Kara did not notice how tired she was because she was used to the strain but the Hokage – one who was a Shinobi and a teacher himself – knew that she had truly went overboard. He didn't need his clairvoyance to see her daily desperation that made her blind to the pain her body felt.

"It wasn't a bad injury."

"It is not the injury that is the problem, Kara-chan," said Sarutobi tiredly. "It's the fourth time you've strained yourself to the extent of collapse and it's not normal. Is it that difficult for you to actually control the amount that you are doing? Is it really necessary for you to continue on this track of ferocity in order to gain results?"

In the face of his questions, she could only turn her head away guiltily, perfectly aware of her own self-destructive habits. Unlike Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto, Kara could not support the continuation of long and abusive hours of training. Even if she started filling out and her limbs and bones were far stronger than before, it did not mean that she was capable of holding the quantity of stress that she had placed on herself as an adult. Kara knew that. She knows her weakness more than anything else and she wanted so badly to correct it as soon as she could.

"I can try to restrain myself," she said lowly and finally, "But I don't guarantee that I can succeed, Jiji. You know I don't promise things that I can't do."

"Results means nothing if you're ruined in the end, Kara," criticized the Hokage.

"But I don't have the luxury of training like I used to, Jiji," she argued. "I can't just sit around and train in a normal pace." She sucked in a pained breath, the air whistling and sharp. "I just can't do it
when I need the strength to protect my precious people." Her gaze was unwavering. "You are one of them as well."

"I understand your reasons," he told her, solemn and resigned. "However, if you want to protect someone, you must protect yourself first. You can't keep giving your own teacher a scare by having a fellow comrade report to her that you were admitted to the hospital from your accumulated injuries."

It is almost a plea that he forwarded, one that spoke of his own fears as well. There is a low rumble in his baritone like a mountain with under shifting plates, the odd sensation digging into his chest, deeper than he realized when those disjointed memories became his own. The papers he held were forgotten in his grasp, crumpling slightly as he pictured her lying on the hospital bed again.

"So I'm here to offer you an ultimatum," said the Hokage, laying down his papers. "It is either that you start living with Tamamo-san as she has requested or you accept an arrangement for a Jōnin-sensei to be in-charge of your training."

"I'm perfectly capable of training myself," she reminded, eyes briefly flashing blue.

"With extreme methods that should never have been approved of," he corrected. "What you need is for someone to pace you properly. You can treat this as a failsafe of sorts."

"Jiji."

He spoke sternly. "I am not compromising otherwise on this, Kara."

"Jiji," she tried again. "I don't need it, 'ttebane. You are already having a shortage in terms of war efforts and you can't afford—"

"—can't afford to lose another soldier?" He raised his eyebrow at her assertion. "Are you not a prospective soldier as well? And one who I have invested in?"

She stayed defiantly silent.

"Look," he sighed. "You don't have to think badly of this arrangement. Having a teacher who can help you hands-on is better than training alone. It often takes two people to spar and a spectator to correct the wrongs in Ninjutsu. If your agenda is getting stronger, I don't see why you can't accept this proposition."

Her head throbbed. "There's nothing wrong with it," she agreed, holding her hand to her head. "But you are working under the assumption that I can't make use of the Kage Bushin."

"The Kage Bushin is still you. You need a teacher who can offer you a new perspective and principle so that you can improve."

"What if I don't want it?"

"There is no third option just because you don't want it, Kara-chan. Not when you have proven that you can't be left to your own devices," he commented wryly.

"I'm already twenty-two, Jiji," she said in frustration, tugging at the ends of her darkened hair. Unimpressed, he raised an eyebrow. "I will like to agree but your attitude and actions speak otherwise." He steepled his fingers. "So, what will you be choosing?"
Kara gave him a glare that was as intimidating as a house cat.

"What will you be choosing?" enforced the Hokage.

She gave up, "The second one."

"Expected," he mumbled under his breath, pulling out a scroll from a drawer.

It was unthinkable that a Shinobi would willingly give up their privacy; just as it was ludicrous to accuse an informant of being loose-lipped. Ninjas were creatures of secrecy - thriving in darkness rather than the light - every single person that bore a figurative 'nin' with their affiliations had their darkest moment to keep. The only difference was the depth that they hid, the amount of blood that saturated their soul and Kara - a girl who was once full of innocent smiles - was the utmost personification of this truth.

He tossed the scroll at her. "Your training is at 0800 hours at Training Ground 28 effectively tomorrow. Please take the opportunity today to rest," he emphasized for good measure. "And when I mean rest, it means no training."

The girl sighed, spinning the cylindrical parchment in her hand. "I heard you the first time, no need to repeat it twice," she grumbled. "I don't need more reminders, especially when you're so insufferable with your methods sometimes."

He hid a smile behind his papers. "Are you referring to yourself?"

It was her turn to raise an eyebrow. "Need I say more?"

... 

Her heart stuttered the moment she reached the edge of the training ground.

Colours lit up in the corner of her chakra senses, the intense and mellow shades fluctuating as they engage in their activities, twinkling like stars in the twilight with its strong bursts of energy. Dread immediately filled her when she realized that she had been had, played into this situation by the Sandaime Hokage once again.

She should have seen this coming.

Her eyelids trembled to a close.

It was so characteristically Sarutobi Hiruzen to do this, being the old and crafty monkey he was. It was no different from the time where he forced her out of her apartment and made her face her fears about the villagers. It was just a different audience, another setting and with the same intentions - constants and variables that she revolved around as she split the path of time. She should have expected that he would meddle in more ways than one. But she didn't.

It was like her comet plunge again – this time into cold water – where she was given a cruel slap that only reality to give. Her cheek was throbbing as if the imaginary slap stung, the swelling flesh exacerbated by heated shame, her teeth gritting at her reluctance and contradictions.

It would be a cold day in the Great Village above when she mistook those distinct chakra signatures for another. Amnesia will never let her forget the white chakra that crepitated with electricity whose familiarity was once comfort or the blue-tinged-red igneous energy that was untainted and undisputedly Uchiha. Not the familiar blue that hers once was, of her father's that was sharp as a gale wind, swirling and powerful, fitted for his own craft. They were merely states that she could not
misconceive no matter how short-lived her exposure to them was because these impressions were already branded in her mind by the end of war.

Naruto wanted to run. Wanted to flee like a coward and prolong the inevitable but-

Kara has to stay.

The latter had no reasons – nor attachments – to run from. Kara was supposed to be empty, a void start, everything she wasn't.

'I am no one,' she chanted, trying to convince herself and failing. 'No one here.'

Her words, her attempted convictions would never reach the depth that her true personality. She could pile shield upon barriers and more covers and disguises but nothing can fend her from the attack that came from within.

There was no chance for her to escape – not when the more perceptive pair in the group had already noticed her the moment she stepped into the vicinity.

"Damn the Sandaime," she whispered, her words holding absolutely no weight nor ill intent. It was shaky, like a frosted glass balancing on the precipice of a fulcrum, swaying back and forth and on the threat to fall. "Damn him, damn it all."

'You know you do not mean what you speak, so why say them at all?' Kurama mused. 'You hold gratitude for the patriarch, never grudge, because he does all this for you. You would never have taken the initiative to face this if he never forced you to.'

'There's a reason why I don't do it, 'ttebane,' she hissed, voice brittle and loud. It thundered in the mindscape, rattling chains, her pain and angst resounding. As quick as it came, those emotions receded to the back of her mind, rationality taking over like a sweeping wave. 'I don't want to,' she repeated, soft and fractured. An explanation hangs on the tip of her tongue but she cannot begin to vocalize them without pain clouting its very surface.

They were the team whom the events revolved around and she needed distance from them. But she could not scorn the Sandaime for his decisions. He did not know the specifics of how she came to be; not about the enemy that was a victim of circumstance or the ties that she had with her Genin teacher. There was so much bad blood coagulated in her that it was an irremovable curse, agglomerated by the bleeding Sharingan and mad delusions. She wanted so badly to flee.

'No one told you to confess your entire life story to them,' Kurama replied bluntly. 'All that is asked of you from a guardian to his ward is to know the damnable man responsible for your conception and to make up for the time you never had. It is a request you should take. Do not lie to me with those eyes, Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto - you miss him.'

'It's not just him,' she cracked, running her fingers through her hair.

*It's Tobi who crumbled like sand, tan skin becoming white and lines running across every surface of his skin before he shattered and was carried off by the wind. There's sensei who was dead silent after every fight, refusing to let anyone see him cry. There's Rin who catalyses everything, and everything that sensei regrets."

'It's not that simple, 'ttebane. It's not just Minato or his sacrifice, it's everything that's collateral—' and it hurts, it's everyone and everything sometimes—'and I just don't know how I should react to them, 'ttebane.'
She does not deny that part of her wanted to pick up a kunai and end everything before it begun. How easy it was to smother him in his bed, pillow closing down on his windpipe and weight on his arms and legs, stealing away the life he has yet to live. Naruto was confident that she could get away with it, just like the hundred other pranks that she had pulled.

She didn't know how to explain herself if her first instinct was to hug the life out them, to take comfort that they were safe.

Kurama hummed. 'The unknown is terrifying,' he acknowledged, tails shifting slightly. 'But you will never know until you do try. You can afford to make small mistakes like these, kit. You can afford to live the life that Kara has yet to live. Maybe you will break down in front of them.' He paused for effect. 'But maybe you will not. There are so many ways that things could occur and it makes everything more interesting just as it is terrifying.'

'I don't think that the feeling will ever fade no matter how many people I meet again,' confessed the time-traveller quietly. 'Do you think it'll get easier?'

'It will only get harder if you continue to avoid it,' he replied with certainty. 'All you have been doing is stewing in your own thoughts. You make situations worse in your head, you start thinking about rejection again before anything concrete has happened. There will be no hope for progression if you do not try.'

'I do try,' she inserted.

'"Trying" does not mean you avoid the main heart of the village like it is a plague. You do interact with other mortals – that I do not deny – but for all my clarity in memory, I have never seen you talk to these new acquaintances of yours in the previous timeline. Your social circles are strangely devoid of those you once knew, unless you count the trees in the forest.'

'They aren't the same,' countered Kara.

'Neither are you,' refuted Kurama immediately. 'But in the past, you have never let any difference in personality or the lack of knowledge become a source of reason as to why you could not be friends with a person. You overcame those impediments and found the group of mortals you deemed precious.' His vermillion eyes softened. 'You made those differences inconsequential and you earned their loyalty. No matter chakra construct, summon or Elemental Nation they hailed from, you made friends.'

'And where did all those friendships lead up to,' she snapped, bile welling in her gut. Regret lined the downturn of her lips and her knuckles were white from clenching them too hard.

All that was left of them were memories – too many of them – all stagnant and eroded by her own reviewing. They were no longer her reality and she wasn't sure if it relieved her or hurt her more. She was terrified to remake that reality only to lose it again.

(And this group – she had to lose.)

All she wanted was for them to be safe and she didn't care what the distance would do to her.

"Maybe I should go," she said abruptly, pivoting on her heels to turn back from where she came from.

She probably could convince the Sandaime Hokage that she really didn't need any external help if
she tried even harder. Maybe even throw in a bribe to help him more for good measure. Maybe then he'll realize that he shouldn't waste more resources on her – the time-thief –

"Hey!" Someone called out behind her. "You're the girl that Minato-sensei has been going off about, right?"

Kara tensed. *Shit out of luck*, 'ttebane, she cursed.

"You are, right?" He insisted, taking a step forward. "The kunoichi named Kappa or something? Where are you even going?"

*My name is Naru- Kara. Kara. And somewhere that is not here.*

"The training ground is the other way, in case you haven't noticed. We don't bite, I swear." Leaves crunched under his feet as he shifted his weight. She could *feel* the cogs in his head turning. "Kakashi might though, but he's a snark – the bastard – and I *swear* he trained his ninken to hate me."

The girl almost giggled at the slight fondness that tinged his annoyance. Her eyelids scrunched shut, remembering that this is what it *was*. The relationship dynamics that fell apart irreversibly and one that gave way to a madman and a Shinobi that followed the madman's old doctrine. And then there was her.

But beyond the complex influence, she knew her sensei would never make his ninken hate someone, and he never could – his ninken were independent and good judges of character, unbiased and more trusting of their own senses. If anything, her sensei trusted his summons more, not the other way around. She could see Akino doing it as a joke though.

A faint buzz of words reached her ears.

"Told you… get her here… not talk… there… Don't think… heard what you said."

She choked down another hysterical giggle.

"Oh shut up, Kakashi-teme," he muttered into his mic before ripping it out of his ear. "I swear he has a stick stuck up his ass 24/7…" The boy refocused his attention on her. "So you are the girl we've been waiting for, right?"

Silence.

"… Can you give me a reply? I don't want to feel stupid for asking the wrong person."

She inhaled slowly, turning around to face him.

"It's Kara," she corrected, eyes crinkled into a smile. "And you are?"

The Shinobi lifted his goggles. "Uchiha. Uchiha Obito! You better remember that name, because I'm going to be the strongest Uchiha the world has ever seen!"

His innocent smile was blindingly bright.

She repressed the urge to flinch. "Nice to meet you." *Please hate me.*
Did anyone catch on about me hinting Team Minato in the first scene? The numbers (Seven knocks, Four times of Passing out and Training Ground 28) and the mentioning of Kakashi?

Do tell me if you did :P

Hit me up on tumblr: br0kenphantasy
It was moments like this where she wished she had taken the Kyuubi's offer to forget. To lock out those wretched memories that were wrapped around in death and let him become her jailer, only letting them out when it was necessary. Perhaps then she could find reprieve in her mind in succumbing to that temptation, one that the devil whispered to her, smooth decibels akin to the deadly honey that dripped from his lips. Kara wished (too many times) that she could finally stop viewing every single place with anguish of what had been lost; stop having to repress words when no one would ever understand the underlying meaning but her and start to lighten up a little – live her new age for all its worth.

Maybe then she could move her feet without imminent dread and the image of punctured chests and crumbling skin plaguing her mind. Maybe then she can look at innocent Obito and stop thinking about the killer he will become – things she know full well she can stop – and think of him as what he truly was in the present: merely a young hopeful Genin, full of laughter, barely mired by the atrocities that he has seen.

Maybe then – kami, she was so tired of all the maybes and should haves and would haves – she could look at Namikaze Minato as just a teacher, not a father – her father, her pride whispered fiercely – because it was unattainable; just as he was when he made the sacrifice. Perhaps it was an inherited trait to give up all they were for the village. Even if it meant –

Even if it meant giving up a vital part of themselves.

Irices that could take on a multitude of shades of the day sky stared back at her with a certain brightness, clear in azures and framing his heartfelt smile. His blonde hair fell on a part of the hitatate that he wore, the shade carrying a lustre of golden beneath the morning light. It was like a picture brought to life - his features photo reflected; all spiky hair and tan complexion covered, befitting of his own moniker of *Konoha no Kiiro Senkō*. It was also a terrible reflection of herself, of same dead visage that she saw in the mirror every single day.

Kara swore she could scarcely breathe.

"Hello there, Kara-chan," Minato greeted cheerfully, hand extended out to her. "My name is Namikaze Minato, and I will be your Jōnin-sensei from now on. Nice to meet you."

This was *real*. She touched the living flesh that he was, the heat permeating from his skin, a temperature so similar to hers that she could barely feel the difference. She was naturally a few degrees warmer but that was not the point – Namikaze Minato was *alive* – beating heart and breathing lungs, blood pumping from his vascular muscle down to the tip of his fingers and toes, whole and smiling and *alive*, living breathing not dead –
"Kami she felt like crying.

"Nice to meet you," Kara replied, voice thick. Part of her didn't want to let go. It wanted to hold on tight and feel the roughness and lines on his hands, a privilege that was stolen from her. Wanted to bury her face in his chest and smell the forest and wind, not the rotting wood that was buried under for too long. But she can't. She couldn't.

She pulled her arm away abruptly as if the thought burned her.

Kara knows she should not wish for what she cannot have.

"Who is she?" The boy beside him cut in rudely, incredibly irritated by her presence.

"A new addition to our team," Minato supplied. "She'll be joining us for our training sessions mostly," he scrunched his nose pensively, "Think of it like a new training partner for you to hone your skills against, Kakashi."

"Just for our training sessions? Then what's the point of her joining in the first place?" He demanded.

"I don't see the logic in your argument, Kakashi. Since when was training sessions just limited to us?"

"It's called team training for a reason, Minato-sensei."

"And is she not a Konoha kunoichi?" Minato questioned back, sighing. "Does she not bear the affiliation that we wear proudly on our foreheads? I don't see the problem with her joining our training."

"She doesn't even belong on our team in the first place, sensei. She's an outlier and she'll probably ruin everything that we've built up since we have to accommodate for her. There are other teams out there that are incomplete. Why can't she join those teams instead? Why ours?" His grey eyes defy, refusing to accept another member into the team.

Kara barely managed to conceal her flinching, the truth in his words stabbing her heart like a shuriken ran through it. The boy doesn't know how accurate his statement was and she wasn't about to correct him. She just allowed this argument to run, knowing that she would never have a proper reply and that she had no right to ever say otherwise. Even then, it is still painful to be reminded - especially by a facsimile of the man she respected and missed.

"Training," Minato explained patiently, "Can be conducted with an external party for the benefit of more." But patience did not dull the harsh edge in his voice.

"But if it's counterproductive, then clearly it isn't," he rebutted frostily. "This isn't conventional, sensei, there has never been a permanent five-man team in Konoha's History for a good reason."

The teacher found himself sighing again. "She didn't follow the conventional road to begin with. She took a path of apprenticeship like you, Kakashi. I thought you would be more understanding because of it."

"If she has a dedicated teacher, all the more reason why she shouldn't be on our team. She doesn't need it."

Minato endured. "You do understand that you don't have a say in this right?"

"Don't take Kakashi-kun's words to heart." Someone suddenly murmured in her ear, distracting her.
Kara looked to her left, smile shaken. "I try."

Her replying smile was beautifully gentle as she tucked a stray tendril of brown hair behind her ear. "He's just angry that Minato-sensei's attention is further divided and spread thin," she shrugged, "But that's my own assumption. He was sensei's apprentice before this, you see. He reacted pretty badly when Obito and I joined the team."

"He's just being salty like the sea," Obito sniffed, inching closer to both of the girls. "I don't see the difference between this and his usual attitude though."

"What he means is that Kakashi-kun will get used to you in no time," she assured. "I'm Nohara Rin by the way. The team's medic."

"Nice to meet you," murmured Kara. "I'll be in your care from now on."

"You're being too optimistic, Rin," Obito gave his two cents. "It took us a week before he even grunted in our direction and that was him being lenient."

Rin rolled her eyes delicately. "Kakashi-kun isn't that bad, Obito. He's just a little… intense at times. He's driven to improve and cares little for everything else."

"Intense?" snorted Obito as he crossed his arms. "I wouldn't be that nice. He's mad obsessed about being the perfect Shinobi. I swear he has read the rulebook so many times that he can recite the entire damn thing backwards and maybe sideways for the hell of it. I'm not even sure how many hours he trains on a daily basis at this point. I gave up counting awhile back."

"That's just dedication, Obito." Rin protested. "He works hard because he wants results."

"Everyone wants results, Rin," he looked at her, pained with an emotion that she doesn't quite comprehend. "But it doesn't explain why completing the mission is his first priority and whatever twenty-hundred lines that he quoted from the rulebook he puts before us. I'm just saying—— he laughed sarcastically while his gaze hardening—— he's nice, but not that nice. I think it's just plain wrong for him to forgo teamwork and ditch his comrades for the sake of the mission and its protocols."

"He's improving though. Even you can't deny that. He's getting better," she reiterated, more to herself.

"He's still a damn snark," he disagreed. "His replies to anything we say are in a variation of grunts—— he swung his arms up in frustration- "and you would start thinking that he's the Uchiha in the group. Which is not that funny anymore when I actually have that clan name."

Rin laughed, knowing that Uchiha Obito might be one of the most unorthodox Shinobi in his own clan. Shaking her head, she turned to their newest addition. "Don't think badly of Kakashi-kun, alright? He has a complicated past and it made him this way. Although he can get difficult, he's genuinely a good person." The jinchūriki cannot help but notice that she does not refute the Uchiha's point.

The boy snorted again.

Hastily, she changed the subject. "So what is your name, Kara-san?" Rin asked. "I don't think I caught it in full."

"It's just Kara," she informed Rin uncomfortably, "and please don't call me –san."
Brown eyebrows creased at the peculiarity, "No family name?"

"Orphan?" asked Obito in succession.

"Yeah," was her answer. She shrugged her shoulders to pretend that she was unaffected.

The saddening part about her admittance was that it was the honest truth. That in this life, neither of the names that she had in the previous timeline were hers to claim and the legacy of those names belonged to another. Kara did not have parents - she never can - her existence an abnormally and her lack of familial connections was her price to pay.

"It'll be okay I think," Rin comforted, filling in the guilty silence that her other teammate left. "You have a family here. A village always looks after one of its own."

Bitter sweetness bubbled within Kara and she upturned her lips while crinkling her eyes. Sometimes, she felt like appearances of happiness was all she was capable of after everything she has been through. This was Konohagakure no Sato, yes, the name and some part of its structure was the same but it was not her Konoha, it didn't have six faces on the Hokage Monument, or her precious people milling in the streets, head tucked in a book or having a meal, telling her the latest news or inviting her to their homes, it hasn't been destroyed and rebuilt before -

Kara bit her lip, pulling at the dry skin, trying and not trying to tear it apart.

The time-traveller let out a shallow, shaky breath, trying to keep her smile from quavering too much. "Yeah, it takes a village to raise a child."

Kara was surprised when she saw everyone staring at her with an odd expression, making her wonder if she said something wrong. The stares of the Namikaze and Hatake made her feel like the world had put her on a pedestal, ready for scrutiny, looking at her as if they had found a part of themselves.

Minato cleared his throat, reclaiming his students' attention. "Back to the topic at hand. This arrangement is merely on probation, Kara-chan. You are free to request for a Jōnin-sensei that is better suited to your training-"

"Please do." A jab to his rib silenced the boy-

"-but until then, my team extends its warm welcome for you to stay. Personally, I think that you would be a great addition, considering all the stories I've already heard about you."

The kunoichi gnashed her teeth. Of course he would do this. The Sandaime knew she wouldn't reject the person he assigned her to the moment she met him. He knew it was an impossibility to say 'no' to her Father, a person she revered since she was young, finding so much joy in his regaled tales and might. It was a cheap move to put her up against him but it didn't mean that it wasn't effective.

Tugging at her darkened hair whilst staring at the ground, she tore at the dried leaves beneath her feet. "If you are willing to have me around, I will stay." Kara said weakly, heart throbbing. "And I hope those stories aren't bad."

Cerulean eyes glinted with mirthful mischief. "They were not bad per se…More of interesting, I reckon. You've made quite a reputation for yourself in the upper ranks." He clapped his hands together. "But we'll leave storytelling for later. Kara-chan do you mind having a spar?"

"...Sure?" replied the girl, suddenly confused.
"Great!" He grinned. "I've wanted to assess your ability for a while and you have a willing competitor," he gestured to the silver-haired boy beside him.

Immediately, Obito and Rin backed away, giving them ample space.

Kara gazed at the Jōnin. "Against a Chūnin?"

"Is it not up to your standards?"

"No," she avoided. "I'm just a high-level Genin, sensei," muttered Kara softly, refusing to look at her opponent. "I just don't think I am up to his calibre."

"You'll be fine," encouraged Minato, patting her shoulder before backing away. "Please make your hand signs."

Fine? She wondered incredulously, slowly lifting her head.

Both of them lifted their left hands to make half a seal.

Her hand, however, trembled slightly as she finally looked at the boy in front of her. She cannot stop the image of a slanted hitat-ate that surfaced with a visible right eye filled with unrecognizable emotions. Or his broad back that protected her countless of times in war, one that she leaned into for support or the fingers that played with his affinity and held hers so carefully. She chose to look at the boy's left grey eye.

But you're not him.

The trembling stopped.

Minato scrutinized their stance and demeanour strictly. "All right then. Shinobi Hand-to-Hand Combat." His hand sliced the air.

You will never be him.

"Begin!"

On cue, the two Shinobi rushed at each other, one stature taller and stronger than the other.

He immediately swung at her, fist attempting to make contact with her face. Her reflexes caused her to snap her head back to move out its trajectory, raising her left hand simultaneously to slap down and increase his momentum, left leg moving to slam into his side.

Naturally, he caught her leg as well and she twisted her body abruptly, her other limb swinging and slamming into his face. With a groan, he stumbled back while she landed on her feet, pushing off to attempt a series of jabs at his vital points. Ferocious as they were, he managed to block, turning into offensive when her new strength had yet to be born. But she was not utterly vulnerable; her actions suddenly rigid, blocking her face and her torso as he executed his attacks.

In her mind's eye, his unrefined actions can never match up to the man he will become. The boy was filled with flaws and habits that he had yet to correct and she could see them clear as day as she compared one from the other. The older version was a sharpened sword - one of Konoha's finest and deadliest - precise and faster, delivering fifteen tons of thunder behind each well-placed strike and no breaks in the between. The current was a good attempt at reaching that stage but awkward; some movements unsure and others pure reckless, trying to make use of speed to make up for lesser strength. But there was no competition - she had gotten used to a higher intensity and skill while the
boy was just its beginning.

The patterns he fell into were predictable, well –

They were part of her own style as well after all.

She parried his kunai strike for strike, vermilion eyes intense as she searched for an opening. The kunoichi doesn’t flinch when he cut her cheek, the wound already imperceptibly smoking. She disarmed him in the next moment, knocking his kunai into the air and discarding her own, hand chopping at his neck. Without mercy, she swung the same hand again, hand coming down heavily at his neck once more, throwing him to the ground.

You can’t be him.

Her chest heaved, picking up the kunai that she dropped. The boy can never become the man that taught her so much, no matter Taijutsu, Ninjutsu or the principles of life. This boy was blooded, yes, but he will never be the Hatake Kakashi that she served, respected and -

Her hand tightened around the sharp edge of the kunai, forcefully breaking her own thoughts. She shifted gears. Four months was still insufficient to rectify the fact that she was not used to shorter limbs. There were attacks that should have hit, not an empty space, and left a sound, not just a brush of sharp air. Shorter limbs, she reiterated, committing the lessons that only true combat could give.

"Doton: Tsuchi Nami no Jutsu!"

The ground beneath her shook and suddenly turned into a wave, the controlled Earth rapidly lapping at her feet.

Kara cursed under her breath, instinctively executing a kawarimi before her feet sunk into the ground further by an inch. A moment later, a heap of soil came crashing down on her replacement, swallowing it utterly and leaving a tousled land with tufts of grass jutting out amidst reds and browns. Her fingers twitched, tempted to blow him into the next century or bring hellish rain down on him for that act.

She settled for throwing a volley of wind-augmented shuriken at him instead, dashing after the flying metal, renewing her own barrage of attacks. The kunoichi ducked under and slid when the boy slashed downwards after throwing off the last shuriken, her legs making a wide sweep, making the boy jumped. Caught in mid-air, he stepped down once on her upraised arms, kicking at her head next before throwing his kunai at her -

Only for her to kawarimi again.

Thud!

The kunai knocked into a soil-stained wood.

Does that girl not feel pain? Kakashi thought, outraged. He couldn’t recall one instance where she paused because of his blows and the only sign of her reacting was a mere grimace that didn’t account for much when her face was constantly contorted into one. She’s a monster, he scowled, barely managing to swivel his body in time to obstruct her chopping arm from impacting. As if they read each other’s mind, both of them drew their third weapon, metal clashing with metal to make a terrible screech, causing orange sparks to fly.

In the one moment they held still, grey eyes met crimson, a vibrant tortured colour compared to another that was frustrated and depthless.
He was two-eyed, both the same shade, scar-less and young. He wore armbands to keep his armoured brace in place and to mimic the teacher he respected. His hair was the same and yet it was not - so many similarities and differences that it *hurts* her, like how this version will never ever take her into his arms to tell her that everything will alright but they were both always serious in a fight. She can't stop seeing them as one and the same - or perhaps she hoped that they were - and she can't stop *comparing*.

It was unfair to the both of them. It was unfair for her to wish for him to be something that he has not become. It was unfair to judge him on a different metrics rather than a blank slate but it was something that she could not offer to any of them.

Helplessness loomed overhead. *But you can never be him.*

Before she knew it, a palm strike sent her careening to the ground and the same kunai pointed at her neck.

*Do I want you to?*

Her vermillion eyes held no fear for the sharp edge, only pain and anguish as she stared upwards at the boy who towered over her. His hold was steady. She was not.

And the kunai nicked her skin slightly as a result, drawing a bead of crimson forth.

"Winner: Hatake Kakashi." The judge broke it gently to the pair. "Please do the Seal of Reconciliation."

The boy drew back curtly, his grey eyes filled with thunderous rage as he threw his weapon on the ground. "You got distracted," he hissed, voice spitting acid. "What's the point of fighting when you're not even looking at me in the first place?" He accused, heel spinning and stalking off to the other direction.

The time-traveller could only look at the hem of her jacket in remorse, trying desperately to put distinctions in her own mind.


*Get it into your head. Stop being delusional. You can't revive the dead, 'ttebane. You can't make things the same. He won't be the same. They won't be the same. There's nothing you can do about this. You've changed everything.*

"I'm so sorry," she whispered to no one, so low that it was nearly soundless.

Minato pursed his lips, looking back and forth from his wayward apprentice and the fallen girl. "Well, that was a rough start," he summarized. "Shall we try something else?"

She clenched her left hand into a fist, crushing the soil and leaves within her grasp.

*This is why you shouldn't have met them.*

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**Omake: Eggplants, Annoyances, and Mystery**
The sounds of metal scrapping across stone and water furiously were the most prominent when he first entered his student's apartment through the window.

"Now, Kakashi," Minato lectured, ducking the projectile he sprung, "That wasn't how anyone taught you to sharpen a weapon."

The sound became more aggressive to spite him.

"Use the door, sensei. You made a copy of the key for a reason."

His teacher smiled nonchalantly, landing carefully on the floor. "I don't know what you mean by that, Kakashi-kun. And what kind of Shinobi enters through the door?"

"The type that treasures warning," the boy told him flatly, pointing the kunai at him.

Minato pouted. "Now that's just rude, Kakashi-kun. You shouldn't call someone who brought you peace offerings a threat." To emphasize his point, the blond-haired Jōnin lifted the plastic bag he held in his hands, swinging it around like it was bait. "I guess I'll just have eat all these fried eggplants that Kushina made all by myself…"

Kakashi's head perked up, suddenly expectant of a treat.

*Oh kami, he looks like an adorable puppy,* Minato gushed internally, eyes searching the apartment for a camera. It was at that moment where he remembered whose apartment he was in and if it wasn't for him, this place would be akin to a T&I cell. He shook his head disappointedly and placed the bag in the boy's hand, watching as he dug into the food.

"Why were you so angry at Kara?"

Kakashi stabbed through the eggplant and styrofoam. And stabbed it again.

"I can stay here all day and wait, you know. Just you and me, in this big big world-"

"Please don't sing," Kakashi interrupted before shoving another eggplant in his mouth. "And we're in my apartment." There were other requests he would like to make; like asking his teacher to stop staring at him with those wide blue eyes and egging him on for answers. He didn't want to eat his favourite food under pressure.

"Kakashi…" he added after three seconds.

A silver eyebrow raised. "Minato-sensei, on the list of things I want to do, eggplants are first, explaining is second. Please wait."

"Kakashi…"

"Kakashi~"

"Ha-Ta-Ke-Ka-Ka-Shi-kun."

The said person gave him a withering glare that looked harmless like a puppy. "Fine," he huffed, placing the box on the floor with much care.

The silver-haired Chūnin gave it a moment of thought. "I don't like her."

"That's it?" asked Minato, incredulous.
"Of course not," his student snapped. "I can't see myself trusting her."

"I don't think she has done anything to warrant your distrust, Kakashi-kun, unless you're telling me you've met her around the village beforehand."

The Hatake shook his head in the negative. "I've never met her around the village before and that's why it's so weird." His eyebrows furrow, voice distant and confused. "When I sparred with her, sensei, it was like I was sparring with you."

Equally confused, Minato asked: "What do you mean by that?"

"She knew what I was going to do, sensei. Every move I made, I couldn't shake off the feeling that she almost expecting me to do something or perhaps even more. It was understandable with you since you've been teaching me for so long but I've never met her."

"So that's why you resorted to more reckless tactics? To shake her off?"

"Yes," he admitted. "But that's not all," his nostrils flared. "I don't know who has been training her but she's crazy. She doesn't even flinch or wince when I hit her, Minato-sensei. She just takes it like it's nothing and she counters. That's not normal at all. But she is good at what she does and it's frustrating because half the time I swear she isn't looking at me. It's like she's looking at someone else and she isn't taking me seriously."

"So you're angry because she doesn't take you seriously enough and not because she is incompetent?"

He took another piece of eggplant and ate it. The plastic fork bent slightly in his grasp. "She is definitely competent," he said grudgingly. "But something's not right with her."

He can't shake off the moment where her dull red eyes were suddenly a vibrant crimson – the colour of newly split blood – and part of him thinks that it might have been welled with tears. Why did she look so haunted when she looked at me? Is she seeing someone else? He touched his own face subconsciously.

"I think the majority of the upper ranks have established that," said Minato dryly.

"Huh?" was his reaction, completely lost in the tangent his teacher approached.

"She's freakishly paranoid – their words, not mine – and they say that anyone who tried sneaking up on her was discovered before they could do anything. We all know she's competent – just not the extent. For one, I don't believe she's just high-Genin."

"Chūnin," Kakashi agreed after catching on quickly, having come under her fire. "She's probably hasn't gained a promotion yet."

"Some presume that it might be more than that," Minato murmured. "The only thing that might be holding her back is her chakra control."

The boy cocked his head curiously.

"She was involved in the entire forest fire and water episode recently," explained the Jōnin.

Kakashi spluttered. "That was her?"

How could he forget the uproar that the incident caused? He doesn't think there was someone who
could conjure so much water from mid-air since the Niidaime Hokage Tobirama and he was famed for an extremely high water affinity. (Also maybe the fact his team was given the mission to clean up that particular mess.)

"Apparently," he hummed in reply.

An epiphany dawned on him. "That's the reason why you accepted her as your student, isn't it?" Kakashi accused.

Minato smiled demurely, toying with the kunai he was previously sharpening. The Hatake didn't buy the innocent I-don't-know-what-you-mean look.

He sighed. "Of course it would be. You could never turn down the opportunity to solve a puzzle, Minato-sensei."

Well, there was a reason why Namikaze Minato just so happened to be the Jōnin-sensei that snagged Kara the Mysterious first.

(And if Sarutobi Hiruzen had to give his honest input, there was no question in who was getting Kara as a student. It was a scan through the documents, 'oh look, Namikaze Minato is interested in her, now where is my stamp… okay and approved' process.

There was zero hesitation, one hundred percent confidence and a smidgen of smugness (who was he kidding, he was full of it) that he got to one up the infuriating girl who had almost no instinct for self-preservation. All in all, it was one of the easiest sorting processes he had in a long time.)

Chapter End Notes

This is a classic example of 'the character is confused and so I am' writing. Like literally, I was questioning what I was writing half the time. And thank you guys so so so so much for all the support thus far. Cheers to 100 Kudos and 2000 views :D

(Then there's the last part of the Omake that was absolute troll. I'm just under the mindset that most Shinobi are inner trolls, especially those who are extremely skilled. I mean, the imagination has to be put into good use right? Yeah... I don't make sense.)

Hit me up on tumblr: br0kenphantasy
I'm open to prompts about this AU of mine btw.
The first time Kara met Uchiha Obito as his younger self, she was surprised.

In his classic onyx eyes and his loose posture, she saw no trace of the man that he would become. He was warm like a summer's wind in the chilly spring, the heat that danced across her skin like the sun's rays which signified the beginning of dawn. He was almost painfully bright to look at when he beamed, completely unarmed against her, so trusting that her fingers tremble whenever she tried to reach for a weapon.

The jinchūriki could not, even as an experienced killer, end someone so devastating intermate with such tainted hands. She cannot bring herself to kill his innocence even though Uchiha Obito and Tobi were the same man.

It hurts her to see the happiness that exuded from the boy who was loud in nature, larger than life, his actions wide and proud with the careless smiles he adorned. He was untainted and diaphanous – everything she used to be – and she wondered how he was reduced to a man that sought for his old happiness that could only be achieved in delusions.

The time-traveller then turns to look at the girl who stands next to him like a dutiful friend and she sees the daylight. She apprised the kind eyes coloured in warm wood and shaped by mellow features, her short brown hair that flutters in the breeze and content in nature. She glimpses the compassion she weaves within her glowing hands as her humbled smile draws her lips into a gracious arc and she relaxes in the mezzo decibels that she speaks. It reprimands but never condescends, always nurturing and filled with heartfelt care. Nohara Rin was gentle beauty in all it encompassed, truly fitting for a family that was famed for its kindness.

And it was then the girl understands how well and hard Uchiha Obito fell.

She does not miss the flush of his cheeks when she compliments him and his eyes that shift back and forth from the ground to her visage. She sees him shake for reasons that differ from hers and the growing devotion that he tries to bury in his heart. His humour mixes with her sweetness like fine wine as they fall into natural steps with one another, but the subconscious distance she places betweenours. Nohara Rin holds his liquid love in the wells of her hands and it slips between her fingers in translucent reds as she sought for the affections of another man.

Her kindness makes rejection mild and harmless when it was meant to be a sharp knife that cuts threads, and it was ineffective in purging the emotions that the boy cannot suppress. It blossoms from a mundane crush that starts off small, before evolving into something bigger and unstoppable as she waters the false hope that she unintentionally implants within him as she shows the gentleness that she extends to all. It was saddening to see that he refuses to admit to the unrequited love that he sees and she doesn't know how to think about when she has never experienced love of that sort.
(And yet, something pounds dully in the back of her head, trying to arouse a narrative she doesn't grant.)

But in Uchiha Obito, she also finds herself. She finds her old persona that she could not fully replicate and her old foolish dreams that she discarded like refuse. Present Uchiha Obito was everything she was not and she yearned to go back to, wanting to possess the innocence and ignorance she finds in his brightness, traits that fled her a long time ago. She accepts the fact they will never return; like how she acknowledges that it will still be his hands that break the things he tries to fix.

When he shouts about his ambitions, she thinks about the man who no longer dreamed and was only driven by the will to reunite a team that was broken by deaths. She links it to her own laconism where she will never utter the same words, for her outdated ambitions no longer belonged to her person. She lost the right to say them when they were sullied by her failures and she cannot speak of them through bitten lips. She brushes off those faded dreams as if she was some wanderlust child, but the only place she ambled were the acres of burnt fields.

When he arrives late, her memories were flooded with a certain scarecrow and it despairs her because she has never asked for the reason of his chronic tardiness. She took it as his life choice or his means to thwart expectations, never realizing that it was so much more. Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto sees bits of Uchiha Obito scattered in her teacher – his imperceptible influence suddenly choking – and she finds that the copycat-nin might have wished for the same things as well, repeating his outrageous excuses as if to relive the past.

She was caught in the odyllic force of his naivety – like a moth drawn to a flame – but the bitterness that accumulates in her gut in anything but tender. She becomes intimate with her green monster when it reared its ugly head, her jealousy so wretched and wrong that she feels ashamed. She should not yearn for something that was never hers and she cannot lose what she never has, and the spot in Team Minato was exactly that.

They parallel to her old team like carbon copies with different faces, and sometimes she almost mistakes their identity and almost calls out for unborn names. She catches herself before the last syllable slips but the damage is done and her tongue bleeds. They were their own person but some characteristics coincide: like the prodigy, the medic and the fool. They bear the ironic seven like a tilted half-completed tomb, their fragile resonance petering out into the tragic, betwixt and reformed. Some roles tend to swap and blur but the gist of it remains; and she swears if she closes off her hearing with them in view, she could almost hear similar banter of varied voices fill her ears like sweet noise.

It was painful to wish upon herself the past, but it is all she has when she misses them so much.

She constantly sees onyx eyes in greys and green in browns, the confusing disparate colours staining optic with flecks that blurs and she cannot detach them. She cries and laughs in an empty space alone when she sees them together for the first time because she can only observe misery in the loop of events that always seemed to befall on the luckiest number, as if to mock their fortune for being able to strike the maleficent. But the scourge of details matter little to her when all she wishes was for them to gather under the thrice-damned banner of aggregate again, powerful and proud, and not just deluded apparitions that lie next to her in the dead of the night.

She was not selfless like the Nohara. If anything, she was so selfish. Her returning sometimes felt like the pursuit of her own happiness rather than the peace of the world like a grieving, spoilt child that could not accept the consequences of the world that she left behind. She supposes a part of it was true since she awakens to the same desperation and pale faces almost every day, her body leaden as
she struggles to breathe through choked gasps. Her own sanctuary is a small apartment where she can be herself but it was almost always barren of personal effects.

She could never compare to the team that was glorious like gleaming stars, and her place was beneath their illumination and in the dark shadows where no light will ever reach. They aren't plagued with demons like she was and she wants it to stay that way.

*I do not belong,* she reiterates time and time again.

(But inside her, it begs another story.)

Kara ignores the paradox that light cannot exist without darkness and plasters a smile on her face, feigning the ignorance that kills her faster than she can comprehend.

Deep inside, she wishes that they would hate her.

But they don't and it makes her *so happy* and depressed at the same time. They welcome her with open arms, no signs of forcefulness and an abundance of zest. They smile and introduce themselves and extend invitations to her (except one) and it was overwhelming for the traitorous heart she tries to kill.

She can't return the hug that Nohara Rin envelopes her whenever they meet after a mission. She can't bring her arms to wrap around her living warmth and not think about how she will die incomplete, where her mercy will come in the form of a crossfire and a hand. Naruto wants to cover the medic-nin's ears from the sound of chirping birds and shield her eyes from the blinding crackle – but she cannot, just as she was never meant to reveal the future that she knows.

She cannot tell Obito about how he will be crushed, rocks pressing down on one side but that will not be his end and how he might think his last moments come with sound of tumbling earth; so loud that it shakes the ground he lies on and then there will be silence. But that silence only grants impermanence and then madness – she was condemned to witness her death and watch this beautiful team break under the glare of accursed crimson eyes that bleed tears, *condemned* to watch as purple marks turn into bruises under the sick pale tone of skin.

For the many things she was condemned for, she thinks she deserves it because she was not a good person nor was she altruistic. She deserves to break just as they fall from their united glory, but unlike their shattering, hers would be another noise in the void. She would be the bystander as the pieces fall into place, broken pawns by broken kings, and only when her side of the board was set, she will play.

*What is more important: your part of the play or the play itself?*

The *Kyuubi no Kitsune* once asked, in the dim room where his words of wisdom rang through the mindscape. His experiences span across infinity and he was patient, waiting for the response she must give. His fur glows in reddish-gold hues, his lying posture a majesty as his nine tails sway languidly behind him. She finds herself replying simply in contradictory tones in both heart and mind, her cerulean fixated on vermillion eyes.

*The play.*

(The actors.)

He does not refute her answer even though both of them knew that one was often sacrificed for the other. He grasps at her motives delicately with his claws and he knows that she will commit to the same path. His host understood the need for sacrifices – she was the epitome of one that lived
through dozens – but he does wonder if she can stay at hand.

**Perhaps**, he then muses, *it is only in contradictions that she can be truthful.*

The ancient knows that she seeks happiness but it was not something she could find in remembrance. But memory was all she has – the vestiges she desperately clung onto – to give validation to the destroyed timeline that made her the person she was to seek such a lucrative happiness. She brands their atrophy of life as her biggest failures and grips onto it so tightly that it hurts her but it is the same pain that keeps her from stagnating.

In her own small body, she was the only beholder of the strength that her precious people grew to have in the war, fighting against their own monsters in their small ways. She was the only proof that they existed, that they were *true* and it gave meaning to the reason why she lived. The jinchūriki was made up of fragments of personalities and styles that she picked up; for the way she thought, fought and acted was all that she learnt from each of them, and without it, she would be quite lost.

Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto loved the actors so much that she willingly became vengeance's creature, descending from the point where she was once empathy's acme. She was trodden down and beaten up in plights one too many for a woman of twenty-two autumns, becoming maddeningly invested in changing things.

But for all the cruelty that she has to commit, the *Kyuubi no Kitsune* sees the strength that keeps her back straightened in the face of adversity and the benevolence that she attempts to bury. She tries to shut out her optimism that still grapples for duration and her need to connect with someone burns strong. Her capacity to love was still boundless despite her tragedies, even extending to a demon as detestable as he. Even though she was more reluctant, she always made space, always willing to help and willing to break.

He witnesses her determination as she takes up a weapon but he admires the kindness that makes her fingers tremble and drop the kunai back into its pouch. He glimpses her old empathy when she eventually brings her arms up to wrap around the Nohara descendent and the way she relates herself to the Uchiha with numerous parallels. He knows the facts she hides and some that she has given away but more than anyone, he sees the strength that burns within her soul, no matter how small the flame; blue and orange fire flickering and growing.

She was broken just as she was valiant, and his red eyes train on her figure, giving her leeway to her own honesty – and Kurama sees the things that Naruto doesn't. Or perhaps they were emotions that she had to deny to keep herself from falling off the brink.

So he asks:

**What is a play with an empty stage?**

His question catches her momentarily by surprise and she seemed conflicted as she grabbed a fistful of fabric like it was her heart. She knows her own insanity for the actors as well but she chooses to direct his query another way.

*And what is a stage, if there is no play?*

They stand in perpetual silence.

(Nothing was the answer to both.)

…
He was proclaimed a prodigy by many and dysfunctional by lesser men, but sometimes he wishes
the latter was true if it could give reason to things he could not comprehend.

But Hatake Kakashi scarcely cares for the former statement; they were mostly empty words picked
out from the grapevine, ballooning simple facts into its own animal through the distortion of traveling
sentences and the human tendency of exaggeration. He was what he thinks he was; a valuable lesson
he learns after an unfortunate run-in with suicide that makes him a pitiful orphan. (He laughs
miserably.) It was an impression that stays with him when they decided that a child was to blame for
their parent's mistakes and it is one he will never forget after too many scorching remarks and
crocodile tears.

(He doesn't outwardly show it – Ninja were never supposed to – but his heart undeniably grieves for
his father, a man he dearly respected, and his anger is well directed at who had exploited his blind
loyalty. He suspects that the emotions will never fade (and he was right) but sometimes he doesn't
realize how much that one decision affects him.)

He does not think he is a prodigy.

Presumptuous and loosely used nominations mean little to him when he stands beside a true genius,
one who he reveres for his artistry in creation and intelligence. Kakashi does not think he was
overshadowed by his teacher when he tries to make the Jōnin's genius his own, and he hopes that he
can reach the same zenith that he climbs towards.

Namikaze Minato was incomprehensible; understandably for a prodigy who was bound to have their
own unique quirks to make up for their brilliant minds – and they come in fascinating albeit terrifying
forms. The boy swears he has never seen someone as fanatical or obsessed as him when it comes to
Fūinjutsu (– sans one redhead, but he tries to ignore her as she was more incomprehensible and
infuriatingly warm and it scares him). The man can spend tireless hours on one end to complete a
single jutsu – his greatest invention – working without sleep or food to painstakingly create his own
sealing language and dimensions to ensure its success. It takes him a long time but he gets there, and
the Elemental Nations tremble before his moniker and his distinct kunai that cuts faster than one can
blink. It was mesmerizing to see fear etched on faces as he flashes in and out of the battlefield like
God's thunder, and he wonders how ancient scriptures imbued on parchment, ink compacted into a
tag, could bring forth such terror.

It gives reason to the intensity of his curiousness, for there were materials – scrolls, techniques and
kekkei genkai alike – that he has yet to discover and learn, and it often leaves him frustrated at his
limited knowledge. Minato tells him that he was young and he should take his time but he can only
muster more scepticism than acceptance at the given explanation. The average life expectancy was a
Shinobi during war was common knowledge and devastatingly short – bright flames that burn out
quickly – and his age, even at ten autumns, meant that he had lived out nearly half of it. He was
mortal and it dictated that his time was finite, facts that wrap around his throat like bruising fingers
when he witnesses his comrades fall. The accumulating names on the memorial don't change and
while he dances with death whenever duty calls, he has no intention to be its constant, willing
partner.

His sensibility drives him to want to learn more, to run faster and hit harder, and before he realizes it,
his own mild obsession forms. He devours the information he can get his hands on and he starts
questioning everything with the intent to understand. Just knowing wasn't enough, for that was the
stream of an empty-headed academic, and he desires to decipher each jutsu from the point of release
to its formation and change. It lures him into the intricacies of Ninjutsu and he finds himself hooked;
making the subject his principle and it builds the path he will later walk.
(This obsession compounds into a habit and it becomes of him. His collective hard work and curiosity pays off and his label as a genius stands, but they denounce his efforts by saying that it was natural since he was his father's son. It leaves him bitter at first, but he remembers there were better opinions to seek. As long as the man thinks he was capable of being the Hokage's sharpest and most devastating sword, he was content.)

But those are just technical things that he will eventually grasp and there were far more complicating things than tardiness and switching of personalities with a snap.

It was not Obito's unfathomable tardiness that can stretch to hours or Kushina-nee's mysterious hair that could float while splitting into nine different sections that confuses him. (He would rather die than admit that there was a point in time where he wondered if she put gravity seals in her hair. He knew his hair defied gravity, but hers was extreme.)

No – the most perplexing person he had ever set his eyes upon was a girl who he fought on their first meeting and one that fell before his kunai.

Yet she was competent and able, smashing any preconceived notions he might have had of any supposed weaknesses into unrecognizable bits. She proved herself to be worthy of her new rank of Chūnin with her speed and skills despite being two years younger, wiping the floor with everyone or at least enough to hold a fight. She held herself with elegance in her style, each movement like flowing water but cutting like a tempest, changing from rigid to soft stances as the situation dictates. It felt like an amalgamation of many styles rather than just one; speaking of different personalities with each transition – brawler, dignified, speed, crazed and grace – utterly mesmerizing as she embodied each one to her core, limbs animated with sole devotion to perform it with finesse.

His teacher once said that he found her fighting style to be 'beautiful' and he concurs, but he would like to add 'brutal', 'lethal' and possibly 'demonic' to the list. If the bruises he was sporting after one spar were anything to go by, her lanky limbs hid deceptive strength and her short stature did not mean she had qualms flipping someone twice her size and using their momentum as her guide. She did not hold back – a quality he respects – and she dishes out pain equally to all. She took pain similarly without complaint, always getting up, and saying 'again'.

However, training ethics and flexible body aside, she was obnoxious. She was loud and bright as day, finding a budding friendship with Obito and reaching his level of annoyance with ease. She found every opportunity to tease the poor Uchiha and spite him concurrently (a feat that he was mildly impressed by) and her only saving grace was that she was capable of being serious (aka shutting up) when necessary and that she was punctual.

But she was more than what met the eye – for a supposedly rambunctious kunoichi she portrayed herself to be, her footsteps were surprisingly silent outside of combat.

When she moved in the clearing outside of practice, the leaves barely crunched beneath her feet. They were undisturbed by her movements as she brushed past and it bore a closer resemblance to Minato's stride rather than Obito's heavy gait. She did not wear even a whiff of perfume while Rin still did on occasion, not caring much for her appearance except the bare minimum. She screamed experience – but from where, he always asks – and he wonders if he will ever get an answer.

Perhaps if he knew the dwellings of her experience, he would stop the fear that still fringes his mind. He cannot shake off the feeling that she knows him: every facet of truth, his dark history, his nightmares and thoughts, every bit of him that spans into the future like a manual already written and one that she has read. She seems to expect things from him – things he does not understand and yet still wants to meet – because she is always staring at him like he was someone else (but not his father, he realizes belatedly), capable of being better and reaching greater heights and she wants him to be
that person.

Like she wants his leg to kick faster and meet the arm she already lifts, to twirl the blade a certain way to clash with hers that descends. Unknowingly, she was the one who sets the rhythms in their spars, subconsciously guiding him to leave lesser openings, to hit harder and move faster, to the extent where he feels exhilarated and breathless, a feeling that only she can grant in mock simulation. And at the end of it –

It scares him. Petrifies even.

That she has that hold, that knowledge of his future potential, like she knows *everything*.

She seemed so sure. She moved with absolute certainty, treading the path that was already paved while his journey felt like a haze with grass, trees, graves and darkness, left alone without a compass or map, where he will find neither friendly faces nor directions.

(The scariest thing perhaps was how quickly he comes to trust her despite not wanting to. It was begrudging but she has her ways to worm into his heart and mind, coaxing him to open up to her, to lay his organ in the palm of her hands. Somehow, he feels like she will never abuse it as she holds it so gently and keeps it in a box, fashioned for safe keep.)

But the conjectures were made and he becomes more perceptive to her reactions; like the occasional dim flickers of the quiet calm she conceals in her jovial vermillion, things that were made known to him when she cannot control them.

He realizes how truthful her expression might have been the first time they met and the prospect of it unnerves him even more. It was not the tortured look that confounds him but rather the fact that he has never seen it again; for she was always grinning and seemingly unburdened by the bleakness of war.

*But if that was her unguarded and her true self,* he hesitates to think, *why did she have such a tortured expression in the first place?*

He concedes that he knows little about her or her past.

He cannot explain why *tortured* was the first term that comes to mind, but it was probably the tell-tale reds that she bore within her sockets that gave him the connotation. He doesn't think there was a colour more vivid than her eyes in that instance, for it was akin to the shade of newly spilt blood and intensified by the tears that welled. He was no stranger to the hue; he sees it on his hands when he slits a throat and on the ground where it spreads and dye familiar silver.

(It was etched in his memory that one fateful night, and it thunders in the background while his body goes cold; he still wonders if he wasn't enough for Him to stay and that thought makes him feel extremely insignificant.)

It was an ugly colour that hid corpses and bones with too many deaths and afflictions, one that witnessed so much violence that she was a perennial reflection of it. That gaze was more intense than the veterans of the Second Shinobi War that once lectured them and it didn't make *sense* because they were *adults* while she was a *child*, and a *child* should never be capable of such a look. (*Never* ever. No, just no.)

A look of so much guilt, of so much angst unbefitting of an eight year old that he involuntarily admits that he feels sympathy for her. That he would, with a shaky breath, confess that he would never wish it upon anyone, especially if they were younger them him. She gave the sinister
impression that she lived through thousands of incidents but it was not possible if time were constant.

The last time he checked, time was.

There was only one war in their time and they were in the midst of it, and it was already something he came to hate with a passion. He cannot erase the monstrosities he has seen and the kills he has made. He cannot remove the imaginary blood he sees on his hands or silence their screams; cannot drown out the image of hundreds of bodies littering the ground beneath the Great Village. Like every other war-weary Shinobi on either sides of the field, he would have to live with it. (He thinks it is ironic that as professionals that make a living off death to be afraid and haunted by death.) The most damaging effect of war was not its death toll or its ending ruin; it was that it turned children into warriors – perfect representations of unquestioning and apathetic soldiers – that dispatched with increasing efficiency as they were exploited to obey. They were the obvious results of war, alienated from the next generation that would never know the losses that they have went through.

(He never wants to picture anyone in the middle of the battlefield, blood-soaked and hands shaking.

But he has an inkling that she was not spared of the scenario.)

And she seemed to reflect those thoughts although she tries not to.

Her ability to hide her own pain astounds him and he was wearing a physical mask. Her figurative was far more impressive than a piece of fabric, for hers like crafted porcelain in the hands of a master: painted smiles on untainted canvas, almost perfected if not for a small smudge.

Even though he sees the imperfections, he scantly cares. He prefers her feigned happiness to her anguish even if it was a lie. He would rather she pretend until she believed in her own act wholeheartedly than ever see her cry. Decidedly, her stupid smiles were more tolerable than her frowns and her tears of laughter were infinitely better than her heart-breaking sobs. He doesn't ever want to see that expression ever again.

He just doesn't want the confident and lively girl she attempts to be ruined by what she hides. It was easier to deal with her cheekiness rather than a girl he cannot console and she was a good sparring partner. She might have a penchant for having secrets (in which she does) and he might never know them but he settles for the fact that she probably will be around for a long time.

He won't be confiding in her any time soon but that was fine.

He doesn't think he will ever understand the enigma that Kara was.

But ever-so-begrudgingly, he will accept her.

(And that, he does.)

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: You don't know how important dialogue is until you write nearly none.
And Trivia: I really like dramatic irony.

I felt the need to make up for the fact that the previous chapter was kind of crappy. I mean, I went back to read it again and edit, and might I say, I was questioning myself. This has been sitting around for quite some time and gathering dust and it was pretty
relevant, so I edited it slightly and now it's complete :D

Enjoy.
The waters rippled.

And yet, he doesn't lift his head nor react to the source that was a beacon for his chakra, her swirling vortex the unique holder for his fire. He knew the signature like it was the back of his hand, its wellspring and intricacies mapped out in his mind as his power runs through her channels like an unending river; a course that he will run until this part of him diminishes along with her. It was natural that he knew her energy like it was his own; he lived within her for more than two decades – a small percentage for all the consciousness he has – watching her develop her systems while his power purified in drops and melded with her own.

She was his vessel, and he prays to his departed father that she might be his last.

(It feels so far that nearly a year ago, that might truly have been the case. With the new timeline, he is renewed; with another vessel that will ensure his continued existence.)

'Another sleepless night?' Kurama asked, voice rumbling in its deep baritone.

Kara shrugged helplessly.

Denying that she had insomnia was useless. Both of them could feel the lethargy in her younger body and the eye bags that she hid beneath her Henge, her own mind slowing down and agitated from the lack of rest.

She cannot stop the recurring nightmares or the dreams from happier times, but she struggled to think that the latter was a blessing more than a curse. All her experiences would remain as memories – almost terrible reminders – of everything she has lost and Kami knows that she doesn't need any more of them.

Frequenting the mindscape helped her so that was precisely what she did.

'Nothing I can do to get around it,' she murmured, giving a moment of pause. 'Unless you want to give me your ability to take naps, of course,' she joked.

He sighed. Part of him wished that he could. 'Come here,' his tails beckoned.

She complied like it was a habit ingrained in her, her lithe feet tapping on water and causing it to ripple even further. She pressed her back against his side and slid down, wiggling slightly to find the most comfortable spot.

The warmth of his presence quickly filled her, his chakra thrumming in her veins in an even, saturated pace. One of his tails reach out to cocoon her like a blanket, wrapping her in his protection.
as it pressed down on her with a comforting weight. She hummed slightly, indulging further in all that her beast was, eyes closing and trusting.

'Kit,' his entire body trembled with the deep note.

She hummed again in acknowledgement, allowing him to go on.

'Why do you refuse to allow yourself to forget?'

Her eyebrows furrowed as she ruminated over his question, genuinely considering it before she spoke. 'Forgetting… Forgetting is so easy that it feels wrong, 'ttebane,' whispered the jinchūriki. 'Forgetting would mean forgetting the people I fight for, who made me the person I am today. While it isn't what they wanted—'she laughed mirthlessly—'who I became was worth becoming. And I don't ever want to forget that.'

The faces of her precious people complemented by their names flashed across her mind quickly in the reddish darkness. They change from actual visages to just registration numbers that hang off dog tags, thin metal clinking against one another on an endless chain, a representation of the cause that they fought and died for. But all the images take a turn for the worse, the glinting surface of metal suddenly corroding and melting.

'It's just-'she struggled, 'it's just the enemies that make everything go bad.'

His claws glide against tiled grounds and turned the liquid into a murky red momentarily. 'If that is what you say, why do you refuse to even entertain the notion of sealing the bad away temporarily despite my numerous offerings?' Kurama asked. An extra tail twirled slowly above her head, drawing out blue wisps that curl around him like a thread on a spindle. 'They often plagued you no matter your state of consciousness and you are aptly aware that you cannot forget them. Yet you cling onto those vestiges even though they threaten your sanity, when the rational thing is to clearly forget them and live.'

Even if it was just briefly, she can feel the weight unburdening her shoulders from the threads he drew. Alleviating it was, she exhaled, pulling back those strings where they belong.

'Things are only sweet because there is bitterness as its counterpart.' Her fingers draw an imaginary circle with a curved divide, her own smile filled with both the emotions she tried to describe. 'Their deaths,' her voice shook, 'remind me why I'm back here all over again, trying to fix the mistakes I made. Mistakes that I regret and could no longer change. They are my motivation that tells me what it cannot become because- because my precious people deserve a better future than the cesspit that we came from.'

One hand trailed down his fur. 'Kurama, you, were once part of that bitterness as well.'

She can only give him her honesty. Unlike most people who remember their childhood as fleeting images of happiness, hers were crystal clear: full of scorching remarks and bruises, of shunning and drivel. It was not the Kyuubi's fault – none of them asked to be linked – but he harboured her unhappiness and allowed it to fester, using it as his own tool for his means.

They got on the wrong footing with conflicting goals; she demanded payment while he wanted freedom. A chakra construct of hatred and a damaged human sacrifice – no one would have expected them to form such a formidable pair. They certainly didn’t.

Ironically, it was from this unstable foundations that they still managed to build such solid grounds, treasuring each other's presence and finding a long lost comfort as partners that were tied in death. It
was this bitterness of beginnings that made their current relationship sweet, giving it meaning that they have triumphed over their own darkness and there were capable of being more than what people said they were. From a common enemy they rose together, becoming comrades and irreplaceable partners, surviving till the end and still trying.

They were imperfect – but Kara was fine that. He showed his concern in a roundabout way but she measured him with her straightforward nature that was unafraid. He was her voice of logic and her extended wisdom and she was his hope that humanity might be different from all he has perceived.

Their past was an anchor that chained her down but it was also a weight that made her stronger.

It was all the matter of perspective.

Silently touched, another tail curled around her, while the other seven swayed arbitrarily.

Perhaps one day he could free her from newer demons like how she once gave him a new lease of purpose, but now was not the time.

'Sleep, kit,' he murmured, quiet with concern. *I will protect you.*

Kurama coaxed more purified chakra into her system in a slow rhythmic pace, its gentle nature soothing her tired mind and heart into unconsciousness. He droned an old story to her in accordance to the lull he created, drowning her senses in a soulful background noise that would chase away the demons that kept her from sleep.

Her eyelids fluttered to a close under his efforts and her head tilted slightly to the side, cheek pressing against his fur slightly. Blonde hair covered a part of her whiskers while the creases between her eyebrows smoothed out and a pang of nostalgia hit him.

Uzumaki Naruto was once a girl who dreamed impossible things, even on the tattered mattress in her small apartment and wearing a ridiculous dog nightcap. She always strived to prove him wrong and was unbidden in emotions, reckless and fiercely beautiful as she stared down every enemy with eyes that spat blue fire. She used to stand in the spotlight fearlessly and gave hope with her golden glow, taking pride in the unorthodox ninja she was that desired the light.

But that flame diminished and she was now frightened by the same light.

Kara only had nightmares and phantoms as her true company, training herself to near exhaustion, always slinking in the darkness unseen. She didn't dream. She no longer dared. She only held the stubborn conviction to save everyone else – her last rope, her saving grace – but that did not mean she treasured her own life. She lost her bright smiles to the carnage, her friends to death, falling into the abyss that she once pulled him out of and Kami knows if she will ever climb up.

The *Kyuubi no Kitsune* was only the watchful guardian that witnessed everything. From her rise to her fall, he healed every physical wound such that none would ever mire her skin, but there were always emotional ones he could never quite reach. He was tired of just being the ancient bystander that only committed to his own pessimism.

If it meant *something – anything* – then he would at least, try to protect her sleep.

So that she could awake with brighter eyes when the sun rose, to perhaps see the world as she had once shown him.

The hours of the night approached dawn and it drew to a close.
"In the name of the Sage of Six Paths, his brother and his biological descendants that may or may not be extinct after this war," Kara groused, "I'm going to kill Jiji." A growl ripped from her throat, the sound low and heavy with unhidden rage.

'Keep your murderous tendencies within your own village,' scoffed Kurama in the back of her mind. 'I would appreciate it if you do not undermine my departed father's succeeding lines.'

"Oh please. He would agree with my master plans if he was forced into this situation," said the jinchūriki seriously. She wasn't about to forgive her grandfather figure any time soon.

He gave her a D-rank mission. *D-rank. By the Shodai* –

She was an Elite Jōnin, was next-in-line for Nanadaihime Hokage and she was given a kami-damned *D-rank mission*. She hadn’t had to do a D-rank mission for nearly a decade – for good reasons since those missions were just demeaning – and he decided that the first thing to do after giving her the Chūnin rank was commemorate the occasion by giving her a *Stupid. Four times damned. D-rank mission.*

'Let her gain more experience and credibility' he said, with a laugh in his voice.

'Utter bullshit,' she called out in her mind, wanting to wipe that gleeful expression off his face with the scroll that her father was holding. But attacking the Hokage would be impolite (and treason) and she was probably in the black books of most ANBU operatives. (Kara swore it was *not* her fault.) In a nutshell – she was doing all she could stay out of the T&I holding cell.

The Hokage just didn't want to admit that he was being petty about the prank she pulled to get back at him for the entire Jōnin-sensei stunt – and *that* had been mild as compared to the entire month worth of D-rank mission he decided to place on her by proxy of Team Minato.

Her eyes narrowed. *He's going to wish he didn't when I'm done with my next prank.*

'On the bright side of matters,' Kurama interrupted her scheming, 'At least it is not a D-rank mission in Suna.'

"I'd take killing scorpions over this, Kurama," she hissed lowly, heaving the bundle in her arms slightly like it was a sacrifice. She wanted to slap that arrogant grin off his face, along with a few of his sharp teeth and maybe that would take his arrogance down a notch. *I hope it's the front tooth I knock out,* she thought darkly.

She glared at the baby in her arms. As cute as it was, its guileless fascination with her darkened hair was something she could not handle right now. Her current schemes involved taking down a Hokage and usurping the nice chair he sat on – not attempt to turn baby speak into some sort of cryptogram.

Her pupils became silted. Her vermillion eyes turned crimson.

She felt kind of smug that the baby started crying.

"Kara-chan, what did you do!?”

*Fuck. Maybe not then.*

The said girl flinched when she heard thundering footsteps echo throughout the house. Brown hair flaming, the medic-nin approached her with the aura of war goddess, half-ripping the crying demon spawn – she meant *child, baby* – out of her grasp to comfort her.
"I leave you for one moment and you have the baby crying," scolded Rin, bouncing the child slightly to calm it down. "What did you do again, Kara-chan?"

Kara flinched again although she felt no remorse. "Nothing?" she muttered.

She gave her a disbelieving, yeah-I-will-totally-believe-that look. "Even Kakashi and Obito aren't that bad with children," sighed the Nohara, giving her two teammates a glance. They were handling the other toddler surprisingly well. "This is the second time you made the children we are supposed to babysit cry, Kara-chan."

"Then Sandaime shouldn't have given me this mission then," said Kara under her breath.

"Kara-chan…"

"I said nothing," the girl quickly added, raising her arms in surrender.

She briefly considered how much chakra it might take to trade places with her clones that were in her apartment reading up on Fūinjutsu. A kawarimi over a long distance shouldn't hurt me, she convinced, in fact, the high chakra expenditure would work in my favour.

Rin narrowed her eyes. "Don't even think about escaping."

She gaped. Was she a mind-reader?

"No, I'm not," said Rin, faintly amused. "You said both sentences out loud."

"Damn it."

The medic-nin slapped her arm, brown eyes stern. "Language."

She stared. A childish part of her wanted to curse out like no tomorrow. Wanted to scream and cause a ruckus (maybe then she'll be banned from D-ranks for poor influence) and hunt a certain Hokage down. But maturity (or there lack of) made her settle for chanting some gibberish demonic chant instead, hoping that some saviour might swoop down from above to save her from this insulting mission. Demons were an option as well – she wasn't feeling picky today.

'I would find amusement in that statement, but you are already the host for one, you do realize that right?' Kurama asked.

'Demon? You?' She snorted derisively. 'Hardly.'

Eye twitching slightly, the Bijuu moved suddenly, taking the liberty to flick her forehead and body straight into the end of their mindscape. His mouth curled in satisfaction to the sick crunch of body impacting on solid and the glare she sported as she climbed to her feet. It didn't actually hurt her, but that didn't mean it stopped her from conjuring a Fūton: Rasenshuriken and throwing it his way.

He cackled and slapped it away.

"You would think that being the closest to the baby's age would make you understand them more," Kakashi muttered nonchalantly. "Closer mentality and all."

"Been hanging around babies a lot, Hatake?" She retorted back, grinning brightly back at his irritated scowl.

"I'm not the one who made the baby cry."
"And I'm not the one who looks constipated like they ate puree for every meal since they were born. Oh wait, that's your description."

Rin sighed lowly to the baby in her arms. Suddenly the doe-eyed, slightly troublesome baby felt like a better conversation partner than anyone else in the room. Obito watched on with fascination while wrenching a small shoe out of the toddler's mouth.

Kakashi's eyebrow twitched. "You don't even know the first thing about babies, let alone tasting puree."

"And neither do you," she snaked. "I wouldn't think so hard about it though. No amount of tissue can clean up the mess of an exploded brain and baby powder can only do so much to mask up the scent of blood. It would be a terrible mission report to write, seeing how babysitting can somehow result in mortality."

"You're full of shit, you know that?"

"Kakashi-kun, language!"

"Not as much as you," Kara smiled serenely. "No amount of diapers in the world can hold up the amount that you have."

His eyebrows looked like they were having a seizure, in Kara's sincere opinion. Rin gave up and buried her face in the crook of the baby's small neck, causing it to giggle.

"Okay, that's about enough arguing, the both of you," Minato finally interjected, looking almost regretful that he had to end the conversation. "We're here to complete the mission, not quarrel about like-minded mentalities."

"I don't even know why I'm here," conveyed Kara in frustration. "I'm already Chūnin."

"I don't see how your new rank affects your ability to complete the mission. No matter what position you are, you are always expected to finish the mission you are given, even if it is low-ranking and below your calibre. Every mission is important to the village."

"I'm not disputing that," Kara muttered. They were in an authoritarian village after all. "But what I do know for a fact that Chūnin usually don't have to do D-rank missions. They tend to cover to scope of B and C-ranks, and this—"she gestured to the overall domestic scene and the diaper on the couch—"is none of the above."

"You sound like Kakashi when you say that. He's like, disgruntled about these missions all the time."

"That is because I am," the silver-haired Chūnin deadpanned.

"And you sound like a disgruntled Genin that has yet to make it to Chūnin, Obito." Kakashi chortled at that.

"Fight me," Obito sulked. "Not everyone gets their promotion out of nowhere like you. You haven't even told us how you got it. You just showed up one day with Minato-sensei and announced that you were Chūnin. That's it. No exams, no nothing. Nada."

"I told you I used blackmail," she huffed, "You didn't want to believe me."

"There's no way that would have worked, Kara!"
"Would it?" She deferred, looking at her own nails uncharacteristically. She looked up at him with mischievous red eyes. "I seem to recall someone being blackmailed into buying me ramen because they didn't want something getting out... Something about a room... a picture... and someone..."

"... I thought we were over this when I bought you ramen last week."

"We were," she informed, smirking. "But that's the beauty of information," her arms made an imaginary rainbow, "its eternal and it can always be used again."

'What information are you talking about?' asked Rin curiously.

"Nothing!" said Obito hastily, his eyes pleading the blackmailer.

She raised an eyebrow. *You started this, so you owe me ramen if you want me to drop it...*

His eyebrow, however, twitched.

'Don't sass me, Obito."

"I must say, I didn't pry you to be someone who would denounce authority, Kara."

"You don't understand how effective the first lady, Fūjinjutsu and high quality tobacco are together, sensei," said Kara, calm.

He raised his eyebrow. "Is it imperative that I should be aware of said effectiveness...?"

"...No."

"Do I have to file a report for this?"

"If I don't get caught," Kara answered, causing the entire room to go silent, save the toddler who fell face first on the ground. "So far, I haven't. It's good for him anyway..." She muttered the next line under her breath, "Since that Jiji damaging his own health with the rate he's smoking."

He would be thanking her when he lived past his seventies.

Minato shook his head, and he doesn't think he'll ever understand the relationship dynamics between the Hokage and his youngest student.

The toddler started sniffling. And it cried.

"Now that-"she pointed to the source of the commotion- "was not my fault, Rin-chan."

"Kara-chan," the said medic spoke with much difficulty, chest heaving like it was physically exhausting to rebuke her companion, "For the sake of my decreasing sanity, please keep quiet."

The other two members of Team Minato guffawed.

"Kick his ass!" Kara yelled, hand cupping her mouth to amplify her voice. Her eyes darted back and forth between the two rapidly moving figures at stalemate before she shouted again: "Or you owe me ramen!"

"What!?!" Obito shrieked indignantly, blocking a kick that was aimed at the side of his face. "How is that even fair!?"
Kakashi grunted when his opponent landed a punch on his stomach, feeling the air being knocked out of his system. He bounded backwards to avoid another punch, circulating more chakra to his abdomen to relieve some of the pain. His grey eyes flashed. That hit actually hurt, he sucked in a breath, drawing out a kunai in his right hand.

"Shinobi life was never fair," she stated in a matter-of-factly tone. The scarecrow pounced, kunai pushing out first like a spearhead.

"And you're fucking expensive," Obito snapped back, drawing his own weapon to counter. He winced when the sharp edge drew past his cheek, feeling the sting of the slash.

She gasped out loud, throwing some stray grass in his direction, "I resent that statement!"

The Uchiha let out a snort as he met metal for metal, his onyx eyes converging on Kakashi even more intensely. Swings were traded, strength against speed, raining sparks down on both persons as they intended for the torso. With military precision, he veered his kunai forcefully and knocked the weapon out of his opponent's grip, quickly making use of his surprise to execute a series of quick stabs.

"Kara, you should stop distracting Obito if you actually want him to win. You're only disrupting his concentration as we speak."

"Distracting him?" She scoffed, sounding offended. "I call it motivation, Minato-sensei."

Rin giggled. Their teacher rolled his eyes, struggling to keep the amused grin down.

The spectators continued to watch the fight, contemplative as they judged each move that they made. A skilled Shinobi would try to minimize their excessive motions to save energy and make quicker and more precise moves. That was the distinct difference between the experienced and the amateur; it was the amount of time spent trying to drive out habits and inconsistencies, and being the latter, they would need all the practice that they could get with the helpful advice of their teacher.

But watching them fight while remaining silent was a bizarre experience for Kara.

It was just a few years ago where she watched them fight to the death as grown men in their primes, their Taijutsu fully developed in both speed and strength. They were fast and flowing in their lethal dance, their art timeless as they met blow for blow, dishing out kicks, punches and all manners of manoeuvres just to get the upper hand. It was sickeningly beautiful to witness them at the tip-top form, a dark background giving centre stage to the walls they raised and the fires and lightning that they wrought, destroying everything and leaving a trail of broken earth in their wake. They both had one red eye then, the Sharingan bloodied with its three cutting edge; both matched in reactions and copying, both familiar and unfamiliar with the style that has morphed.

It was also the first time she saw her sensei despaired, trying to hide his own guilt and failures behind his signature pocketbooks although the pages don't ever flip.

Now they were just children, nothing of the experienced killers they would become, like cumbersome puppets with shorter limbs, movements unpolished and awkward. They were still learning – engraving memory in their muscles and forming stronger bones, still shaky on reflexes and mind barely honed, trying to grow out of the stage of in between. It's a blessing, she idly thought, a blade of grass spinning in her grasp, that I have the chance to watch them fight without the intention to kill.

Consequently, it made her realize the devastation that her sensei might have felt, that whenever they
fight on different sides of the war, there would be no teacher to moderate them and call an end to it, throwing any chance of reconciliation out of the window. The seals that they made after a spar was gone with the winds of the past and all that was left was the ugly truth that only one of them could survive for the other to thrive.

This was what it could have been for them. Where both of them completed each other without even trying, making up for each other's deficiencies with combined strength - in rhythm with one another for the objective of improving rather than trying to kill one another.

Kara let the flimsy plant she held drop.

"The spar is over, it's Kakashi's win," Minato called, snapping her out of her reverie.

Obito was on the ground while Kakashi towered over him, his retrieved kunai positioned directly in the middle of his opponent's neck, the cusp of his blade prickling skin slightly. No matter victory or defeat, exhaustion and satisfaction was present on both their faces. The victor offered his seal of reconciliation in good grace and pulled a grinning Obito up along with it.

"Good fight," Rin praised, a humbled smile on her face.

The medic-nin pushed herself up from the ground to heal them.

Their teacher nodded in agreement. "Obito, you are an aspiring Taijutsu practitioner with your growing strength but you can afford to plan out some of your moves in advance to land more devastating blows. Not everything has to hit; it is more of landing the final and systematic blows that count."

"Kakashi, you make up for where Obito lacks. You have the speed and reflexes to make up for your lesser strength. While being agile exploits your shorter stature to its full limit, being able to pack a punch when it counts will increase your effectiveness." The said boy grunted, staring at his own hands while clenching and unclenching them.

"Either way," he clapped his hands on both his boys, gesturing for them to sit, "We'll call an end to today's training. Good work everyone."

His cerulean eyes softened as he gazed at the children that meant so much to him. They looked up at him with such optimism, sporting a wind-blown hair and slightly scuffed up but still utterly precious. It was times like this where he felt bitterness for the career choice that they made. In the dark times of secret wars, they were put through battles where there was no mercy for the young – every man for themselves – and the comfort that they could find in the times of desperation was cold steel.

"We are going to be deployed for another war mission tomorrow," informed Minato. The alarm and fear present on their faces made his gut wrench. "You are to report at the South Gate tomorrow at five hundred hours and you need to be punctual." He looked strictly at his wayward student before he sighed again.

As much as he wished that their missions could stay at a lower rank, he was not deaf to scarcity in manpower. The scales of ability to missions have slowly shifted ever since the beginning of war and it was a miracle that his team remained mostly untouched.

_But how long has that lasted?_

"So I expect all of you to rest up early today. If you need to replenish your weapon and pill stocks, or pack the last of your bags, please do it by early evening. I want nothing less than your peak performance tomorrow. Is that clear?"
"Understood," all of his students answered, syllables crisp.

"Is the situation that bad?" asked Run, voicing the question that some of her teammates had.

"Worsening," he replied with a grimace.

Iwa was quickly making advances through the buffer village of Ame, and Kumo would be stupid to not take advantage of the clear road that had already been forged. They were approaching steadily and it was terrifying - they were too close to his home plate for his liking, too close to his precious people and he wanted them out.

"We'll be fine when we have you around, Minato-sensei." Kara quipped with a grin, another blade of grass twirling between her fingertips.

If only he had her confidence, he smiled wryly. "I thank you for your faith, Kara-chan. I hope I won't displace it."

"You won't." Resolute vermilion eyes echoed the absolute certainty she vested into the two words and part of him believed her. But the seriousness fades as soon as it appears. "I mean, you are the famed Yellow Flash. All you need to do is swing your blonde hair like you're advertising a hair product and you'll send both Iwa and Kumo-nin running." She cracked a huge grin.

Obito and Rin burst into giggles at her random input.

"Very funny," Minato laughed along. "Should I throw in a few Bushin to magnify the impact?"

She considered it seriously, tapping her cheek with the plant. "I say yes if you're trying to cover more area. A small-looking person from a distance won't do much… Impact is absolutely necessary."

Her teacher shook his head, amused by her vivid imagination. She probably imagined him lolling his head to the rhythm of metal clashing as well. "I'll take it under advisement."

"Spoilsport," Kara pouted, knowing a rejection when she heard one. "People would write stories about it if you actually did it."

"I don't aspire to be written like that, Kara-chan."

"It adds appeal to your infamy?" She suggested.

"People would revere you sensei!" Obito fuelled eagerly.

"Or make him a laughing stock," Kakashi stepped up to defend his honour. He refused to have his teacher's dignity sodden by childish antics.

"It can be used a tool for underestimation then," the mischievous kunoichi surmised immediately. "If the enemies constantly expect him to swing his hair gloriously on the battlefield, they won't think he's dangerous and they'll let their guard down. Then Minato-sensei can swoop in-" her arms and head moved in a zigzag manner opposite of one another-"and end them all. It's the perfect tactic to employ!" She finished, chest puffed out and immensely proud. Obito chuckled again while Rin continued her breathless giggles.

"I think you spend too much time thinking of pointless tactics, Kara."

"I call it making use of every possible distraction as a weapon, Hatake," she sniped back challengingly, the grin a permanent fixture on her face. "And ever heard of improvisation? Heard it
stimulates the mind. You want some?"

"I can improvise plenty well and in more reasonable ways than you can," Kakashi retorted coolly. "I don't think using Minato-sensei as a party trick for intimidation works well."

"Well don't knock it till you try it," she shrugged carelessly.

"I'd rather not, thank you very much."

"This is why you should never take Kakashi out for comedy," Obito whispered loudly to Kara. "He doesn't understand it."

Grey eyes became a level more intense.

"I learnt that the first time I met him," she whispered back, still looking pointedly at the silver-haired boy. "He'd start questioning the comedian irritably instead of getting the joke. Shame." She paused. "Shameee," she booed at length, dragging the word out on purpose.

In her fit of laughter, she barely managed to dodge the blunted shuriken that was thrown her way.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed reading this chapter as much as I enjoyed writing it ^^
Eight's Breakable

Chapter Summary

"When a person's got nothing, hope is the kindest thing you can give her. Or the cruelest." - Samantha Kemp, Burial at Sea

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Breakable

/breɪkəb(ə)l/ · adjective

capable of breaking or being broken easily.

For an adult of eighteen autumns, there isn't much that Naruto hates.

She dislikes things, like the three minutes it takes for a ramen to prepare (it's called instant noodles, and that isn't very instant), she dislikes the actions of others and she comes close to hating an aged, red-armoured Uchiha who was probably a pyromaniac like the rest of his bloodline kin.

But decidedly, the first thing she does truly come to hate is hospitals.

Not a big surprise, really – most Shinobi did.

Being independent creatures of solidity, ending up on a hospital bed – powerless and weak – was a tough pill to swallow. Having to be under the mercy of steady hands while tethering between life and death was even harder, where they were no longer the determinants of their lives, forced into vulnerability that they seldom felt. (Or maybe it was just that many of her comrades have been in here and she was forced to wait hours outside the operating room and under that blasted red sign, biting her own nails to non-existence. Or that there were some bodies that she had to collect from the morgue so that they could bury them. She has enough of the smell of rotting bodies and blood from war, and the hospital is a concentration of it.)

Naruto woke up to lethargy and weakness, a state that deeply bothers her. The brush of leather was more than enough to keep her down, weak as her limbs were, the soreness and missing strength foreign to her. Her head rested heavy against the pillow although she felt light-headed, painful inhales drawing air into her lungs as the organ pressed against bruised ribs. Each slight arch of her back brings about a sharp pang that shoots up her spine and her leaden limbs were too feeble to comply.

"Hey," she croaked out, head shifting to the left.

Her hoarse voice splintered the soft humming of seals and the other chakra signature in the room awakens, its calmness disrupted like a small fracture spiking through earth. Tired emerald eyes accentuated by eye circles and puffiness met her blurry gaze. Her caretaker sucks in a breath, the sound like seething waters that a dam spits in its deterioration.
Sakura then exhales after a long moment, dispelling the drowsiness that clouds her mind. She pushes her chair backwards, metal scrapping against tiles, taking a few steps forward to stand by her teammate's bedside.

Misery has its way with her heart and dug into palpable flesh. Her arms cross and she grips tightly to herself, afraid as she inspects the condition of her frail patient. There were little instances where she hovers over her headstrong friend, and the last time it happened, it was when they were shattered as a team and under the burden of a forming promise.

It felt like a regular occurrence now – or maybe because Naruto wasn't the first person in the string of people that she has to tend to – and she shakes at the revelation. The reason why doctors don't tend to their loved ones make sense at times like this, but a short-handed faculty denies them such a privilege. To hold her a person's life in her hands – let alone her precious people – was so rewarding and terrifying.

"You're not invincible, Naruto," Sakura breaks it to the person she regarded as her sister. "Stop-Stop putting yourself in unnecessary danger." Her voice was trembling. "I can't- No, we can't stand the sight of you collapsing on us—"you are our strength damn it; her mind cries out—"so please try not to do it again. We can't afford to lose you. I can't afford to lose another person."

Naruto's answering smile lacked its usual hundred-watt quality. It was brittle and small but still sincere, "But I can't afford to lose you either."

…

Her eyes were dull. They took in the information around her, from the moisture in the air to the speed of natural wind, searching the ground and branch for any previous activity. Feet moved in a uniformed manner to the average speed of their medic, practised and repetitive.

Dread and demise hung over the borderlands, the dried blood and rotting flesh festering a malodour in the growing fever of summer, attracting an unsightly group of scavengers and a buzz of flies. The humidity was thick in the forestry greens, such that sweat stuck to her, small beads accumulating into a bigger drop of diluted salt, rolling off her limbs and leaving a sticky trail behind. Pockets of light shone through the unshifting leaves, like a thousand eyes glaring in a thousand directions, watching the group that silently moved.

A small indent in the tree branch was noted. Her enhanced nose caught a fading scent. Nostrils flaring, her fingers flexed, in synchrony with the Jōnin and Hatake who came to the same conclusion. Enemies.

Numbers?

Her chakra senses expanded by a five mile radius, easy as she was breathing. Kakashi's head tilted upwards, trying to find downwind.

Six, Kara signed under the guise of brushing her hair back. The less sensitive pair caught on, temporarily tensing before forcing themselves to relax. They could not alert the enemy that they were aware, not until they could turn the tables into their favour at least.

Minato schooled his mild surprise into neutrality. He always knew that his youngest student was an
accomplished sensor but he wasn't sure how effective she was. Where?

Her hand tugged on her jacket with three fingers before flipping it back. Three front – Three rear. Her fist clenched. Closing in.

His palm brushed against the tree gently like he was moving his arm away to relax his body, marking it as his temporary anchor. His students' hands curled around their chosen projectiles, pressing cold metal against hotter flesh, finding a deluded comfort of self-protection. Chakra coursed in their energy channels at a greater speed with adrenaline fraying their minds, primed for action and reaction, ready for the worst.

It took all but a few seconds for chaos to descend.

In one staggering movement, Minato was in between Kakashi and Rin, flashing them backwards to the tree he once marked. The vertigo slammed into them but they were somewhat accustomed to it, easily regaining their balance and bearing their weapons. Her hands glowed with a threatening green, the chakra scalpels almost perfected into a thin coating while Kakashi brandished the chakra sabre that made his father famous. Their teacher had already disappeared, teleporting up the trees to give them aerial cover. The pair nodded at each other and moved.

Obito and Kara bounded backwards on their own accord, their fingers moving rapidly through a flurry of hand seals. He reached completion first; breathing in deeply before he expelled the chakra-infused air: "Katon: Gōkakyū no Jutsu!"

The entire area lit up with elemental fire, signature to the Uchiha.

"Fūton: Daitoppa!"

The large gust of wind that she discharged propelled the ball of flames forward, propagating not just its distance but also the scorching intensity behind the technique. The temperature was blazing in the current humidity, sweeping across the area in inferno reds and swallowing the enemies that were in mid-pounce.

In the hands of an amateur, the C-rank wind Jutsu could only achieve average effects. Placing it in the hands of a master that had too much chakra, however, it resulted in monstrous technique that compensated for the lack of control with power, increasing the distance that the flames could reach.

Before the flames dissipated, their feet were moving again, matching step for step, chasing after their combined Ninjutsu to the beaten, half-built earth wall that their enemies raised. A charred body was standing in front of the cracked structure, clearly not fast enough to duck behind their erected cover. The person's burnt limbs gave way and it collapsed – but before it even met the ground with a sickening thud, the two young Shinobi were already at the position it was supposed to claim.

Their hands shot out and smashed their selected enemy's head into the solid, unforgiving in their force and it resounded a loud bang. Her victim choked out a scream and was quickly silenced when she pulled his head back by the hair and embedded a kunai in his throat, but Obito's was unmoving, crumbling into useless matter when impacted and Kara cursed.

Fuck mud clone – something in front of her glinted from the charred trees – "MOVE!"

The cry tore from her lips, edging on raw urgency, her hands moving through the practised seals faster than the warning traversed air.

Not again not again no no No NO –
She didn’t know why she did it.

Perhaps it was instinct. Maybe it was desperation.

But no one was fast enough to stop her from attaining the effect that she wanted.

‘*Kit don’t—*’

The switch happened in a nanosecond.

Suddenly, she was the one under the chopping blade, its trajectory cutting through the air with a sharp whistle. Kara did not feel fear. She has been through worse.

As quick as she was to react before, her hand shot out to clamp on her assailant’s wrist, pain tearing through her shoulder where metal met. It was not a shriek that leaves her lips but something more primal, welling from the aged bloodlust that laid dormant within her, caged and finally released.

"Don’t Fucking *Touch* Them," she snarled, grip tightening with beastly strength. The Kyuubi did not take kindly to his partner being hurt.

Equipped with a kunai in her other hand, she swiped down ferociously at the arm that she grabbed. She flinched when he rapidly dislodged his weapon from her, pulling flesh with the blade and renewing the amount of blood she was losing. A throaty hiss broke forth from the back of her throat but the pain did little to deter her, slashing erratically with the same kunai at his torso, her injured arm already brandishing sharper nails.

Eyes as red as the blood that trickled from her arm, the jinchūriki pounced with a bestial flair, legs propelled upwards by almost caustic chakra. Her posture was primal like a lioness pouncing on her prey, body soaring in mid-air with deadly grace. Unfazed, the Kumo-nin stabbed front into her supposed heart—

Only for the girl to disappear into a puff of smoke.

"*Bitch—*" he barely managed to choke out as someone barrelled into him feet first, landing a solid kick on his lower spine. He flailed forward, weapon tilted and attempting to find lost balance- but his actions fail him as he let out a screech. The ground came closer.

Time stopped for him.

The Iwa-nin saw his demise for only a moment; a bloodied, dripping pointed end protruding out his chest, the sight ghastly as blood spluttered from the wound. A gurgled choke rose up from his throat after he collided with the ground, the embedded weapon pushed back and causing more friction within his failing heart.

His last words went unheard, mixed too deeply with his screams, where word and noise could no longer be differentiated from one another.

Hunched over his corpse, her body shuddered from all the red chakra that coursed within her coils. Her injured shoulder smoked lightly just as her internal channels burned, her fingers trembling as she gripped onto the kunai’s end. *First kill trauma?* She guessed before shaking her head. *It’s too late for that bullshit, ‘ttebane. Far too late.*

Younger body or not, she has witnessed too many intimate deaths for a death of stranger to affect her too much.
With steadier hands, she killed her hesitation, pulling out the weapon and stepping away from the
corpse in one move. She stared at the kunai and its bloodied cloth, alongside the crimson that still
dripped from the sharp end before she let the weapon clatter back onto the body. Disgusted, she
wiped the blood on her pants, displeased by the stickiness and warmth.

"Kara!" Three voices shouted at varying levels, causing her to flinch.

The first person to reach her was one of glowing hands, intent on healing her.

She stepped back involuntarily, confusing brown for pink.

"Baka! How many times do I have to tell you to stop putting yourself in danger!??"

"You're bleeding, Kara-chan," Rin murmured, lifting her hand to place it on her shoulder. "You
shouldn't do such dangerous things you know?" But thank you, for doing an act I don't dare to and
one that I can't. "Stand still alright? I'll run a diagnostic and heal you right up."

She took a step forward. Kara moved back. "It's fine," she muttered. "I don't need help."

"Kara-chan, you're bleeding," The medic reiterated, visage concerned. "That does not constitute as
'fine'. You need help so let me heal you."

"Listen to Rin, Kara." Obito quipped in. "And um-" he stuttered once, blushing slightly- "thank you
for the cover just now. And sorry about the wound." He gave her shoulder a guilty glance. "If it
wasn't for me, you probably wouldn't have gotten that injury."

"Would have done it again if necessary." She mumbled. You incorrigible liar, she thought, moving
her shoulder away. "And Rin, no- just no. Please stop trying. I'm fine."

"Kara…" Rin implored.

"No," she replied rudely, shielding her shoulder away.

"Kara," Minato said sternly.

"I'm fine okay," said Kara, on the verge of snapping and pleading at the same time. She can't handle
the look or tone of concern. Not right now. "I don't need help. What part of it can't you
understand?" Why did her throat feel so clogged? "The wound isn't that deep, it didn't cut into the bone, just give it
a few days—"never mind that it is almost already healed—"and I'll be fine. Please just drop it
okay?"

"I can't just ignore the fact that you're hurt, Kara-chan," insisted Rin, continuously approaching her.
"At least let me check it over to ensure that it won't get infected."

"It won't get infected." Not on her Kyuubi's watch.

Rin looked at her still bleeding shoulder and thought otherwise. "Kara-chan please—" she stepped
forward again.

"I told you NO!" snapped Kara, slapping the offensive hand away. Only one person ever does that.
"I'm fine, okay? Leave it be." She sounded slightly hysterical.

Rin looked at her incredulously, glow faltering. She has never seen their extension look so
uncontrolled and fearful; nothing of the bright smiles and boisterous noise that she made. It was like
comparing a sunny day with a storm – one being pleasant and comfy, almost a necessary heat that
she liked to soak in while other herald pouring rain and coldness that made her want to curl up in her blankets and wait for the next day.

"I'm fine okay?" Kara strained and repeated, trying not to imagine a Byakugō no In on her bare forehead. "Just leave it alone, please," she begged.

"You're being unnecessarily difficult," another voice raised, apathetic.


"I'm not the one refusing help and wasting the time on our delivery mission. You are."

Kami - she raged, hands fisting and cutting into skin.

Her crimson eyes looked devastating with its bloodied red but she doesn't know it. "I'm sorry for wasting your time then," she said angrily and distressed, filled with so many emotions that she was shaking. "We can get moving now if that is what you want," She turned, pulling up the torn part of her jacket and stalking past.

Kakashi frowned. That was not the effect he intended.

"Kara,"

She shook. Why that tone? Why do you keep interfering damn it—

There was a quietness to this tone that demanded obedience. She looked back at calm blue eyes, her eyelids quivering close in silent defeat. She pulled at her torn jacket again.

"Let's have a short walk."

How can she ever say no to him?


"Kakashi, Obito, make note of our supplies and account for what is lost. Rin, make sure that the storages are still in-tact and in good condition for the camp we're heading towards. We'll be back in a few minutes." His students nodded and got to work, but not before casting a worried look at their extension.

Minato said nothing as they walked out of the hearing distance of their team, mind mulling over questions to ask their enigma. There was some small assurance that she was following him instead of running although there was a slight dragging to her pace.

But where does he begin to ask to try and make sense of the violent reaction that she had displayed? One so fearful and torn up apart like she despised the idea of someone touching her, never mind the fact that she had never shown such opposition? What can he say when his heart nearly stopped the moment she made the switch, a desperate gamble of reaction timing and sacrificing her own body for her teammate's? It is not wrong to do that but the prospect of losing any of students scared him so much that his heart nearly froze over and jumped out of his chest, leaving only cold anger and an intense need to hurt those that brought harm onto his people. There was so many questions, so little time and he wasn't sure if he would even get his answers.

It was just a short trek, barely enough, navigating between shrubbery and trees before coming to a halt.
Please don't ever do that again," was the first thing he said, knuckles branding iron white. "Please do not ever use yourself as your comrade's shield ever again." Half-pleading and commanding, the steel in his voice felt more of an assurance to himself.

She paused at his request, stopping a distance from him. "I'm not going to regret what I did, Minato-sensei," said Kara finally, voice low and bitterness undeniable. "You can't make me. You can't promise me that either so don't. Just – don't." She gripped onto her sleeve tighter.

The man inhaled deeply. It was at times like this where she showed her startling wisdom that made him wish he could encase what was left of her innocence like a relic to keep it safe. But she grasped the dangers and reality of war faster than any of his other students if her clean execution was any indication. There was a dangerous beauty in the smooth transition of one jutsu to the next like it had been mastered, the lack of hesitation as she plunged the weapon into the enemy's chest like an experienced warrior; a description he does not want to give a child who has not reached her double digits in age.

"It is hypocritical," Minato admitted. "But I want you to trust your comrades to get out of sticky situations themselves and I want you to trust me to be there for you as well." As he laid out his thoughts, he turned to face her, cerulean eyes clear. "You need to understand that we can't afford to lose you, Kara."

Yes you can. She wanted to immediately say but she clamped her mouth shut. All she did was let out a shaky exhale as if the answer physically hurt her. "But you can't always be there for us either, Minato-sensei. I can't afford to lose any of you."

She was fraught with the need to make him comprehend what she truly meant and just how strong her conviction was in saying it. But she can't. And he will never know.

They have become precious to her so quickly just like her former team and it felt like someone was slowly digging their fingers into her beating heart, nail puncturing muscle and clenching so tightly that she was choking and bleeding. Kara was expendable. She knew this. Every day she spent interacting with them was a reminder: Team Minato had yet to live out their fate but she was never meant to be here in the first place. They were too important and in the centre of it all, too valued to be allowed to meet their ends prematurely while she had no role to play. The time-traveller safeguarded and threatened the former fact and she held the main pieces of the future in her hands, utterly capable of destroying and setting the world adrift.

"And hence you must understand that the line of thought is reciprocated. We care for you just as you do and when you try to sacrifice yourself, the person that will end up hurting is not just yourself," he said, standing his ground as he folded his arms, "I know this might be hard for you, Kara, but as your commanding officer – no, as someone who is concerned about you, I have to ensure your well-being. Whether you want it or not, you have to take off your jacket and show me the wound at least." This really isn't fair, she fumed in despair, trying to keep her voice from wavering.

"Can you not give me the benefit of doubt when I say I'm really fine?" She asked quietly.

"I could," he told her, "but this is for my own peace of mind as well. I prefer to believe my own eyes rather than the words of others, Kara. I need to know whether you are truly okay. I wouldn't forgive myself if someone happened to you because of neglect." He fervently hoped she understood that he was doing this because he cared and it was killing him to see her hurting in any form.

He can't just pull that card, she dreaded, feeling worse as she denied him. He couldn't just come into
her life and knock down all the barriers she had desperately built up to keep herself sane; tear down her walls and make them nothing; worm his kindness into her being and make her feel like everything was okay because it was not. She wanted distance to keep him safe and he was making it difficult, and impossible and the worst part of it all was that she wanted that.

"...And if I don't?" She mumbled.

Grimacing, he replied. "I would have to use force and I hope we won't ever have to come down to that. Just cooperate, alright?"

She stared at her own hands, thumbing the stains that were stuck in the lines of fingers, the brown curling and smearing. It was ugly. One slinked up to tug on the right sleeve, the process slow, before the half-worn jacket swept past her back to droop on the left side. The fabric fell to the ground in a small hurdle of cloth, her dark hair the only cover between the injury and her teacher's perception.

Brushing her hair to the left of her shoulder, she revealed the already healed wound, the drying blood and the tattered edges of her mesh armour and shirt being the only evidence that she was once harmed.

Minato inhaled sharply.

Where the cut should have been was unblemished skin; the surface smooth and slightly pink, a shade lighter than her usual tan complexion. Impossibility didn't quite cover it – the reality of her own healing ability was right in front of him and he had no way to deny it.

"Is this why you don't want Rin to check up on you?" He sounded, disbelief colouring his tone as he held her shoulder in his scrutiny. "To hide your kekkei genkai?"

Kara covered the cut with her palm. "I'm not trying to hide my healing ability," she said adamantly. "I'm not ashamed of something that I had ever since I could remember and I'm not afraid of people knowing about it. It's not a kekkei genkai. I'm not against Rin. I'm not against anyone or anything and I don't have anything to hide. It is just—"nostalgic and different—"weird to have someone check up on me when there usually isn't anyone when I'm hurt. I'm not used to it."

Puzzled, he asked: "What do you mean by weird?"

She can't stop her words from pouring out of her mouth like a torrent. "I'm not used to people checking on me because these wounds are nothing. They are nothing. I've had such wounds before and I've had worse, and I'm supposed to be okay. I know I shouldn't have reacted that way, I know I'm really fine. But I just can't help—"thinking about the past, of Sakura and her hands, of Baa-chan and her warmth and all that they were, she shuddered, the intensity of her emotions wrecking her with anguish—"feeling that way because I usually don't have anyone there for me – I've been alone. You don't get people caring for you out in the streets. No one should care when you have no one and you can't get back the people you have lost."

The time-traveller was trying so desperately to hold back her own tears all the while as she stared at the ground, at the orange jacket that was incongruous to the colour of brown. She wiped her tears away furiously with the back of her sleeve. She didn't want to cry. She wanted to stop crying because she has cried enough. She has cried so much that she could no longer make sense of time and there was too much to cry about. She promised herself that she would stop crying and she would be stronger for the new generation.

But there was too much fear and anticipation for it be healthy. They accumulated in her mind like rising rivers held back by a breakable dam along with everything else, the water polluted by her
anguish and recollection, tarnished by all that she encompassed in its wretchedness. She could feel
her sight blurring once again, orange blurring with browns into an incomprehensible and she silenced
herself with her own hand.

"Kara-chan, look at me."

She shook her head in the negative. Hair falling over her shoulders and onto her face, she refused to
show the vulnerability that she could not control. This was disgraceful. She was supposed to be empty,
supposed to take the rest of this life in her stride because she has known worse and yet she
can't – she choked back another sob, clutching onto her healed shoulder with her other hand,
yeeking for the phantom pain to return.

Crystalline eyes, clear and faceted stared at her before his feet moved instinctively. Step by step,
Minato closed the distance that they were, feet crunching on leaves, slowly but surely and towards
her. He gave her time to move away from him, to reject his company but the girl stood there with a
quaking frame, trying to hold herself up in her brittleness. He took the shaking girl into his arms in all
her weakness and just held her close, pressing her head on his chest and his head on her crown. His
arms wrap around her like caged steel and offered her protection – or at least he tries to because that
was all he could do.

He was not the glue to her fragile and broken pieces but he would hold them together until she could
mend them. He knew only a measure of her loneliness and how tiresome it could be to fend for
oneself in that state but he did not know her plights enough. He was the kindling furnace that kept
her safe with his gentle warmth as he threaded his fingers through her tangled hair that glowed
brown in the rays of sunlight. He was the home that she could not relinquish – familiar and
unfamiliar – from the cold dead arms that once held her in a similar fashion, attempting to give her
the love that she was deprived of.

Namikaze Minato does not assume that he can fill the hole that is omnipresent in her heart but he tries
to close that hole. (He hopes someday it'll get a little better and it'll hurt a little less, just like how
company has helped him.)

"You are no longer alone," he told her, completely earnest. "You will have me, Rin, Obito and even
Kakashi now. You might have been alone once," he regretted, "But no longer. If you need help, we
will be there for you. We are a team, comrades and family. Please remember that."

The girl grappled at his jacket, unable to reply to his words.

There was nothing that she could say in reply to that. There was no eternity or constants within that
statement with the volatility of Shinobi life during war, only impermanence, injuries and the elusive
temporal. He does not grant her 'forever' but only 'now', affirmative of only the present that was
neither in their control. He gives meanings to the new relationships she has created in this new
timeline but it was one that brings her equal relief and terror.

So she cried silently, soaking his flak jacket slightly, the thick material warm in her hands. She could
smell some blood – distinctly salt and rust – and briefly musk, her breathing regulating to the beat of
his heart.

She clung on tighter.

She prays she will never have to let go.
"She is not invincible," he starts, watching as the wisps of smoke rise from glowing embers. "I'm sure you are plenty aware of that, Sakura."

The medic who was trapped in her self-pitying state looked up in surprise at the sudden noise, the hands that she propped on her knees still shaking from how tight her hold was. "I know," she said, confession hoarse. "I know."

"But sometimes Naruto makes it so easy to forget that fact. She's always so strong, the first to charge out in the battle, smile despite all the grimness, optimistic and bright—"she choked up as she listed the wondrous traits of the Shinobi she regarded as a sister—"and it makes it so easy to forget that she is not invincible." She paused to swallow but the lump of guilt refused to go down. "For us, she usually is."

He took a long drag of his cigarette, allowing his lungs to indulge in the burn and distract him momentarily. "She is the strongest person we know," he acknowledged, shoulders hunching even further as he leaned against the wall, "But she is not unbreakable. She is human like the rest of us – capable of getting hurt, making mistakes and she will fail. There will be times where she won't be enough for herself. There will be times where she cannot lift her head up, where she has to admit to herself that she is not strong despite the power she possesses. She is not indomitable even if she seems to be."

Sakura nods slowly like the action was extremely difficult. She doesn't bother to tell the strategist that smoking was not allowed in the hospital since the haggard look and the three o' clock shadow he was sporting told him that he was taking it as hard and he was desperately in need of a vice. It happened a lot these days, she realized, such that the smell of nicotine and smoke clung to him.

"I know that," she whispered hoarsely. "I've seen Naruto when she was beaten and I know that she's human." She has held her fragile life force in her hands and steadied it to a regular beep. Nothing could compare. "I know she can break like the rest of us. I know she has."

She will never forget the sound of sobbing that escapes Naruto's mouth when she thinks she was asleep, and she will not forget the tears she cried at every funeral that they attended. She has seen her in the midst of the battlefield and screaming, her actions wild and uncontrolled, rhythmed to her anguish. The lady has broken more times than she could count and yet she miraculously picks herself up and she gives people hope. That was what made her glorious and capable – the acme of humanity in all its perseverance and the strongest Shinobi that has ever graced the Elemental Nations.

"But I'm just so… angry at myself for expecting so much. I expect her to always be okay because she always has been, I always expect her to smile despite all the adversity we face because that's all she has been doing." Naruto has become her pillar of support for their psyche and losing her will break them all. She shudders like a mountain shaken. "It just makes me so goddamn scared that I can lose her so easily and I don't think I can deal with that."

Shikamaru took another long, slow drag. "I don't think anyone can."

Chapter End Notes

This was a surprisingly… difficult and complicated chapter to read and write, personally. I hope you enjoy it :)
And it features a little tidbit of what happens when you regard a person too highly. I thought it was really important - when you have expectations too high for a person to meet... you can't expect them not to crash from the high pedestal that you placed on them. It isn't fair to them and perhaps, it is also to drive home the point that maybe, Naruto/Kara's breaking might not just have to be because of her losing people. I felt that it was vital to address this... especially in Time Travel fanfics. But that's just my take.

Hit me up on tumblr: br0kenphantasy
Materfamilias

/ˌmeɪ.ər.əˈfi.ʌm.ɪ.əs/ · noun

An idle soldier was a soldier that was not used up to its maximum capacity. With the different skills that each soldier possess that derived from their background, affinities, experiences and interests, they had their own uses and a good commander would utilize them to the fullest.

That was what she was told with the accompanying sounds of fine wood clacking against wood, where each shogi piece was representative of a person or larger scale, the board its landscape and the entirety of the game its strategy.

In the times of war and chaos where numbers disintegrated with each clash, such a saying stands. Manpower was a resource. Down-time was scarce – brief and few in between – unless there was a serious injury involved. (But that might also signify an end to a career – where one would be relegated to a desk job which could be demeaning and yet a way to preserve life.) Children deployments for simpler, still dangerous missions increased to make up for the numbers spent on borders and those lost, forcing the young to live up to their own abilities or perish. Gears that one grew rusty with peacetime were lubricated by sacrifice and blood once more, and the fire of the Hi no Ishi burning bright with same fuel as its driving force.

War ruins and trains like no other instructor can, and Kara becomes closely intimate with the fact for the second time.

She might not be her older self in terms of physique but there were plenty of other things she has learnt from surviving war. Honed instincts don't fade even if her body was no longer capable of executing the movement she wanted to the finest precision. Paranoia was still a powerful thing – an important tool that separates her continuing existence and death – and if it could buy her precious seconds to counter, to live, she wasn't about to complain.

Her body shivered once as a wave of hot, almost caustic chakra flooded her veins, replenishing the stacked consumption in mere seconds. Her chakra coils burned from the impurities of the Kyuubi's chakra – bits that she cannot remove in her immaturity – fighting back the urge to physically show her pain.

Four more, she absorbed, reading the flashing hand signs of her commanding officer as she stepped away from her recent victim, breathing harshly.

Four more, Kara told herself. Four more and we can start cleaning up the scene. Her shaky fingers brush parts of her muddied hair out of her face before she pressed them flatly against the tree that she was behind, trying to sense for approaching vibrations.

She couldn't remember the last time she slept – Was it eighteen hours ago? Or a full day? – and like her entire team, she was running off fumes and surges of adrenaline. But the time-traveller has been through worse and longer hours. This was nothing in comparison; like a handful of water from a lake. She – no, they will live through this.
"Rin-chan," she whispered, her voice hoarse. "Stop over-straining yourself."

Another enemy fell from the collective effort of Kakashi and Obito. He smashed into the ground with a sickening thud. *Three more.*

She could feel another sharp chakra in her periphery, the wellspring of his power packed and akin to razor winds; ready to be unleashed in short bursts. He flashes like God’s thunder, his chakra blinking in and out of existence as he dances from one dimension to another.

Slightly bloodshot eyes continued to focus on what laid beneath her glowing hands, the green light intense in the setting sun. It fluctuated violently once and then twice, signifying how the medic was at the end of her reserves, desperate to make the last drips of her chakra count. She constantly pressed against his chest in a steady pace, elbows locked and overlapping arms perpendicular to the organ she was trying to resuscitate, making full use of her body weight as she compressed, and putting all her might into the task.

"Rin-chan," the kunoichi hissed, bending down to tug at her companion's shoulder. "Rin-chan, he's gone. *Stop.* You're going to risk chakra exhaustion and we can't afford that."

"No," Rin reacted violently, shaking her off. She tilted her patient's mouth upwards and forced air into it to give him oxygen. "I almost have him Kara-chan," she croaked, feeling bones crack as she repeated the cycle of chest compressions again. *So close* — she can feel his heart trying to beat underneath breaking calcium but maybe it was just her delusions.

Kara growled, abusing her strength to wrench Rin away from her patient. "He's dead, Rin!" She snapped, arms hooking around her armpits. Her ears did not fool her about a heart that could no longer beat by itself and she knew that Rin was aware of the fact, since she pressed her palms against the same organ. "Stop it!"

"No!" Rin continued to struggle, the glow on her hands faltering. She grovelled forward in attempt to get back to him. "I have him! He's going to live, I swear," she pleaded, unable to break out from the vice-like hold that she kept in. There was a lump stuck in a throat and a wound in her healer's soul because she had already lost countless patients today and she didn't want to lose another. She wanted to succeed for this one. *Come on,* she urged, clawing to get back, trying to muster the strength to shake the kunoichi off and *reach.* Tears sprang in her eyes, *I just want to save one. Just one.* Is it that difficult to ask?

.Zero.

"Nohara Rin!" shouted Kara, seldom seen frustration bubbling. Maybe it was a mixture of everything else that made her slip; the exhaustion, the deaths and the sadness of it all. She collapsed to her knees to level the medic in height while simultaneously wrapping her arms around her torso from the back, holding the distraught girl in her arms. She felt Rin writhe and tremble like a worm trapped beneath stone; futile and exhausted, her struggle pathetic as she weighed down by the accumulation.

"He's gone," she said more quietly this time when her movements lessened. "He's gone okay?" She broke. "We were too late."

The jinchūriki shivered, coaxing a small amount of purified chakra into the medic-nin's system, her own condition tethering on its brink. Warmth filled the Nohara immediately, starting from her lower vertebrae and repairing her internal vessels, the feeling alleviating compared to the heaviness of her own pain.
"I almost had him," she rasped, staring at her own bloodied hands, angry at her own failure to save another despite the conduct she swore to wholeheartedly. The crimson that stained her skin suddenly felt dirty again and all she could do was watch what little was left of it well in her hands and slip in between the cracks.

"It is not your fault," said Kara softly albeit tiredly. She leaned her head against Rin's shoulder, equally exhausted. "It's not your fault."

But not blaming does not dull the guilt they were knee-deep in. It does not soothe the ache from all the losses, does not erase the atrocities that have already been done. What’s done is done, and as hard as they might try, they cannot change the ending.

"Team Minato has completed their mission," their commanding officer's voice crackled in their earpiece, declaring the results coldly like a jury giving his verdict. "Outpost in Block 8A is secured. Casualties stand at eight, enemies fourteen. Victory to Konoha. Over."

Detached as the man sounded, he made a truly lonesome scene as he was hunched over a comrade's corpse, closing non-seeing eyes slowly. It was not one of victory but of sombre defeat; his arms clasped together not to pray but to fling dirt, his intake of breath more to calm himself rather than to shout joyously to the heavens. Yet miraculously, he still looked like a beacon of light - blonde hair barely losing its lustre despite the blood and dirt that mired it and dark blue eyes still clear.

Obito cursed loudly at the results, punching the nearest tree in a fit of angry disappointment. Kakashi was no different, except he attacked the tree with a kunai instead of his own hands.

Too late. What an absolutely horrible thing that they had to admit especially when they were tasked to be a first-response team. All that was left of the outpost were the dead; having met a gruesome death from an ambush, their corpses the telling sign of what a failure this mission was.

A soft whine reached the kunoichi's ears and she tilted her head towards the source of the sound, surprised to see a dog with feral teeth and muzzle bloodied whimpering at their feet. It was made clear to her when she gazed at the dead once more, the red marks on his cheeks suddenly pronounced against paler features – marks that made him distinctly Inuzuka. It gave a name to a fallen comrade rather than just identification by a registration number and the time-traveller briefly wondered if this man was supposed to live.

Kara extended her hand slowly to the animal despite the reflexive growl it made, used to the apprehension they felt due to the tenant in her seal. She bared her neck slightly to the beast as if to offer respect, her hand relaxing further to show that she meant no harm to it.

"I won't hurt you," she vocalized, knowing that the dog could understand her. She lifted her hand even higher, prodding him to come forward.

Limping towards her, the dog lets out another whimper after it took a cautious sniff. It took it moments to register that she was a non-hostile. It began to nip at her fingers harmlessly and pressed its bloodied fur against her palm, tears rolling down from its round eyes as it sought for the comfort it had lost. It cried for its dead partner, for the lifelong master that it had once treasured in equal measure but all that has been lost in the war.

Kara scratched its chin, sighing. "Do you want to go back to the compound or do you want to stay with your partner, ninken?"

It rubbed its face insistently against her arm and whined again. Its hope was with the future generation and there were some things that could not be given up on just yet.
"Back home, huh?" She huffed, vermillion eyes sad. "We'll make sure you get back home with the rest. I promise you that, ninen."

It was an oath that they would get home.

Kara stared at her teacher sceptically. Checked his chakra for foreign sources, his eyes for a concussion and the slant of his lips for a stroke because there was definitely something wrong with him. No one should have a skip in their step especially when they had three bruised ribs, a once dislocated shoulder and fractured two of his fingers after being rammed by an opponent two days ago. Literally – she swore he was whistling to the song that they intercepted on the radio and the last time she checked, she was pretty damn sure it was Iwa propaganda music.

*Iwa* propaganda music.

She knew for a fact that he had no qualms against slaughtering an entire camp if necessary and this was just…

"Is he sane?" she questioned no one in particular, scared out of her life. "Did he recently get a condition I didn't hear about from the medical report?"

Rin laughed. "No, this is normal for Minato-sensei actually."

"*Normal?*" Kara hissed without a beat. "He's skipping, Rin-chan. No grown man skips like they are high on opium after being thrown to the ground."

Realization dawned on her face. "Ah, I guess you haven't seen him moon over Kushina-nee yet. Don't worry about it, Kara-chan, he's usually like this when he's thinking about her. It's like his brain just switches off and you have…," she gestured, not knowing what would be the proper description of it.

"Moon?" she echoed, more surprised than confused.

"Yeah," the medic-nin giggled, recalling how love-struck their teacher was such that he could trip over his own feet for the Uzumaki. "I overheard his slightly incoherent screaming outside the first aid tent a few days ago. Apparently he received news back home that his downtime has finally coincided with Kushina-nee. It has been months since they spent proper quality time with each other, I think."

"Did you record the sound?"

"I didn't have a recording device on me," Rin apologized, looking sheepish. "Obito did say that it was an interesting cross-over between a squealing whale and a dying toad though." Her nose scrunched. "It is almost creepily accurate and that is kind of scary."

The time-traveller burst out laughing at the analogy. She knew that her father had the biggest crush on her mother since a young age but seeing it in real time was quite another experience. She definitely didn't think it had been that intense or bad – her mother had clearly sold the magnitude of his affections short. *Maybe time does make the heart fonder*, she mused as she gazed at the man with tinged happiness, still slightly creeped out by the jump in his step.

"I suppose you're talking about Minato-sensei's henpecked attitude?" Obito randomly jumped in, having fallen into steps with the pair. Kakashi did as well, preferring to tolerate their company rather than a long lecture about Kushina's amazing face.

"It's Kara's first exposure to it," Rin wisely said.
"Ah," Obito's eyes gleamed with excitement. "Well then, feast your eyes on the Yellow Flash, once feared and infamous and suddenly—" he gasped dramatically, placing a fluttering hand on his heart —"smitten by the almighty and the gorgeous Uzumaki Kushina." He executed a pirouette and gestured as their enamoured teacher. "Watch as he falls to his knees to worship the very ground she walks on and he will do anything in his power to make her happy." He rubbed away some fake tears. "What a beautiful romance. What a tear-jerker."

She giggled. "That's such a bad introduction."

"Don't make fun of a man in love with a wonderful lady, Obito!" Minato yelled back, having caught on, shaking his injured fingers non-threateningly. "You may be laughing now, but we'll see how you are like when you are in a relationship, Obito-kun."

"He'd be worse," Kara predicted instantaneously with a smirk. Kakashi coughed.

Obito flushed red, kicking soil towards Kara's direction. He then gazed at their team's medic quickly before scowling at the ground. "Oh quiet you," he mumbled. "You don't know me and my ways."

"If that is what you want to believe and it helps you sleep," smiled Kara serenely.

The Uchiha ignored her statement. "Anyway, speaking of Kushina-nee, you need to meet her Kara. The food that she makes is BOMB!" he almost moaned while remembering the meal that she cooked for them.

"That's an excellent idea," commented Minato brightly. "I think Kushina would be happy to cook us a meal tonight. You're free to join us, Kara. Kushina has been quite interested in meeting you in fact."

"Umm… I don't think I can," she replied uncomfortably, avoiding their stares. "I probably have to continue evening classes with my shishō. I've already missed a few months of it due to missions and I think she would like to get back to them as soon as possible."

That was just a convenient excuse of course – she couldn't just say 'Kushina is a jinchūriki and so am I' or that 'she is my mother from another timeline and I don't know how to face her', now could she? There was a reason why she avoided a certain district like a plague or she ducked out of sight whenever she saw red hair in the streets.

"Come on, Kara," Obito bemoaned. "I think your shishō can understand the concept down-time at least. It is just one evening. It wouldn't kill you or her. I swear you hardly spend time with us outside of training and missions and the least you could do after a tiring deployment is do that."

"But I eat lunch with you all the time," she pointed out, slightly flummoxed by his assertion.

"Only because it was in between training and missions," Obito inserted. "Other than that, you just disappear on us after training."

"I do that?" Kara asked subconsciously, tucking tendrils of hair behind her ear as she introspected her own schedule. She does not realize how packed it usually was; most of her time invested into regaining strength rather than leisure.

"You do," Rin concurred. "You just… disappear and we don't hear a wink about you until the next morning. It's like you don't exist beyond afternoons. That's why you haven't met Kushina-nee yet because we tend to meet her for dinners." Kind of like Kakashi, the medic thought as she paralleled the two personalities, but they had more hold over the prodigy rather than their resident enigma.
"What do you even do for leisure, Kara-chan?" Rin questioned.

"Fūinjutsu," she answered honestly.

They really should have expected that. "That doesn't constitute as a hobby or leisure."

"It does," argued Kara passionately, flames lighting her eyes. "It is fascinating to learn about Fūinjutsu – they are versatile in function, you can store, trap or catalyse releases. You can even manipulate energy to form unique barriers that fend off different attacks and you aren't limited to just one because Fūinjutsu requires significantly less output. It takes time to craft the best version of a seal and yet incredibly rewarding – drafting each layer can be manipulated to fit its own purposes and within it matrixes that act like the linkages. It's a wonderful topic."

The two boys looked slightly bewildered at her speech. Rin looked at her teacher imploringly, hoping that he could knock some sense into their newest addition. There was a distinct difference between work and leisure – and in her fanaticism, Kara seemed to usually disregard it and overstress herself. However, it was a mistake that she momentarily forgot what Namikaze Minato was infamous for.

Naturally, the teacher looked at her weirdly albeit seriously. "Fūinjutsu should be regarded as leisure, Rin-chan."

The said girl buried her face in her hands. It was truly a mistake. "That was not what you said when Kushina-nee threatened to burn your Fūinjutsu books if you missed sleep or forgot to eat your meals because of it, Minato-sensei," she bristled, voice muffled and exasperated. "Please stop encouraging Kara-chan's unhealthy habit of barely resting."

Minato laughed sheepishly at her admonishment. "Of course rest is definitely important. I never said otherwise. I just think that light reading Fūinjutsu should be considered as leisure." He discontinued his train of thought under their deadpanned stares. "Okay, maybe it isn't." He looked at Kara expectantly. "All the more reasons why you should join us for dinner, Kara-chan. It would be fun to have you around the dinner table."

"But I have classes…?" she tried again weakly, unable to defeat the sincerity in his eyes.

"I can write a note to your shishō if you want," he offered.

Her eyes widened like saucers. "No, it's fine, Minato-sensei. I'll tell her myself."

If there were two parties that she would like to keep away from one another, it would definitely be between her shishō and her team – she wasn't so sure that Minato would take her specialization happily.

"Does that mean consent?" Minato hid a smile.

Kara slouched. "… Yes," she mumbled in defeat.

"Great! What about you Kakashi-kun? You'll be attending this dinner as well right?"

The said boy immediately shivered at the sugary sweetness in his eerie smile, the saccharine quality buried within it enough to give him a toothache. It was a smile that spoke of dying babies and mutilated cats and Kakashi had never seen a more dangerous expression than that.

"I mean, you could hypothetically not attend the dinner and face Kushina's wrath…" His words trailed off. But that would be far worse, wouldn't it?
The unsaid threat was often the deadliest.

Kakashi shivered again. "You can expect my attendance at the dinner, Minato-sensei," he answered hurriedly, suddenly fearing for his life and quite possibly his privacy and apartment when a certain redhead was involved.

Say what you might, but Uzumaki Kushina was in some ways more terrifying than Namikaze Minato and he made a great enemy that Iwa and Kumo would not forget for decades to come. While the Yellow Flash's reputation was impressive and he could send people hightailing with a glare of glacial eyes, the hair-raising Uzumaki was similarly peerless in the damage she wrought, equally deserving of her entry in the Bingo book. (It suddenly wasn't that strange that they made such a good couple.)

After all – *Hell hath no wrath like an Uzumaki woman scorned.*

It was a rule that Kakashi would abide by almost religiously unless he wanted to die prematurely; and from the pleasure exhibited in his teacher's eyes and the oozing sympathy from his comrades, they clearly followed the doctrine as well.

Minato grinned wider. "Today is a good day," he sung, skipping even higher. "Let's hurry home shall we? It's just a few more miles and I'm sure you can handle a light sprint, right?"

He immediately took off, leaving his students in a small cloud of dust.

"What did I get myself into?" Kara muttered under her breath, shaking her head before she hastened her speed to catch up with their excitable teacher.

Kara shoved her hands and key into her jacket pockets as she jogged down the stairs. She looked out at the street lights that were lightening up with a huff, knowing that she would be late if she didn't hurry. The girl had wanted more time to prepare herself for the meeting – quite ironically, she had to admit – but she felt like no amount of time could properly prepare her for this. *I'm meeting my mother,* she thought feverishly, and the last thing she wanted to do was leave a bad impression.

Or perhaps it was like her encounter with her father all over again because Uzumaki Kushina was once unattainable other than the remnants of her chakra imprint; gone too soon from her life, an absent figure that had left her an orphan; and she would never know warmth of a mother's caress or a parent's care when she fell. She was alone and she had to pick herself up because no one would be there to give her a helping hand. No one would grant a monster concession or clemency and being a child made no difference.

Alas, the truth remains: Kara could not call them by the way she knew them, having to relinquish these special titles to another time where they could never be reclaimed.

It took her awhile to realize the full extent of her fears, such that she was staring at the Uzumaki crest that made the basis of her chakra suppressing seal when it happened. The spiral seemed to mock and reflect her state of mind and she almost tore up her hard work at the revelation that afternoon. She was so done overthinking sometimes.

As she continued to walk down the streets, she allowed her mind to drift. 'She won't know that I'm a jinchūriki, right, Kurama?' she asked.

He doesn't grasp the true nature of her question. *'Your seal is stronger than hers,'* he assured. *'She will know nothing of my existence within you unless I act up, and even then, you have the chakra*
suppressing seals as the second protective measure. You will be fine, kit.'

'That isn't it,' she voiced with much difficulty, cobalt blue eyes downcast. 'What if she doesn't like me? What if she comes to think that I am monster one day?' The possibility was not unfounded and the idea of it frankly terrifies her and she can scarcely breathe.

It took a few seconds for her question to register and he was taken aback. The Kyuubi was not prone to making mistakes but he often underestimates the hold that her vulnerabilities have on her. She was an orphan no matter what time or age, and her loneliness was once his constant companion in the old cell. Kurama sighed and gave her a lazy eye.

'If there is one thing I have learnt from the mortal company that you kept, it is that you are incredibly difficult to dislike.' He recalled her kindness and grins. 'You are your mother's child – and having been her prisoner, I daresay that the likeness between both your personalities is almost uncanny. I do not think it is even possible for her to hate you, let alone regard you as a monster. Even if she knew of your status, she cannot discriminate against you when she bears a similar burden, in fact, it would only serve to drive you closer.' The beginnings of a smile started to tug at her lips.

'You should not doubt yourself too much,' he summarized, 'If you can persuade a supposed chakra construct of hatred, I would think that Uzumaki Kushina is but a small hurdle that you are capable of overcoming. You have little to fear, kit.'

Her expression became iridescent. 'Thank you, Kurama,' she said sincerely, the traces of doubt disappearing from her crystalline eyes as she left the mindscape, brightening it up a little. The change was imperceptible to humans but the ancient was no such thing.

'You are no monster, kit,' he hummed after her departure. Not yet. Not when there are other that make you look tame.

Meanwhile, the time-traveller was jolted back to reality by someone yanking her hood to stop her from proceeding, causing her to scowl at the perpetrator that nearly made her fall from the harsh rebound. Grey eyes stared at expressive reds impassively as she steadied herself, his hand releasing her hood gently to show that he meant no harm.

"Do you even know where you are going?" Kakashi asked out courtesy, eyebrow raising.

Kara blinked owlishly, not really processing what he just said.

"I guess not," he huffed at her silence before he started to walk down the street to their destination. Noticing that the girl wasn't behind him, he tilted his head back. "Well? Are you coming along or do you want to get lost?"

She blinked again. What was that all about, 'ttebane? The kunoichi thought, shaking her head furiously before following after him.

They moved in comfortable silence, treading towards the busier districts of Konoha under the bruising skies, the purples and darker pinks casting an odd glow on the Hokage Monument. It was peaceful despite the rising noise that came with night life; diners welcoming the regulars into their humble establishments and children giggling as their parents swung their hands back and forth. Kara smiled softly as a boy almost bumped into her as he ran, stepping away kindly so that he could run
"What is Uzumaki Kushina like?" She pondered, accidentally saying her thoughts out loud.

Kakashi paused briefly. "… Skilled," he allowed, speaking at length with a soft fondness he doesn't want to admit. "I heard that she is exceptional in the art of Fūinjutsu and she rivals Minato-sensei in many aspects. She's also a good cook and… she's incredibly kind."

"She sounds nice," she replied quietly, although they were traits that she already knew of.

He nodded in agreement. "We're here."

While the boy started to climb the steps to the house, Kara halted in front of it, studying the house suspended on elevated earth. It was a quaint house, standing at one storey high with a typical orange thatched roof, lights diffusing out of its numerous windows and its interior filled with familiar chakra signatures except one. Lifting her leg heavily, she clambered up the stairs, letting the wood creak beneath her feet as her fingers brushed against the jagged structure before finally stopping at one side of the doorframe that was suspiciously empty of an insignia.

When she passed through the open door, she paused, observing how well at home the Hatake seemed as he strode into the dining room where the rest had gathered, settling into the seat next to Obito. They looked like a perfect family as the chatter immediately included him, and it left the time-traveller feeling awkward as she was encroaching on a place that was not hers.

Apprehension fraught her and she diverted her stare to the shoes that were placed next to one another. They were neat. "Sorry for the intrusion," she muttered to no one, removing her sandals and placing it down, shifting it around to ensure that it was in order.

She gripped onto her arms as she looked around in wonder, her pace sluggish and body ready to flee at moment's rejection. She didn't want to touch anything in this house; she didn't dare, afraid that if she tried, she would taint the homely feel that it had or her hands would slip between the walls and she would wake up in realization that all this was a terrible dream.

The jinchūriki often found herself waiting for the illusion to break; for the other shoe to drop and for gazes to turn cold, to slander her and turn everything stale.

"What are you doing, Kara?" Obito hollered at her, shocking her out of her self-loathing. "Get your butt over here, you slowpoke!" He said, arm swinging enthusiastically to beckon her forward. Kakashi slapped the errant arm down in annoyance, causing the Uchiha to glare at him.

She attempted a brave retort but no words came out from her mouth and she closed it instead. The next speaker made her freeze, the scent of something predatory and sweet masked by food hitting her nose. Kara didn't need her secondary source of chakra acting up to give her a hint and her only consolation was that the lady didn't know who she really was.

"Ara, is the little prodigy that Mimi-chan wouldn't stop talking about is finally here?" A warm voice teased, poking her head out of the kitchen and into the hallway.

"Um, thank you for having me?" Kara squeaked, blush rising to her cheeks at the compliment she was given. She ducked her head down again the moment red hair appeared in her peripheral vision, tugging on her own darkened hair in lieu of backing off.

The entire house fell silent in anticipation. The redhead froze as she drank in the sight of the blushing girl with innocent fox-like eyes, evidently with the potential to grow out of her current cuteness into a beguiling heartthrob. She was so petite and small such that the ladle dropped to the ground with a
soft clang, an overwhelming urge to hug the girl swelling.

Before Kara could react to the sound of rustling fabric, someone slammed into her, pressing her against a soft chest and knocking the wind out of her. *What in the name of the Sannin—*

"You're so cute, 'ttebane!" Kushina screamed, shaking the helpless girl back and forth in her arms. "Minato, why didn't you bring her over earlier, 'ttebane!? Are you trying to keep her to yourself, 'ttebane!?!"

The rest of the occupants burst out laughing at her choking expense.

While the young kunoichi treasured the warmth the hug brought her and the tickling feeling from her chest (it was the hair), her bodily needs caused her arms to flail in protest for air. She would love to make the excuse that she was being suffocated by affection – part of her revelled in it – but frankly, her arms were *Too. Damn. Tight.*

"A-Air," she gasped, slapping her thighs. "N-Need… B-Breathe…"

"Kushina!" her boyfriend sounded increasingly hysterical. "She's turning blue!"

Strong limbs loosened instantaneously. "I'm so sorry, I couldn't help it 'ttebane!" Kushina gushed, petting down her unkempt black hair incessantly.

Kara took in a large gulp of air into her deprived lungs but the exaggerated heave was meant to cover the forceful repression of her chakra reaction as scriptures lit up beneath her sleeve. Her head was still downcast, hiding her vermillion eyes that were ringed crimson and silted.

The Bijuu were always drawn to one another – their sibling chakra bonding them together to the original source – and it heightened their sensitivity towards each other. Even if the sentient creatures denied it, they were territorial creatures by nature; with a preference for different habitats and it extended to their vessels and encompassed the village. Only one tiger could rule the jungle; a lion a savannah; and the jinchūriki did not like their positions threatened.

'First contact?' Kara guessed, forcing a sheepish albeit timid smile on her face.

'Nay,' Kurama answered, suppressing a growl. *'But it is the first time I have been this close to my other half since the last war.'*

Danger radiated from Kushina although she was not as affected as Kara who was aware. The sound of a snarl resounded in the back of her mind as the seal on her stomach burned like skin brushing against a dwindling candlelight, ringing her violet irises crimson. Her red hair rose slightly and split into nine distinct pieces with her worsening predatory persona as she subconsciously exerted her dominance. A slender hand snaked beneath the girl's chin, lifting it up with brutal gentleness.

As they flickered open, dull eyes were devoid of enmity or foreign source, only filled with the shyness fitting of the withdrawn. "No harm done, Uzumaki-san."

She blinked the red away as another arrow shot into her chest. *Shodai, she's adorable. "Just Kushina-nee is fine – Uzumaki-san makes me sound way too old."*

"Kushina-nee?" she repeated unsurely, the name and suffix sounding weird in her mouth.

The said lady gave her another hug. "I like you already, Kara-chan," she gushed, pleased with her quick uptake.
Unwillingly, Kara moulded herself into her embrace. The worried thoughts that scuttled in her mind like a dozen of locomotives fell silent, quietening down to give her peace. Uzumaki Kushina was a heat blanket in the harshest winters of Kumo, her limbs wrapping around her fully, its strength offering her safety and protection. Her smaller arms raise as well but there was hesitation shadowing her actions.

This isn't a dream, she grinned, fragile and bright. She tightened her hold, trying to instil the fact that she might not necessarily always have to lose.

"Will the mother and daughter please break apart for dinner?" Obito joked, wincing when a delicate hand jabbed his side. "What?" He defended. "I'm starving!"

Rin chided lightly. "You didn't have to interrupt so soon."

The other two nodded subconsciously in agreement, but the older man was in a slight daze as he thought about his lover becoming the possible mother to his child. Just the idea of red hair or blonde hair – it doesn't really matter now, does it? – with his blue eyes stumped him into a paternal frenzy, his pants wrinkling with his clenching fingers that grappled for a family that he could call his own after near two decades of being alone. Yearning curled low and heavy as his gaze swept across his own team, youths that he cared for like they were his own flesh and blood. Biological or not, he loved them in his own idiosyncratic way and from the expression he read off Kushina's face, she shared the same sentiment.

He smiled softly, vision shifting to the arm Kushina placed around small shoulders. They really did look like parent and child despite having met minutes ago especially with the gossamer protectiveness that she already exuded for Kara, and the reflecting bizarre fierceness present in doe red eyes. Her footing was slightly forward as if she was poised to defend, which was odd for an adolescence.

"Shall we start dinner?" Kushina crooned, rubbing soothing circles on Kara's shoulder to erase her inherent awkwardness. She pulled the girl forward into the dining room and place her amongst friends before returning to the kitchen to finish the last preparations for dinner.

Kara twiddled her thumbs and rocked back and forth on her heels nervously. She gave a sheepish smile. "I'm not used to this," she whispered.

It was true – even with her later popularity, family dinners were rare due to her unwillingness to intrude while team dinners were short-lived and grew increasingly scarce with the diminutive numbers. It was difficult to enjoy meals with unoccupied seats and she would be lucky to even have company sometimes.

Hearts dipped unpleasantly at her confession. They should have noticed; noticed the insecurity behind her smile and her unusual silence, or remembered her history that drew a near blank for interaction. Their new addition was by no means impaired or socially awkward but there were small moments that showed how much she went through even though they barely scratched the surface.

"Well if you're not used to it, all you have to do is join us more often to get used to it," said Obito. "It's not like its advanced chakra theory or something."

"Well-said, Obito-kun," praised Kushina, mirroring his broad grin as she entered the room with a large pot. "I do hope I can see you more. I think it would be interesting to have you around more often."

"Kushina-nee, are you playing favourites now?" Rin teased.
The said lady laughed as she distributed the food. "I would never, 'ttebane. You know I love all of you equally."

"Now I feel like I'm getting replaced," Minato joked.

"Of course you are," said Kushina seriously. "On my list of priorities you are—" she counted off with her fingers—"fifth on my list now."

He gave his students a mock glare. "I will not tolerate this position. All of you better be prepared next training – I will make it my mission to have Kushina’s love back."

"I think you win by default once you put a ring on her, sensei." Kara said absent-mindedly, taking a tentative sniff of the food placed in front of her. She was nearly salivating from the spread in front of her and she could see why her mother was praised so highly for her culinary skills.

Minato flushed at her suggestion. *Wife* – now that was a description that he definitely wanted her to have, and she was his only option after he saw her for the first time as a nine-year-old. Perhaps it was once a foolish crush or a fleeting infatuation, but he came to love the loudmouth woman so intensely that his heart would cease to function if she died. He was wholly enraptured by the redhead, wrapped around by her string of fate and his enamoured expression made the youths share a secretive smile with one another.

"Maybe it'll be Kushina-nee who does it," Kakashi mused, staring at the eggplants with a vicarious appetite.

"Probably," Obito and Rin chimed in, much to the horror of Minato.

"Should we bet on it?"

Kakashi scowled. “I’m not betting against or with you. The last time I did that, I ended up losing half my stipend.”

Kara stuck out her tongue childishly. She couldn’t help that she had incredible luck or that the world trying to compensate for the abysmal circumstances that she was always thrown in.

"Betting aside – which I do not and should not approve and something you should stop - are you insinuating that I don't have initiative?" Minato interrupted.

"It’s not the lack of initiative that we’re worried about Minato-sensei,” Obito explained, pointing his end of the chopsticks at him. “We just think you'll take too long and Kushina-nee will get annoyed and she'll end up proposing so she can get it over and done with."

“… That sounds about right,” Kakashi agreed.

"Maybe I just want the proposal to be perfect," their teacher tried to justify. “Maybe that’s why I’ll take so long.”

"Is he really talking about this in front of me right now?"

It was heart-warming to know that the man loved her enough to want to marry her despite all her flaws and her role in the village but there was a time and place for this – and it was definitely not in front of the lady in question. Rin gazed at her emphatically as her rhetoric went unheard.

“Sensei, the last time you over-planned, that was precisely what happened. Even if it happens a second time, I think it is expected at this point.”
"You wound me with your lack of faith, Obito-kun,"

"Thanks sensei, I try."

"... But Obito-kun does have a point though," said Rin unconsciously. "Kara-chan, can you pass me a pair of chopsticks please?"

"Sure," Kara giggled, enjoying the shocked expression on her father's face.

"Are you against me as well, Rin-chan?"

"No way," Rin denied kindly. "I have faith that you won't stutter too much when you do ask the question, sensei."

"..." He buried his face in his hands. He swore his students were growing more rebellious, to the extent where they were going against him. Had he not treated them well?

Kushina sighed dramatically, deciding that her boyfriend had suffered enough humiliation. "Whether he proposes or not, be it in a month or a few years, I just hope that it will be me. For me—" her fingers interlocked with his underneath the table—"that will be more than enough. I don't think I need anything more than that. Let's eat, shall we?"

"Hai," they chorused like obedient children, genuinely content with the quiet affection that the couple showed to one another. Clapping their hands together, they spoke again: Itadakimasu."

Digging into the food immediately, Team Minato barely held back their moans of pleasure when the food met their taste buds. With the slight sourness mixed with the spiciness of the soup broth but not overwhelmingly so, it stimulated their appetite even further. It was heaven compared to the months of bland rations during deployment and they were silently happy that they were alive to taste Kushina's cooking again. The cook watched on happily at their indulgence, slowly slurping her noodles while they gulped theirs down like starving wolves.

"Does it taste good?" She asked Kara who was sitting across her.

Kara looked at her in surprise, cheeks puffed like a squirrel. "Mm," she nodded hastily, swallowing her food. "It's one of the most delicious things I've ever tasted."

She laughed. "I'm glad you're enjoying it. I heard from Minato that you came from a seaside village and I thought you would like to have some seafood. Konoha isn't very big on it."

The time-traveller gave her a teacher a side-glance. "I didn't stay in my old village long enough to become big on seafood, Kushina-nee. I was basically raised in Konoha since a very young age. But I still appreciate your cooking though."

"Ah, my mistake. It was your shishō that found you right? How was your village like?"

"I think there was a lot of colour and activity before it was destroyed. I don’t remember much of it because I was really young," she lied, spinning the spoon in her bowl. "There isn't much to see except the remains of it now."

Violet eyes softened, and her heart went out to the girl who had lost everything in the war. Her fingers subconsciously traced a spiral on the table, her own smile ruined by woe and the bitter image of her own homeland destroyed, where the once pristine white houses were in shambles from bombardment, decaying the limestone into a murk from its glorious array of colours when the sun was setting beneath the horizon, where all that was left of its elaborate seals – scriptures that lined the
grounds, walls, and skin – were slashed, the language seemingly ravaged by animals. The Uzumaki understood that particular pain all too well; worse nightmares where Konoha would share the same fate and the occasional thoughts that these forests could not compare to the whirlpools surrounded by jagged rocks – the motions of water arbitrary, powerful and constant, rock's smooth, glinting surfaces brought out by splashing waters, a splatter of brown and grey gradients like unique murals on a palette – because that was home, where her family once dwelled even if her eleven years were short-lived, and where her principle, those wondrous ancient scriptures proliferated from. There was no knowledge as vast as the grand library underground, spanning a few feet high and too numerically wide, but all that was scattered across the continent, burnt or buried under debris – soon to be forgotten like a nameless grave, a mere memory of a once great village.

"What about your parents?" she followed up, tone accommodating.

Kara hesitated, scrunching fabric in her own hands. "They died protecting the village during the raid. The villager said were good people… Valiant even. They were loved." She looked up at the couple, her vermillion eyes unusually bright. "And I don't think there is a day where I didn't wish that I had more time with them, to get to know them better."

The entire room cannot help but think that this was the most that their resident enigma had confided in them about her past, but the wistfulness and longing was unpleasant to hear. It took Kushina some iron will to not fling herself across the table and take the girl into her embrace.

"I think they would have wanted that as well," said Minato sincerely. "They would have been very proud to have a daughter like you."

"I hope so," she said quietly, picking up her utensils to eat again.

Wisely, Kushina changed the subject. "So how did your recent mission go, 'ttebane?"

"Same old, same old," Minato muttered, struggling to pick up a strand of noodles with his non-dominant hand. He swore his girlfriend cooked udon on purpose…

Obito chortled and Rin allowed herself the smallest of smiles, causing Kushina to grin knowingly. "Is there a joke I should be privy to?"

The Uchiha cleared his throat unnecessarily. "Minato-sensei got manhandled."

Kakashi nearly slammed his head on the table but he had better manners than that.

"I did not," Minato admonished on reflex, sounding defensive albeit horrified.

"Shush and eat your noodles Mimi-chan. No one cares about your opinion when you tend to sell your own injuries short."

"I do not do that!"

The silver-haired Chūnin slammed his head to his teacher's indignant reply. Well, he had better manners. They just tend to fly out of the window.

"Funny that you say that, Mimi-chan," she drawled. "I distinctly recalling you insisting that you did not have chakra exhaustion only to collapse on the hospital floor face first a few seconds later." She turned her attention back to the boy, wanting the juicy details to her boyfriend’s injuries. "So what happened?"

"So we were in charge of intercepting a scouting team from Kumo and naturally, we clashed with
them. It was actually going fine and all, until a really bulky and large Kumo-nin charged at Minato-sensei and hauled him off the enemy he was fighting and the ground. It was pretty funny actually," he laughed, pretending to re-enact the heave, "how Minato-sensei was lifted like he was weightless. I think the Kumo-nin wanted to break sensei by slamming him against his knee, so sensei dislocated his shoulder purposefully in order to stab the Kumo-nin's arm to get away."

The rest of the table winced as they imagined the pain. "I don't really understand how you fractured two of your fingers though, Minato-sensei," said Rin in confusion. "Did you jam your fingers into his arm?"

"Wrong grip?" Minato guessed. Rin considered it and nodded.

"—and then, Kara and Kakashi tagged team and took the Kumo-nin down. It was pretty awesome." Obito finished.

"Oh? Kara can keep up with Kakashi's speed?" the Uzumaki questioned.

In Jōnin standards, Kakashi was just 'passable', especially when he was under the guidance of the speed demon called Namikaze Minato. But within the range of Chūnin, he was definitely in the top percentile and rumours were already circulating that he might be promoted into a Jōnin if he was given more time. While the news of an eleven year old child becoming a Jōnin greatly displeased her, it was still a high praise for Hatake Kakashi.

"Keep up?" he snorted, tugging at his goggles. "She's a stamina freak, Kushina-nee. She never runs out of fuel. It's like she has so much of it that you can never reach the bottom of the well."

"Seconded," Minato inserted and Rin agreed in envy.

"They exaggerate," Kara said modestly although a snort echoed in the back of her mind.

Banter continued back and forth at the dining table and Kara soaked in the homely atmosphere. There was so much joy and laughter such that it made the war seem like a faraway place; her team enjoying a meal for more than its sustenance, their tinkling octaves of happiness like sweet noise that rang in her ears and their curling lips a sight to behold. It was beautiful to witness this – to see her parents hunched over one another for support as they cracked up over a joke that Obito made or Rin giggling over ridiculous experiences. Even Kakashi seemed to loosen up with the faintest trace of a smile lining his mask as he gazed at these people fondly.

The time-traveller finds herself staring into grey eyes, similarly wanting this to be eternity and she tries to brand this memory into her mind.

There was no extravagance to this wanting or this happening. There was no superficiality in this moment because of its simplicity and she realized that small things were worth savouring and perhaps she didn't need something in its grand scale to lighten up a little.

So the end of the night begins like this:

"Say, Kara-chan, will you do me a favour?"

The sudden question caused the said girl and the rest of her teammates to turn around curiously, her feet barely slipping into her sandals. "Yes, Kushina-nee?"

"Can you give me a drop of your blood?"

There was no hesitation as she nicked on her finger – an action that she has done thousands of times
for different reasons. She allowed the crimson to bead on her thumb, holding it as an offering of trust.

Kushina smeared her blood on her palm gently before she wrapped a prepared plaster over the closing wound. Kara watched as older hands went through a series of seals slowly before the walls of the house brightened slightly before returning to its original state. It was brief – but her Uzumaki blood sang in recognition of the barrier and the invisible words that lined the walls, pleased by the genius in the creation.

"If you need any help in the future, our home is always open to you, no matter what time of the day or night," said Kushina, her sincerity tangible as she held smaller hands in hers again. "If you need someone to talk to, I will always be here, alright?"

Something within the girl fractures even further but it felt natural, like something trying to break out of its shell. It was like old skin peeling away; with slight resistance and some pain but necessary and long overdue.

Kara smiled. "Okay. Thank you for doing all this, Kushina-nee."

"We don't do just do 'thank you' in this household, Kara-chan," she teased with a wide grin. "We prefer hugs." She brought the girl into her arms for the third time that night and the younger kunoichi loved the unrestrained affection.

"You're one of my precious people now, 'ttebane," whispered Kushina. “You are always welcomed here, please remember that.”

There was nothing more empyrean than acceptance from the materfamilias herself.

Chapter End Notes

Meaning: the female head of a family or a household.
I didn't want to spoil the chapter's content in advance. And I really like the word.

Fact: 30% of the patient who have received CPR tend to end up with a fractured rib due to the chest compressions. Consequently, it feels even worse when paramedics cry while doing it. (It happens, and imagining it...)

Thank you so much for 150 kudos and 3000 views (and 50 bookmarks) :D
It means a lot to me that you find my work worth reading, especially those that have been here since the first few chapters. I do get frustrated while writing Shattered Glass sometimes and it is a personal commitment to continue writing but you have become my source of motivation as well. Thank you so much again :)
Lines.

With a pencil in hand, she sketched; her lines varying in thickness and intensity as she pressed down on parchment. They intersect at numerous places and branch out to the end of space, like vines twisting wreathed around sticks, imprecise but with a general direction to follow. Her other thumb occasionally smudged some lines to cast the shadows on faces and to make discrepancies between the dark and the light, emphasising on some edges while leaving others soft. She glanced up at the empty rock face and squinted, her apparatus making imaginary calculations of what was reality and memory.

A little bit more here? She guessed, pencil making a few more strokes. She scratched her head while adding a few more – perhaps drawing truly wasn't her forte; it has always been someone else's and anything she might draw would be inferior to his artistry. But then again, even he favoured the ink brush as well, an instrument that was unforgiving to an amateur since it could not afford mistakes, the pigmentation seeping too deeply into paper to be erased. The time-traveller was not perfect; even if she was trained in calligraphy due to Fūinjutsu and the ink brush could offer the pronounced differences in thickness, she needed something that could be erased.

Gently, she brushed her fingers against her canvas, from their hair down to the marks on their faces and their cheeks, along their jawline and filling it with imaginary colours as if the image could come alive.

"Drawing again?"

She covered the right side of the paper in surprise. "Kakashi," she greeted, looking up at the boy who loomed over her like a shadow. "And yes, I'm drawing again."

"What's the point of it? Drawing seems to be of little use to you."

"It's not useless," she retorted tartly. "Not when it's a vested interest. Some things are worth capturing on paper."

"Use a camera," he suggested. "It's faster and it lasts longer."

Kara snapped her sketchbook shut and sealed it in her storage seal. "A camera cannot capture everything the mind sees. Sometimes, the only way you can do it is through interpretation and drawing." She thought of all the pictures she has received, the portrait and landscape capturing the unique feature or the ghastly through raspy brushstrokes.

"It's kind of like the Hokage Monument," she gestured at the wide structure before her. "What was the sculptor thinking when he made this? He wanted to capture our leaders' features to perfection, but
there was an absolute for them to be awe-inspiring, to watch the entire village in every direction and to invoke fear from her enemies and respect from its people. A photograph couldn't do that. It can't capture the harsh edge of our leaders that represents their power and the staunch will it takes to become Hokage. It can't erase colour and make it singularity to bring out what matters the most. Interpretation can enhance as much as it can destroy."

The silver-haired Chūnin considered this. "I suppose you have a point there," he agreed although he might never truly understand. "Although I would prefer if you didn't use training time to draw. We were meeting for training today, in case you have forgotten."

The kunoichi peered at the position of the sun before she replied. "I lost track of time," she apologised, getting to her feet. "Where's Rin-chan and Obito?"

"Rin took an additional shift at the hospital," he told her. "They were short-handed and it was a good opportunity to further her medical studies. She isn't joining us today."

They executed a few *shushin* to their designated training ground. "What about Obito?"

"His grandmother told me he was being summoned to the Uchiha Compound."

"Again?" She frowned, mentally counting the number of times that it has happened. It seemed to become a frequent occurrence these days, and she had an inkling what it was about. It wasn't hard to guess really – not when it involved such a prestigious clan like the Uchiha.

"Clan politics," he said blandly, apathetic to the topic. He had separated himself voluntarily with the excuse of age and he would rather not be bonded by such trivialities. "Especially so for the Uchiha who is all about image; they are elitist nature and they pride dignity and accomplishments above all else. Unsurprisingly, much of it is derived from the superiority of their kekkei genkai."

She stretched, reaching for her toes. "And Obito always comes under the fire because he is a late bloomer and as unorthodox as an Uchiha can get," said Kara with scorn. She would never think well of a clan that produced her enemy or drove a hero into mass slaughter. She would neither forgive them for discriminating a *child* that did not activate his bloodline as most would have.

"I am kind of worried for him though," she admitted. "The Uchiha have never treated clan members who have little potential for the Sharingan kindly."

"He might not have developed his latent ability and he might have been marginalised by the main house but he is still undisputedly Uchiha, even if it's half. I don't think any drastic measures will be taken against him or get kicked out. They prefer to keep their kekkei genkai within the village – in-breeding and all."

"And therein lies their crutch," she scoffed. "Placing their kekkei genkai on too high a pedestal, thinking that it is infallible. An Uchiha that cannot materialise their Sharingan is no talent to them and they associate 'geniuses' with the Sharingan itself. They over-rely on their Sharingan as they believe strongly in not fixing a method that is not broken." She paused as she worked out the kink in her neck. "In doing so, they do not understand that the method is inherently flawed."

"Aren't the other clans the same?"

"Depends on which clan you're looking at. The Hyūga are the closest to them in disposition and exclusivity and both of them want to expand their political influence although there's nothing new there. However, the Hyūga are *slightly* better. For one, they aren't entirely dependent on their eyes; they are still extremely proficient in Taijutsu without the Juken, the children have always known the
tenketsu points by heart and can point out its usage and placement without their eyes. While the Uchiha Interceptor Style is useful, it is nothing if natural reaction timing is not trained. Obito is a fine example of a Shinobi who can accomplish or at least adapt the style without his kekkei genkai. For the Sharingan that has so much versatility like copying Jutsu, it is tragic how pride becomes their limiter. Imagine the terror that the Uchiha would be if their pride no longer stopped them from using the Jutsu they have subconsciously stolen or kept them veered towards the fire affinity."

"They would be a force to be reckoned with," he concurred. "But wouldn't that raise the standards of the Uchiha as well as their reliance?"

"All I'm saying is that they should treat their eyes more of a tool than a matter of pride. If only they would get that stick out of their asses, maybe they would be more well-liked by the village and more rounded in technique." Seriously, if anyone ever viewed the records of the Uchiha, they were ridiculously skewed in Genjutsu and the fire affinity.

"Which is consequently difficult, considering the long history that they have, spanning back to the Warring Clans period."

"As did most of the clans that have resided in Konoha," she rebutted. "You don't see the Nara bragging about their intelligence or being arrogant about it when they have the capital to."

"The Nara Clan doesn't count when they are notoriously known to be as lazy as they are intelligent."

"…True," she agreed. "But the thing is, you don't see the Yamanaka, the Inuzuka or the Akimichi or the other clans hindered by such a pride and they are not inferior to the Sharingan in their own aspects. The Yamanaka are feared for their mind walks across the Elemental Nations, no clan can convert and store metabolism like the Akimichi can and they have revolutionised the soldier pill at some point in history. The Senju is self-explanatory; and with Tsunade-hime, her contributions to the medicinal field alongside her Byakugō no In cannot be disregarded."

"I think you've made your point," he told her dryly. "I must say, it is a surprising revelation about how much you know about the clans."

"It's only so because you presume that I know nothing," she retorted, parting her feet into a comfortable fighting stance. "Konoha is famous for her clans – isn't it only right to learn about them?"

"You aren't exactly the most studious," he noted, popping his bones. It wasn't far-fetched to say that the girl preferred more hands-on experiences.

"But I know when to read when it's necessary even if it bores the soul out of me. If I'm going to have work one with the clans one day, I don't want to be ill-prepared. And you shouldn't think the least of people, or it might bite you badly later."

"I never said that I was underestimating your abilities or attention span." His left hand formed a half-seal and she followed his example.

"I'm honoured to hear that," she feigned a smile, her eyes crinkling close and becoming the role of the unassuming.

They stared at each other silently for a beat, hearing the wind rustle the trees while leaves fell.

Another pause.

They shot off.
Immediately, Kara summoned two shadow clones, signalling for them to intercept him first. Kakashi let out a ‘tch’ as he stabbed one of the clones with a kunai but the clone easily dodged, grabbing his arm and slamming him to the ground. His legs snaked around the arm and twisted, his other hand reaching for another weapon and dispelling the clone. He landed on his hands first, rebounding to his feet and tossing the kunai at the second clone with breakneck speed.

Simple-minded the clones might have once been, they have grown, easily parrying away the projectile. But Kakashi was not kind and he would rather not fight more opponent than he had to, efficiently executing a shushin behind clone two and knocking it out of existence.

"Fūin: Jūryoku!"

Baited.

Kakashi's eyes widened as black calligraphy slithered across the blades of grass. The air in the entire area distorted as the words flared with chakra, causing the ground to shake ominously for a moment before the ground indented and cracked. The increase in gravity caught its target by surprise, the sudden weight slamming down on his person and nearly forcing him to his knees. On reflex, he circulated the chakra in his system at a faster pace to lighten the load, meeting her kick with his leg although it made him swivel back.

The infuriating smile remained on her lips as his eyes met hers momentarily, and his first urge was to land a solid punch in her gut. The kunoichi could have defended but she furthered her own offence instead, punching the boy straight in his nose and making him jump back.

Unfeeling nightmare, he twitched his nose, eternally annoyed by her lack of reaction. It was a useful trait to have when she was an ally and covering his back but as an opponent, she was almost obnoxious to deal with. Pain offered a short window of weakness – she did not have such a human flaw; or rather, she refused to allow herself to have one.

Countering and blocking, assault and defence, they were the wind that welcomed a storm. Attacks missed by the brush of the hair while others were ferocious; myriad of attacks pouring like torrents, cutting through and changing gale, carrying sound as flesh impacted flesh. They spin around each other like swirling winds and clashing currents, flowing, flashy, fleeting and halting occasionally like stilling air. There was no rhythm and yet there was, but one slowly overpowered another.

She was in her element; her steps bearing weight in contrast to his lithe, yet not compromising speed. She jumped upwards and away from his collapsing earth, her hands sending slicing wind at him in staccato, and he reacted by erecting a wall, blindsiding him by hiding behind it. Brutishly, she punched through the solid with chakra coated fists and catching him by the scruff of his shirt, pushing before slamming him back against his own creation.

He cursed as he tried to twist her hand only for her to withdraw but his objective was already achieved. They engaged in close combat again, neither giving quarter to one another, stubborn in their wants to attain victory. He has won a few times against her in the recent months as she became more comfortable with her own style, improving its erraticism and unpredictability proportionally, her morphing movements suiting situations with its versatility and he finds it hard to change her tune. No matter lightning nor earth, she was steadfast; blasting them away or weathering them down by seeping through the cracks.

"Yield," she speaks, panting shallowly as her fingers wrap around his neck in mercy, applying slight pressure such that she could feel his vein pumping beneath her grasp. Her hands were hot like the rest of her limbs, her tied hair falling over her shoulders and tickling the arms that she pressed down with her knees, her body weight used to keep him from moving.
The time-traveller and his heartbeat were fast. Kakashi looked at vermillion eyes that were obscured by the shadow of her fringe, her incisors glinting like a predator honing in on its prey.

"Get off me," said Kakashi, voice strangled. "I yield."

She smiled triumphantly and got off him, alleviating the load on his chest while pulling him up with her.

"Good fight," she chirped.

He nodded in agreement, albeit disgruntled that it was another lost in his books. He had learnt from a young age that age did not determine calibre, a fitting opinion for a child prodigy. "Was that a new tactic?"

Kara retied her hair, "The gravity seals? Yeah," she beamed. "It was an idea that I derived from Kushina-nee and I just expanded on it, 'ttebane! You're the first person I've ever tested it on. Any comments?"

"If its intention is to be annoying and take the enemies by surprise, it certainly achieved its objective."

"Close enough," she shrugged. "It was about chakra expenditure," said the seal mistress, re-activating a part of a set-up as an explanation. "As long as it is active and you are within its area of effect, you have to constantly run more chakra in your system to counteract against the gravity. Even then, there is no one hundred certainty that you won't be hindered by it the slightest. I thought that even if I can't win, I could just stall it out and gain eventual victory. Not the most chakra efficient but it's plausible. Kind of like Kushina-nee's barriers that forces enemies to break it with techniques, but I can never match her proficiency in constructing barriers."

He checked his own condition. "Well, it is effective if that is your end goal. Wouldn't the expenditure be monstrous —" realised he stopped mid-sentence, suddenly remembering who he was speaking to —"Never mind. It is an interesting take on the training gravity seals Minato-sensei put on us. realised it could be used this way."

Mischief tugged the edge of her lips. "Who says?"

In the next moment, she lunged at him, gravity seal already prepared on tag. "Fūin: Jūryoku."

His arm immediately dropped from the sudden weight, his equilibrium disrupted by the unexpected pull downwards. She looked extremely smug as she held up his hand like it was feather-like to steady him. "It can be used like this as well."

The scriptures darkened back to its inky blackness. "It's all the matter of perspective. Seals, like Ninjutsu doesn't have to be used in just one way. I mean, didn't you augment your own limbs with your lightning affinity as well?"

He broke into a small run to cool down. "You noticed?"

Easily keeping up with him, she snorted: "Of course I did. Who wouldn't feel shocks of electric currents if they weren't alive? I'm human, not rubber."

"Could have fooled me," he muttered wryly. "You didn't even react. I thought you were incapable of feeling the voltage."

"Not reacting and not feeling are two different things, Kakashi. I've been shocked before," she said,
subconsciously lifting her hand to touch her chest, her previous deprecating expression clouded. "I've been burnt badly. When you've went through something like that you just… stopped reacting. Everything feels mild compared to it, like a prickle of a needle."

Noticing the odd expression to her statement, she looked ahead at the trees and the white walls that raised above their heads, several feet high and the large gates that they were approaching. "So, how are your preparations for the Jōnin exams going?"

"Fine. I have some confidence that I can meet the criteria."

"I didn't think otherwise. I heard that the Jōnin proctor approached you personally. Isn't that kind of impressive?"

She never have such a privilege of such private recognition – Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto was handed the title in the midst of war, where it was more of an inevitability than having to meet conditions.

"If you considered that there's a shortage of abled Jōnin, it is not that surprising," he said. "I qualify for it, yes, but it also shows how desperate the times are. Minato-sensei was angrier about the promotional notification than he was happy. And sensei isn't one to get riled up easily."

"You can always choose to fail it, you know."

His pace became faster. "And fail Minato-sensei? Unlikely."

Whether the boy wanted it or not, he has become the indirect representation of Namikaze Minato as he was his protégé, and he was in no position to jeopardize his teacher's future prospects after all the man has done for him. It was like Sarutobi Hiruzen – he was feared not for just his prowess but his ability to raise three outstanding Shinobi that shook the world with their title of Densetsu no Sannin.

"I'd rather not fail him," He means too much.

"What about you? Do you think you will be selected for the Jōnin exams any time soon?"

"Maybe. It could be tomorrow… in one month or a year. It's not up to the higher rankings of Jōnin to decide my promotion," she replied truthfully. "My shishō has been given full jurisdiction of that given the circumstances of my specialization and the Hokage trusts her decision, should she undertake one."

It should be soon, she mused internally, reflecting on the time limit her shishō had voluntarily imposed. Tamamo Ezume was not one to back down from her words – and Kara was sure that even if she 'graduated', the lady would always remain a valuable ally and mentor.

"You have an odd relationship with your shishō, don't you?" Kakashi questioned with raised eyebrows.

"What makes you say that?"

"You seem to trust her…" he said at length, doubting his own words, "And yet, somehow you don't." There was a distance that seemed to separate this pair of teacher and student that he couldn't place but from the little he knew thus far, it seemed to be the case.

The girl licked her lips. "Shishō… Shishō is a complicating person to trust," she spoke with vague honesty. "She saved me from where I was, she taught me how to survive and I'm eternally grateful for that. But," her volume dropped, resigned, "She was also the one who told me not to trust her. Her
lessons come with consequences and the first lesson she drove into me was to trust no one because no one can always offer unconditional and eternal loyalty."

"The first Tsuchikage famously said that self-preservation is the first law of Nature," he stated.

"But I don't believe it," she cut in, her voice rising to prove a point. "I want to believe that Shinobi are capable of loyalty; to the village and to their friends and comrades." She gazed at him seriously and he can't look away. They halt in front of Konoha's large gates, the matter better spoken at standstill. "I think we are capable of loyalty – it's just finding the right person or thing that is worth it, and we are willing to commit to. Loyalty is a choice at every subsequent stage, if not, why do we choose to fight this war? Why do we try to protect this village so desperately? Is it for the place itself? No. It never has been." Her voice was strong and convicted, the reds of her eyes crimson bright. She spread her arms wide, the trees and all that encompassed of Konoha becoming her landscape, "It's for the people that dwell here, the leaves of the Great Tree down to its aged roots and for our little Kings and Queens.

"Just because we are Shinobi doesn't mean we can't be loyal. Shishō can no longer think like that because she thinks it's an obligation but I can't do that. I can't agree that we are without loyalty because if we were, we would have destroyed everything else. Without loyalty, we would have be nothing."

She knew that down to every chakra coil that ran in her system, to the fibre of her bones and to the end of time. She has lived through and lost those that she was loyal to and who, also returned it without condition, and that was the truth she will always embody.

The time-traveller seemed to catch herself at the end of speech, her hand now clasped on her mouth. Her capacity to surprise with her optimistic philosophy seemed to extend even to herself, even if it was tainted by melancholy. Part of him was shaken by her statement piece and thankful for honesty, such that he could only scratch his head. It was not the first time she has shifted his paradigm, it will not be her last.

The afternoon sun enhanced her features as it shone, her naturally tanned complexion seemingly glowing from beneath her skin.

"Was that too much?" She whispered.

"No," Kakashi replied, sounding strange. "It wasn't. It was perfect.

... (The chronology of the timeline is always linear. But I just refuse to give dates because I don't like being specific, although I do occasionally month drop.)

The smell of lavender was thick in the air. It was in each inhale she breathed, down her windpipe and into her lungs, the scent deep within her veins and with the blood that moved.

Face powdered lightly and eyes lined kohl black, her darkened irises peeked from beneath long lashes, her lips redder and full. Her dark hair was piled on top of the crown of her head in an intricate bun lined with plaits, fastened by a silver pin and complementing the darker shade of her kimono. From the colour between her ebony hair to the glistening metal and down to her outfit, it created a soothing gradient that made her seem at peace.

The girl – perhaps, teenager would soon be a better description once she grew more – slaved over her chosen instrument, her wrists a respectable distance away as her fingers plucked at the strings.
The notes flew out in various octaves and concentrated on the lower pitch as if she had invested her soul into the melody, the song floating into the air in its vibrato and capturing the audience in the story she tried to craft.

Jade green eyes hold her student in scrutiny, appraising everything from her costume, posture countenance and to what she exuded. Did her serenity extend to the song she played and was there any tension misplaced? Did she truly embody the role of what she given or was she just a fake? Tamamo Ezume saw what many did not in her specialization like the nuances in her craft, and the last thing she wanted for her legacy to do was to fail and let her legacy shatter.

The girl has come from where she began; from the frail child that was hounded by her own demons, weak against her own albatross as she was in physicality, she had morphed: slowly into a woman, her body becoming endowed, finding her own mask and becoming more self-assured; stable rather than volatile; a sharpening weapon for Konoha to wield, a shield to guard against oncoming attacks and mostly – a means for her to survive. For the precious people she must protect, she hid the unglamorous, the pain and the future. For herself, it created a box that made life easier with detachment and allowed a void that could be refilled.

“That is enough for today, Kara,” she speaks of the name that she has once given, now ironically filled with more attachments than she would like.

She blinked slowly albeit innocently at the command, her palm resting on the koto to still the strings. “But the night is still young,” she replied lowly, “Have I done something wrong?”

“Nothing that the average will notice,” she demurred. “Your progress is satisfactory. While you still have much to do, that will now be down in your own time.”

Kara shoved the confusion down, willing her lips not to part in reaction to that statement. “What do you mean by that, shishō?”

“Surely you have the capacity to decipher what I mean, Kara. I have taught you better than that.”

“Lesson two: read underneath the underneath,” she recited quietly, her index finger pulling at a string. Of course she wouldn’t forget. “Can I presume that your given time limit is up?”

There was more disappointment in her than she thought she would have but the time-traveller has always formed emotional attachments too quickly. It was her strongest weapon and yet… it was her biggest fault.

“The arrangement’s time limit,” Tamamo corrected coldly. “I suppose it was foolish of me to think that you would not become dependent on something that was meant to be temporary.” But her hand lifted to caress her cheek. “Although I must concede that you were a good student – better than any I could have asked for. The Hokage has chosen well and he has kept his promises.”

The silence hung between them to prolong the moment.

She sighed. “Alas, I must keep my promises as well. I have better morals than some and I would prefer to keep it that way.” Her kimono shifts as she pulled out a white scroll, placing it on the ground. “This mission will determine your fate as a Shinobi in Konoha’s system. It might determine your life and death, but I trust that you will not fail. Use what I have taught you well—“she exhaled, shoulders loosening—“and show them what it means to be Konoha’s Deceit.”

“Shishō, you can’t mean—“ Her eyes widened, the words tumbling out.

“I mean what I said,” she intercepted, her tone patient. “Do not make me repeat myself twice. You
have not made me do so in the span of our lessons, there is no need to ruin my impression of you by starting now.”

This might be the second and last time she will bow to this teacher who has given her as much as others had. No – Tamamo Ezume has given her more in this life than anyone else can.

“You honour me,” her voice trembled because both of them understood what she was giving. “I will do you proud. I will not sully the reputation you have built.”

She made her lift her head. “That is all I can ask of you. Go.”

“Understood.”

---

Omake: The Conundrum about Birthdays

Hatake Kakashi hated birthdays.

But who could blame him when his experiences with them were at extremities and it was the terrible that tend to make a bigger impression?

For first five years of his life – he doesn’t really remember the first two, so three – his father had been mostly absent. The first year it was seeing him minutes before it ended, the second no because he was out on a mission and the third – well, was there really a need to elaborate?

His birthdays were usually spent alone with books and thundering silence as his company and occasionally his ninken that did not want him to be alone.

But come the sixth – he had no father, now an orphan with a blackened name, with a wish that the mask would stay glued to his face.

He spent that birthday alone (again), with the Chūnin certificate in his hands, with no one to show it to. What was the point of trying so hard when he was gone gone gone – far from his reach, in the Great Village, the distance immeasurable although it was only six feet beneath. He doesn’t think that the Hokage would be pleased if he burnt his certification and the dead didn’t need it anyway. Paper was always for the living.

Perhaps the other half of his birthdays were better. His seventh to tenth was spent with his teacher and subsequently his teammates and maybe, just maybe it wasn’t so bad.

He would never really understand why cake was a requisite (it was so sweet) or the need to buy frivolous candles according to age (what were you going to do if you were eighty-nine? That’s a lot of one-time usage candles) but he supposed he would be better off not questioning tradition. If it made Kushina-nee happy, he was going to keep his mouth shut.

He wasn’t about to take away her happiness when it comes to planning, especially when she gave it some significance when he was nine.

“We celebrate your birthday because we are glad you were born today. We continue celebrating it because it means you’re still here with us and that’s all that matters, ‘ttebane.”

(He would rather die than admit that it made him really happy to hear that.)
Essentially, Hatake Kakashi was not one to ponder about the significance of birthdays – well, until today.

“My birthday?” echoed Kara, a strange glint flitting across her eyes as she was setting his present on the small table. “I don’t have one.”

Pin-dropping silence.

It is no surprise that people take for granted what they have, or the fact that normalcy always makes anomaly stand out. A paradox really; especially when the converse was also correct.

“What?” asked Kushina cautiously, eerily in sync with Minato.

“I don’t have one,” she repeated for their benefit. “I can’t celebrate what I don’t have?”

“No records from your previous village?”

“Not that I know of,” Kara told her teacher.

Or maybe it was just the fact that she never had anyone celebrate her birthday with her until she was thirteen, and house break-ins, threats of death and being thrown out to the street did not constitute as presents. During those times, she wasn’t sure if she would have remembered her birthday if not for the festival and it was more about the idolization of the Yondaime Hokage than placing focus on herself. She has had some happy years, sure, but what happiness was there to find when there was war, and death anniversaries crowded around her birth date?

Birthday celebrations were a social event; a loner had no place in it.

“What?” Obito blanched loudly. “You’re missing out on so much! Getting to celebrate your birthday is one of the best things ever!”

The strange flicker of emotion returned. “You can’t really miss something you’ve never really celebrated?” she offered.

Oddly enough, Minato seemed to be berating himself for forgetting the crucial detail.

“And that’s the bloody shame, Kara. How would you even know when you’re a year older?”

“When a year passes, I’ll be a year older,” she shrugged. “It’s not that hard.”

“Yeah, but what’s the fun in that? Birthdays are supposed to be special, unique to you alone.”

“Obito, there’s bound to be someone else in the Elemental Nations who was born on the same day as you. It’s not as unique as you say it is.”

“Wow, would it kill you to stop being a spoilsport?”

She cocked her head. “…No,” she smiled cheekily.

Rin quietly assessed the situation. “Do you remember the date you arrived in Konoha, Kara-chan?”

“October 15?” she recalled, tapping on her chin. “Around there, I think. Hokage-sama swore me to the oath that day.”

“Well then, it can be your new birthday,” she suggested, although her tone was anything but. It was more a demand; words phrased in politeness but it was an absolute period. “It makes sense – coming
to Konoha was a new life for you and it is a... rebirth of sorts. And it has significance to it.”

“Brilliant thinking, Rin-chan,” Kushina praised, ruffling her hair. Kara looked at the medic-nin with implicit surprise at her thinking.

The Uzumaki moved over to the wall to mark the calendar. “So we’ll be celebrating Kara-chan’s birthday a month from now on,” she turned around and looked at the girl pointedly. “You will come, Kara-chan, and you will find out what you’re missing out.”

“...Hai?”

Chapter End Notes

A few notes:

"Self-preservation is the first law of Nature," is by Abraham Maslow and his theory about the Hierarchy of Needs. I thought it would be fun to add it in.

Konoha's Deceit – believe it or not, this was actually the very name that sparked off this entire fanfiction, about the darker side of Shinobi life. You'll see its significance later.

My writing style will probably change a lot throughout this entire fanfiction, or as in, for Omake or Interludes (should I choose to write one) might be a different writing style. I'm still experimenting with what I like, and it is part of the struggle as to why some updates are late.

Thank you for 3000 hits ^^
"Everything is going to begin again, Hokage-sama," she spoke in probability, her incisors glinting despite the late night.

He let out a low hum, masking his slight surprise that she managed to slip past his ANBU and traps and into his mansion. The dull and low-burning candlelight on his table barely highlighted her seated figure, and it was a belated realisation that it was nearing twilight.

Laying down his report, he asked, "What do you need?"

"Just a mission," she replied, "Out of the village and alone."

"Any place in particular?"

Her crimson eyes hardened. "Just send me where you need more eyes in, Hokage-sama. I'm not in the position to make demands when you've already done so much for me, 'ttebane."

"I do those things under my own free will," he asserted.

"You wouldn't have catered to my whims if I wasn't valuable," she added for him.

Both of them understood the nature of Shinobi life too well to be fooled by the notions of pure altruism. Whether it was Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto or Kara, the powers that the girl held with her newfound prophecies made her a piece that he could not simply disregard. Even if he treated her like his own biological granddaughter, there was a sinister sub-consciousness which would weigh the benefits and disadvantages and sought to exploit; dipping his hands deeper into bloodied waters and relishing in the coldness seeping into his skin.

It was the growing frigidity that made him numb and impartial; a levelled general that would seek the best tactics; almost an apathetic higher being who cared little for relations as he sat in his dark room whilst he peered over the map, moving pieces as he wanted, showing the might Konoha had and could bring at the expense of so many. But the warm hand of values and some morals were placed on his shoulders and he found living warmth; things that fought against the cold and reminded him of humanity.

"It does not change the fact that your value is more than that of a competent soldier, Kara. I treasure you like you were my family and whatever you know doesn't diminish or ruin that."

You can't say that when you weren't supposed to meet me like this in your life. Wisely, she kept her opinion to herself and smiled at him. "I treasure you like family too."

The calculative slant of her lips reminded him too much of her teacher, he groused. "I am glad to
hear that. Am I privy to the reasons as to why you need to leave the village?"

"Some events are better left to natural progression," she murmured, tucking a tendril of dark hair behind her ear. "Deaths… Sacrifice… Growth. All that is due at the end of the day."

The Third Hokage frowned. "Surely you don't believe that."

"And you don't?" She deferred emotionlessly, purposefully pressing her palm on her stomach. "It is what it is, Hokage-sama. War is always fought for a cause, no matter how stupid and pointless, and I see the biggest war's stage being set as we speak. Pieces that have been moved cannot be withdrawn again and what I know can be prevented, but it does not change that it has happened. If there is nothing that can be done to halt a madman's scheme in advance, then some pieces must remain constant to make it an easier victory."

"Tactical," he noted in resignation. Sarutobi Hiruzen would have done the same.

"But it will still be pyrrhic," she inserted in concession, her shoulders hunching like she had aged another two decades. "Send me where I can be of use, Hokage-sama, and I will deliver, 'ttebane."

"Very well," he sighed, plans already forming in his mind. "I'll see what I can do."

... 

A gifted girl:

She was shaken awake.

As if she was spineless, she was lifted up with scalding hands, rocking her with such force that her eyes snap open. Blurry vision took in the silhouette outlined with fiery orange, his face exposed in the half-light, enhancing his features that were similar to a scarred mountain.

The smell of smoke gave her a coughing fit. "Tou-san," she croaked dryly, "What's happening?" Her voice trembled, "What happened to you?"

One of her hands lift from the blanket to touch his forehead, smearing away the blood that trailed down from his forehead and soaked his eyebrows. Why are you looking at me like that? She traced the bags under his eyes, trying to will her own shaking to stop.

Her father said nothing as he moved her arm away in urgency, threading it through one of the backpack's straps, repeating it with her other arm equally fast before retrieving a rope to secure the bag properly around her torso. He seemed awfully preoccupied with the knots as he undid and did them again, wanting it to be dependable and yet feeling like it wasn't enough.

Sick of the silence, she asked again: "Will you be okay?"

Dark eyes snapped up to look at her hurriedly, filled with so much panic that the glaring light emitting from her window muddied it further. Browns swirled like the darkness in the bowl of a spinning ceramic pot, and she cannot help but clench her bed sheets tighter.

"I'll be fine," he said hoarsely, laying his hand over hers and flipping it over. "Promise Tou-san something, alright?"
She nodded unsurely. *Why does this feel like goodbye?*

He placed a knife in her palm and he didn't let her flinch away, holding her still, letting her feel the weight of it rest on her hands. The weapon was glinting as it reflected fire and the steel edge's sharpness. "Whatever you do, do not let go of the backpack." The bandage wounded around her hand and the knife – they become one. "When you wake up, I want you to run. Don't stop until you've reached the village and don't talk to anyone. Can you do that for me?"

Tears sprang in her eyes. "Tou-san, why—"

"I love you, Airi," he interrupted, voice cracking on her name. "I love you so much, even if the stone crumbles and there's nothing left but dust." *I will always love you. More than life.*

She broke. "I love you too, Tou-san."

Her world went black.

…

To Iwa:

"Those fucking tree-hugging and decaying pieces of shit." Tenchi snarled, his eyes smeared red with bloodlust. He was boiling lava; the simmering magma bubbling and hissing steam, the upward pressure of hatred pushing it upwards and spilling into blistering rage. He kicked the charred wood that was on the ground, breaking it into pieces. "Fuck those cowardly pieces of shits."

There was nothing left in the forsaken village. Houses were burnt down with lingering chakra emissions in the air, and what was left standing was already looted and unsafe from the destruction. There was only death and broken things; pulverised hearts and shattered dreams – all lying at their feet on blood-soaked soil, just shards to step on and to bleed. A pile of bodies stood in the midst of the two square – a sedimentary hill of corpses – as a show of strength to make a mockery of Iwa.

A maddening laugh broke forth from his comrade's lips as he clutched a failing structure for support. "What the fuck," he choked out with a restrained sob.

Everything was gone, he already hated Konoha, he hated the war, but they have already committed the same atrocities repeatedly and the only difference was the number of causalities. How many time has he stumbled across this scene? How many times more would this happen until they finally learnt? And how many times was he going to be the aggressor, and how many times would he be the victim? *When does it end* – he paused, because such admittance was treason. So he laughed again, the sound disjointed by heartache.

"Check for survivors," Tenchi stated roughly although it was empty and merely protocol. "We'll give the villagers a proper burial afterwards."

The fact that their graves would be nameless and just another statistic on a report was left unsaid.

"Taichō,"

"What is it, Minami?"

Hands pressed to the ground, she felt. "There's one weak chakra signature present," she sounded in disbelief, its presence soft but fading.

She crept closer to the pile and held her breath, laying out the corpses dispassionately, disseminating
the hill to reach the end. In the middle of the dead was one impossible life – blood-stained and stinking of rust, curled up with a weapon clasped between her hands. Her chest was moving up and down – *badump badump badump* – her heart beat, proving that she was indeed *alive*.

"Do we kill her?" he asked, an unemotional façade donned on as he palmed a weapon.

"No," she replied in the negative, wiping away the blood from the girl's face with her sleeve.

"Cruel," said her leader.

She glared daggers at him. "Cruel?" she snorted outlandishly. "You are the cruel one when you wouldn't even allow her to live."

"Death is 'mercy' in this situation and you know that, Minami. Would you rather her live with the memory that her entire village was slaughtered and she was the only one left alive? She's better off happy in the Great Village above with her departed family."

"No," she disagreed again, prying the knife from her hands and bringing her closer to her chest. "She should live the life her village did not." She can feel the steady and slow thrum of a heartbeat and it gives her a shimmer of hope. "Her past will give her strength. Maybe that motivation becomes revenge, but there is also the chance that it can become something positive."

But how many have already walked down the path of blinded hatred and have gotten out of it alive? They see the veterans that fight until their last breath, hands ceaselessly moving as they slaughtered fools. They burn bright like an inferno before they die out like a candle snuffed out; fleeting and wasteful.

Tenchi sighed. "You will be responsible for her, you know."

"Of course I do."

…

From Konoha:

The pair of Shinobi on night duty peered into the twilight. It was unnaturally cold tonight.

"You are dying to say something, aren't you?"

Slightly caught off balance by his perceptiveness, his partner stared. "Was I that obvious?"

Yamanaka Junichi raised an eyebrow. "No, not really. But I *am* in the psychology department for a reason."

"Would it kill you to stop analysing my mental state?"

"Atsushi, we are at the edge of Iwa borders, I'm a *Yamanaka* and I have nothing better to do. Give me a break from my boredom, please."

Well, he couldn't be faulted for that. "It's just..." Atsushi huffed out, "I don't agree with this mission."

"A little bit too late for regrets, don't you think?" said Junichi. "What's done is done and orders are orders – it's not even worth considering insubordination at this point of completion."

"We just sent a *ten year old* into the backlines of *Iwa*, Jun." he bit out. "A *ten year old* that is the
same age as my Genin niece. Does that not bother you at all?"

"We just burnt down an innocent village just to plant her inside the backline and that's what's bothering you?" He deadpanned incredulously.

"She's ten," he couldn't stress enough. Just because she was small enough to go to place didn't mean that she had to, didn't mean that she should be subjected to missions that even Elite Jōnin hesitated to uptake since it was suicidal during hostilities.

"Atsushi, we've been killing since we were ten. We've killed so many people that I don't remember their faces and it was just hours ago," he stated in a patient monotone. "Regrets or not, this isn't any different. It's just another scenario and a more dangerous mission." Better her than I.

The said man laughed bitterly at the truth.

"And I think she'll be fine," Junichi convinced. "She's incredibly skilled for her age – too skilled." A prodigy. Dangerous. But her utility cannot be denied.

"Still too young," muttered Atsushi, tracing a shuriken's edge.

Shaking his head at his partner's denial, he furthered his point. "I would have worried at first but she pretends so well. So well that I can barely find kinks in her act. It was like I was staring at a different person when she became the hunter's daughter. It was terrifyingly great." Even with more experience under his belt, he wasn't sure if he was capable of executing such an act with so much finesse and deep inside, he was still shaking in bewilderment when he remembered it. There was a certain trait to her method acting; that she could abandon herself to portray another, like her true persona, trained instincts and growing paranoia didn't matter. He might have known the kunoichi for a few days but it was obvious that she was a stellar Shinobi beyond an accomplished disguiser, well-acquainted with the stark reality and its necessities.

"And how fast she got she found the food supplies," his partner nodded in agreement, almost disgusted by her efficiency. "I don't even want to know how."

"It does make you wonder who her teacher was," the Yamanaka shook his head.

Atsushi shot him a glare, "Ally or not, I do not want to know."

Having connections were all well and good but he would prefer to stay away from some characters to preserve his sanity. It was common knowledge that the higher you went, the greater the eccentricities of the Shinobi and if the student was already this fearsome, then the teacher would be petrifying.

Atsushi loved life too much to consider it.

...

Airi felt lost.

This was not her village. This was not home.

Home was where her father was, where he would wake her up in at the break of dawn with a brush
of his lips on her forehead and return near dusk with the day's hunt, smelling like wood and musk. It was when he would put down his weapons on their wooden table before hugging her, teasingly telling her that his profession was not meant for her just yet, his arms a protective cage as he makes her soar.

Home was where she could see familiar faces and not a thousand unknowns, it was not rock houses towering like artificial trees with a curve for space but wooden structures and quaint frames. It was running along soiled paths and greeting everyone she knew, their contented voices as loud as hers, helping her neighbours for an extra snack and dancing under the pouring rain, raising her head and singing praise to the skies. It was not bustling streets or sterile rooms, or cobblestone paths and meek sounds.

Airi did not know this place. Airi did not belong.

(But Kara was not confused. You are Airi. This is a mission. You are Airi. Be Airi.)

In all the anger that she could create, she lit the growing incendiary air with a scream: "What do you mean that my village is gone!? It was fine yesterday! Tou-san would have told me if something was going to happen—"

"I love you so much, even if the stone crumbles and there's nothing left but dust."

"—Tou-san would have said something about it so quit lying to me! I don't want to be here, I want to be in my village with my friends and not in this crappy village and crappy house so let me go!"

Unfazed, her caretaker continued to peruse the small pocketbook at her bedside, indolent of the temper tantrum that she was throwing.

"And what can I earn from lying to a child?" She raised a delicate eyebrow before frowning at the lines in her book. "All I'm doing is presenting facts and whether you want to believe it or not, it is still the truth. Villages can fall like dominoes but they don't rise from ashes, kid."

"I don't care!" screamed Airi shrilly, flinging a clipboard at Minami which she conveniently caught. "There's no way that can be true! I want out! I want to be in my village! I don't want to be here, I don't believe you, I hate you I hate you I HATE YOU!"

"Hate away," she stated airily. "But no matter how much you hate me, we're not going back to your village." Not to the mass graves. You are better off not seeing that. "And who has seen the aftermath of your beloved village? You or me?" Airi glared back helplessly.

"Of course it's me. So who's more trustworthy in this case? A child that wasn't awake—"the girl whimpered—"or an adult that actually was? You don't look stupid enough to think that it's the first."

Minami continued to dig into the invisible wound, her fingers hooking into flesh. "And who was the one the ended your family?" she continued to ask sardonically, a cruel smile twisting her lips. "Was it the enemy that decided your village was a supply depot or was it my team that was sent to help?" Stab. "Who was the one that was helpless?" The invisible knife twisted. "Who was asleep while their village burned?" Air let out a pained gasp.

"I hate you," she felt the need to repeat, knuckles white as she clenched onto the blankets so tight. "I hate you," she can't say it enough, lips trembling as tears start to fall, like the truth that was sinking to the bottom of her gut. "I hate you, I hate you, I hate you so much for bringing me here," she breathed out shakily.

"I hate you," it was barely a whisper now, croaky as it mixed with her small sobs. She pulled her
knees closer to her chest and buried her head between it, fragile frame quaking to her despair. "I… I…" I hate me. I hate myself for not being able to do anything.

Minami let out an inaudible sigh before placing her book and clipboard on the small table.

First was anger and subsequently denial and then came overwhelming despair. Her chair creaked slightly as she shifted onto the bed, arms wrapping awkwardly around the girl and patting her comfortingly. The girl needed to cry; needed to relieve the fact that it had actually happened, needed to ground herself into reality rather than the hopeless delusion that there was something left of her village and she needed it to move on. The grave markers of her people would become her stepping stone, but first, she must be willing to kneel before them to pray, to beg for forgiveness, to take their wishes upon her shoulders before she can raise her head and stand.

In the sterile room where small cries was the background noise, there they sat, one trying to console the victim of such an enormous loss despite knowing that it was just part and parcel of war, whilst the other cried out for everything she couldn't regain.

But beneath closed eyelids and soaked lashes, brown eyes flashed blue, then red.

…

"Kara is not going to be in our team anymore?" Obito expressed first, appalled.

Minato nodded with a frown. "She was taken out of Team Minato for another mission."

"But that wouldn't warrant them to break a working unit just for a mission, sensei," Kakashi pointed out, fully aware of the basic workings of war protocols. "They would just send her for the mission – not take her out of the team."

"Not always," Rin disagreed as she worked towards another tangent. "If Kara-chan has a specialisation, it would make sense that she would be more valuable as a flexible unit or she is ill-suited to the type of team we are."

"Right on both accounts," their teacher confirmed. "From what little I have gathered, she was sent on a mission that has no time restrictions." And perhaps that was the part that the Elite Jōnin was most worried about; the condition set had narrowed the choices of missions to a short list, and he liked none of them.

"Either way, we have to make do," he concluded, unfurling a scroll on the ground and signalling for his students to crowd around. "Here is our mission objective…"

…

Months later…

It has been years since she saw him.

The man she never got to say goodbye to.

Whose last moments were spent in paving a possibility of victory, burning words into scars and into his own unique code, based off a book that he wrote decades ago with his dreams for peace and the end to the cycle of hatred compacted into what would give the time-traveller her name. He was the empty grave she prayed to, the man who was akin to a father, and the gallant role model that was wrenched away by fate.
Disguise or not (she truly missed his shade of white hair and red Haori), she would never mistake the broad back that she often leaned against after a tiring day of training or when they camped out under the night skies, or the unmistakable shit-eating grin that promised mischief. It was almost surprising that he managed to tame his hair back into a slick black hairdo and he could look so… Mundane despite his eccentrics or that he was more attractive at a younger age. Minute wisps of nature's energy clung onto him and she resisted from blinking at the slight glimmer that he exuded like it was charisma personified.

Kami I miss him so much, she admitted, heart clenching, choosing to turn her attention back to her food. He might have been one of the first deaths that she had accepted since she found proper closure in confronting Nagato, but like re-meeting anyone else, it was a completely different matter for her state of mind.

You have a job to do.

Airi knocked her chopsticks against the wood in a particular rhythm before she ate a mouthful of noodles. The sound of wooden sandals clacking purposefully in the same rhythm against cement reached her ears and she held her breath.

"Haven't your seniors taught you that it is common courtesy to wait for the other person before eating?" He began, sliding into the bench opposite of hers. The man leaned out before calling: "Hey, waitress, give me a bottle of warm sake. Thanks."

Till the end of her life, she will swear that any reply she made was a reflex. "They didn't teach me how to deal with people that were late, sorry," she smiled crudely. "Isn't it a little bit too early for you to drink, Oji-san?"

His dyed eyebrows twitched slightly. It was amazing how kids these days could master the art of being respectful and disrespectful in one greeting. Nonetheless, he played along. "Here's a life lesson kid," he reached over to ruffle her hair as petty revenge, "It's never too early to drink."

She hid her preening with a scowl as she swatted his hand away. "You are probably not going to be saying that when you wake up in the dumpster, Oji-san."

"If I end up in the dumpster in the first place," he corrected, giving the waitress a smile of thanks before turning back to her. "I have pretty high tolerance."

He didn't seem to notice that he sent the waitress blushing as she scurried away.

"Tolerance doesn't mean immunity," she pointed out, watching as the clear liquid flowed into the cup. "Your kidneys are going to collapse at the rate you're drinking, Oji-san. Ever heard of drinking in moderation?" If you were of civilian capacity that is.

"The only person who has the right to say that to me is also a perpetual drunk," the Toad Sage raised his cup like he was toasting someone imaginary before lowering his voice to whisper conspiratorially. "And if that were the case, then someone getting lung cancer from excessive smoking is seriously overdue."

Airi giggled at the shade that he threw. It was an open secret that the practising of chakra made a body stronger even without active enforcement, and getting away with some of the damages caused by drinking or smoking was a little too easy.

"Although I must say," his eyes sharpened in scrutiny, "When the old man told me that he found someone new to dote on, I certainly wasn’t expecting someone like you."
She grinned cheekily instead of cowering. "What can I say? I'm adorable."

"Adorable?" he snorted back. "I think I'll be the judge of that. The old man has questionable tastes sometimes. I'm not sure if he fully thinks it through before he likes something."

"Are you saying that Jiji has bad taste when it comes to me?" pouted Kara, laying on the wounded tone thick.

"No, I'm just wondering why he would resort to such company when there are so many more." Is he desperate enough to make a child an informant or are you worth more than that?

"Maybe he prefers the company of the young," she suggested sweetly.

"…Brat," said the man after a beat of silence, spreading his arms out wide to show off his physique. "I'll have you know that I'm in my prime."

Airi smiled saccharinely. "Sounds like denial and smells like overcompensation for something you don't have. How long does your 'prime' even last?"

"As long as I am able and woman want me," Jiraiya told her, downing a cup before pouring another.

She pressed her hand on his arm with a note under her palm, "It's okay to dream, old man, I understand. Everyone always wants some love, no matter their age."

A tick mark appeared on his forehead. He slotted the piece of paper into his sleeve. You would think that Mimi-chan's politeness would be transferred over to his students when his skills did, he smiled sarcastically. "You ought to beware of that sharp tongue, brat, lest you want someone to cut it out."

"I'll take that under advisement and keep my mouth shut when the time is right." It's not like you can do anything to me in public, 'ttebane.

He narrowed his eyes at the challenge she issued with smug eyes. I wouldn't test that boundary if I were you, kid. Leaning forward with the sake cup balanced on his lips, he asked: "Does Mimi-chan know about this?"

Airi hid her bark of laughter with a cough. Who would have thought that the fearsome Yondaime Hokage had such a girly nickname? "How did you know I was associated with her?" said the girl after she regained herself, slurping another mouthful of noodles.

"There are only so many outrageously talented children in one era, brat. It wasn't hard to conclude about your beginnings," he retorted. "And you fit the bill for many of the traits that she listed. It isn't hard to piece it together. So? Does she know that you're here?"

"Mimi-chan doesn't always need to know where I go, Oji-san."

"I would think otherwise," he argued, staring at his distorted reflection in the cup. "I know her mind like it was my own, brat – By the Shodai, I raised her like she was my child. She has been talking about you ever since she found you, and she hasn't stopped – about how cute you are, and how she found parts of herself in you. She clearly cares a lot for you and you owe her that much to tell her where you are and what you are doing."

The girl frowned at her food. "I'm just finding a place where I can eat that's all. And she's so busy with her career – stop looking at me like that, Oji-san, you know it's true – and me taking care of myself works in her favour."
"Your new-found independence is heart-warming but it doesn't change the fact that you could have told her, kid. She's been pretty worried."

She looked up at him, eyes flashing red as she narrowed them at him. "You're going to tell her now aren't you?"

He shot back at her the same infuriating smile before he leaned back on the bench. "Doesn't matter now, does it? It's not like you can spit out the food you just ate."

"But you can stop drinking before you even start," she gestured at his alcohol, her nose wrinkling to the acrid smell.

"Ah," he wiggled his finger in the negative. "I choose to indulge in this drink as much as she deserves to have a peace of mind to at least know where you are."

The time-traveller forgot how much of a nonchalant asshole the Toad Sage could be towards people he didn't care for. "It's the opposite and you know it," she snarled quietly, her chopsticks cracking slightly.

Namikaze Minato would worry himself sick if he knew where she was and she needed him to be at peak condition for what was going to come. She didn't want to be the reason why he was going to get hurt in the battlefield, she didn't want to be a greater burden and that was why she was here, and not with the team that she had become increasingly attached to.

"She's not that fragile," said Jiraiya, having read her mind. "She will worry, yes, but she trusts in your ability to provide for yourself. As someone who cares for you, the first act of faith is to trust that you will be fine on your own and there's no need to constantly coddle you."

It's so typical of him to say this, she scratched her head, embarrassed. "Thanks."

"Either way," Jiraiya muttered absent-mindedly before he slapped a few bills on the table. "Let me pay for this. It's a senior's job to take care of their juniors after all."

"See, you admitted to being old, Oji-san," she teased, swapping the Fūinjutsu note he hid beneath the money with another piece of paper before she pushed it back to him. "I appreciate your concern—"Thank you for the bailout—"but I can pay for this on my own. I'll be fine."

As she stood up to go to the cashier, she left a scroll on the table which he easily swiped as it rolled off. "It was nice meeting the Oji-san that Mimi-chan always talks about."

"Only good things, I hope," he joked as he drank from the bottle. "I'll see you soon again, hopefully." Stay alive.

The student gave him her biggest grin. "I try."

The Sennin watched as the girl leave the shop with a skip in her step before turning his head to where she once sat. She was all the things that his protégé had described but he seemed to have pushed the danger that lurked beneath her innocent exterior aside. The girl was mysterious, he deliberated lazily as he swished the remnants of the alcohol in his bottle.

He could not find any factual past records of her and it wasn't from the lack of trying. There was something about the girl that struck a chord within him – like natural energy disturbed – that he could not put a finger on, and if there was anything a good Shinobi loved, it was a puzzle that had yet to be solved.
His train of thought was abruptly derailed when he let out a short laugh in the middle of nowhere, his head shaking back and forth at her random sense of humour.

Of course she would know the story and the philosophy that Minato loved – Especially when only a naruto remain at the bottom of her bowl.

Maybe she isn't so bad.

...

Obito involuntarily shivered as he drew his jacket closer to his neck, fingers curling around thick fabric to trap heat within the palms of his hands. "Cold," he hissed, pulling his legs closer to his chest.

His companion leaned in closer to him, her knees nudging against his. "Tolerate it for a little more. It'll get better once we start moving again," comforted Rin, a gentle smile gracing her lips.

The boy made a low noise in the back of his throat. He could perfectly view the brown eyes that were the shade of honey – like a warm and sweet treat he was quickly favouring – staring at him with adorable concern, innocence imbued in those soft depths such that it made red rise up his face. He shifted his head away from the expression that was becoming a little too much for him, trying to cool his cheeks.

Now camped out in a far-flung location in Kusa no Kuni, he missed the dense forests spanned for miles around Konoha. The current territory was more grass and rocks, and the sparse forest coverage they were in a sparse forest; was sub-par compared to Hashirama's raised majesty.

(Maybe the insults of their enemies about tree hugging or marrying a tree wasn't just to mock their village after all. Sigh, glorious trees.)

"Who-Who are we waiting for, Minato-sensei?" Obito finally stuttered out as he watched his teacher pace back and forth.

"Informant," he replied, looking up at the skies for a bird to circle overhead and land. "We can't play interception if we don't have information."

"Do we know the person?"

"Nope," Minato said, adopting a lecturing tone. "And it is best that your allies don't know your identity either when you are an informant. When information is a one-way street, it is easier to deny involvement since there is only one track to erase. Information gathering is a delicate process – and it would be best if there are lesser factors that could break it."

Kakashi nodded at his teacher's foresight, satisfied.

"So we're going to stay here until it arrives?" grumbled Obito.

"Patience is a virtue," his teacher told him sagely, said quality exhibited on his expression.

"And impatience gets you killed."

"Prudence makes you safer, but prude-ness makes me puke," Obito smiled thinly at the conformist, corners of his lips poking sharp.

Nonplussed, the Hatake raised an eyebrow. "Been taking up literary endeavours?"
"I don't need eloquence to insult you," said the Uchiha sincerely.

"An ironic statement." The medic-nin giggled at that.

She gazed idly at the skies through a small canopy of leaves, somewhat expectant to hear a cheerful voice chip in to fuel the impending argument. Rin sighed. She did miss the exuberant girl; the perfect company against all the swirling testosterone in the air.

It was funny how the girl had changed their team dynamics in less than two years, and without her, there was a slight imbalance. It was not obvious of course – it was more the small things that reminded them that she had become an irreplaceable part of them.

They were a competent team even without Kara; balanced with a heavy-hitter, one skilled in agility to flank and the last who sustained the team in long-standing battles. It didn't hurt that they had a monster of a teacher and Kara added to their firepower. But –

Kara fitted them in the oddest way like she filled the gaps and made them wholly complete.

She was the one who actively engaged Namikaze Minato in his principle of Fūinjutsu, she was the perfect partner-in-crime to Uchiha Obito in the pranks he pulled and she was the kunoichi that challenged Hatake Kakashi and kept him on his toes. It was natural that Nohara Rin felt slightly jealous at her ability to gel the team better than she ever did and it didn't help that she was ridiculously talented and too much like Kakashi.

But Nohara Rin loved Kara.

She knew that behind her genius was tireless hours and sleepless nights, and behind her aptitude in socialising and bright smiles was someone who was fiercely protective and willing to go to any lengths to protect her precious people. Kara was one of her pillars of support when she broke down, offering her shoulder for her to cry after a terrible day and her endless source of comfort. It was difficult to dislike someone just off the basis of inferiority and it was frankly petty of the Nohara to even entertain those thoughts.

It made her feel ashamed that she had sometimes wished that Kara was a little less.

Suddenly a small chakra signature appeared in the middle of the team with a puff of smoke, and her chakra senses rang in alarm, chakra scalpels forming sharp enough to leave a mark on the rock she pushed herself off from. Her other two teammates ran off their own instincts with their own kunai brandished, moving to strike at the interference.

"It's an ally," said Minato, being the voice of calm for their team. He clamped down on their wrists in a timely fashion, inches away from their target that croaked in amusement.

"Interesting students you have there, Minato-san," said the toad dryly, unfazed.

"Thank you," he replied back with a cheerful smile. "Is Jiraiya-sensei doing fine?"

"As fine as he can be if he can deliver this message, Minato-san," it waved his concern off before it pulled out the scroll that it harboured in the back of its mouth. Obito and Kakashi made a face of slight disgust as they relaxed and shoved their weapons back into their pouches.

Taking the slightly wet scroll with good grace, the Toad summoner wiped off some spit off his pants before he unravelled it. On the blank piece of paper, he nicked his finger and drew the standard encryption key, watching in fascination as the blood blended with the emerging ink. He paused when he saw the words, body running cold as he ran the comparison in his mind.
Frigid anger took precedence over worry and his cerulean eyes darkened into glacial ice. Mt. Myōboku would have to topple over before he forgot the handwriting of his student, whose work he had seen scattered across her living room in varying sizes and her notebooks when she conferred to him. Fury was boiled beneath his skin as he rolled back the paper into its cylindrical state, the movements controlled enough to not tear the paper into pieces.

How could they send a child, his student into the backlines of Iwa? And then expect him to take the information she was providing at face value and sit still while she risked her life in enemy territory?

And the fact that his teacher had written about it –

*Your student is an informant in the Iwagakure no Sato.*

Only confirmed it and made it far worse.

"Thank you for your hard work, Gamaden," he said politely, tone strained. "Send Jiraiya-sensei my well regards. You can go now." The toad nodded warily at the change of attitude before he dismissed himself back to his home.

"Team Minato, we're moving out," he fumed. His students looked at him apprehensively and obeyed, not wanting to become the target of his ire.

It made sense why his youngest student refused to tell him her specialisation or what mission she was assigned to. She knew he would disagree and he would try to pull her out, even if it meant accepting another apprentice. She knew and yet she stayed silent, risking her life in a place where he could not reach.

_Shodai_, he swore, raking his fingers through his blonde hair. There was much more that Kara had yet to tell him and he had an inkling that her specialisation entailed more than this in the years to come. He didn't like the situation now and he felt sure that he wouldn't in the future. She wouldn't hide it from him if it wasn't something he was terribly against; and in times where words failed to speak, silence spoke the loudest.

Alas, the message was quite clear: Namikaze Minato, Elite Jōnin or not, was not allowed to interfere with the darker matters of Konoha's functioning. He could not stop what had already transpired even if he did step into power. The missive was telling him to shut up and accept that child soldiers were a norm and if they were useful, they would be used.

His hands twitched for a weapon. The _Kiiroi Senko_ was going to end this quick.

…

"Minato-sensei is awfully agitated isn't he?" Obito commented as he wiped down his weapons with a random piece of cloth.

"Hn," Kakashi grunted his agreement, leaning back against the tree trunk with closed eyes.

*It was a hail of weapons. From the bright skies it rained metal, casting number-less shadows on the ground as they descended, causing sharp cries and hisses as it cut through flesh and ground.*

*Team Minato didn't even have a chance to move before their teacher did, his full might unleashed on the unsuspecting poor enemies that had crossed their path. Fast like lightning the Namikaze flashed, cutting throats at coordinates, quicker than the thunder of collapsing corpses, softer than the sound of silent screams.*
"I think it might have been the message he received," Rin opined quietly, tugging on the ends of her pink skirt. His wrath had been leaking in short bursts after that incident and it was so unlike their teacher who prided himself in his control.

Their opponents had been the unlucky outlet to his growing rage, where their blood and life was the price of quelling.

"Will you tell me what Iwa's plans are or do I have to cut it out of you?" He asked politely with his kunai spinning around his fingers, the sound of metal sharp as it sliced the air resistance. His smile was poisonous like it dripped belladonna, his expression cold like the killing intent he emitted, and it brought down the overall temperature to that of frost.

Their enemy trembled, "Over my dead body," he stuttered.

The Kiiroi Senko smiled even wider, stilling his blade, his cerulean eyes storm clouds in its darkness. "That can be arranged."

"It makes you wonder what it said," Obito shivered. "To incur such anger from Minato-sensei."

Kakashi scrunched his eyebrows in contemplation. "There aren't many things that can anger Minato-sensei," he admitted, thankful for his teacher's lack of triggers, "But he's probably angrier at himself more than anything else. He tends to do that a lot."

"It couldn't be about Kara, right?" Rin paled.

Confusion flitted across his visage. "Why would it be about Kara?" questioned the Hatake.

"The only person that could worry him like that—"

"I see that you are ready to go," Minato interrupted Rin's words, smile still present on his face. His sleeves were drenched with more blood than usual.

The blonde man grabbed their enemy by the scruff of his shirt and started to drag him away, ignoring the shouts for mercy or death.

"Can you do me a favour and collect my weapons?" he asked cheerfully over the loud noises of their enemy. "I'll be back after having a conversation with our lively guest."

His students nodded with shaky knees, and all three of them exhaled the breaths that they didn't know they were holding until he was out of sight. They had never been more grateful that Namikaze Minato was on their side.

"Hai, Minato-sensei," they confirmed in a monotone, standing up in attention.

"Then let's take off. We have another group of enemies to intercept."

…

Gamaden arrived back at Mt. Myōboku in a weird state of limbo like there was a piece of earth that was missing from the mountain. The predominantly red toad gazed at the scenery – at the lush greenery that was alive with nature's breeze, the rush of water that was cold and pure, and the humidity that soaked his leathery skin.

There was something awry, it thought decidedly, the scroll that was previously on its tongue had left an odd taste in its mouth. It was familiar and yet it was not; the chakra remnants reaching it on a
deeper level like a hymn of a call lost, or the mystical connection of chakra severed; placing a glass panel of distance that it could not overcome. A small part of it ached for what was not yet regained as if loyalty had a missing piece, or a contract missing its rightful name – incomplete and uncomfortable and no longer in accordance with nature’s plans.

"Gamatama," greeted Gamaden, making the said toad raise its head.

"Gamaden," it greeted back. "What brings you here?"

"A question," replied Gamaden. "Did we accept a new summoner recently?"

The name-registering toad paused. "No, we have not," it recalled. "But I see that I am not the only one who has felt the disturbance," it murmured, closing the scroll it was reading. It hopped towards a certain section of the shelf, brushing its phalanges against the spines.

It tapped on the last book beside Namikaze Minato. "A new book has appeared," it announced. "It bears no name nor details about this new summoner and much of it is shrouded in mystery like it is not the time to be read. But I do say this with certainty: whoever the human might be, it belongs to us as much as we belong to them. The human will return to us," it allowed its words to drift, "It is an inevitability."

"Does the Ōgama Sennin know of this?"

"Nothing escapes the Ōgama Sennin," Gamatama answered. "Ojiji-sama probably knows about this before I did. He is a prophet after all, and he has never been wrong."

Gamaden frowned. "But to have three living summoners is seldom heard of." The Toads have allowed for their contracts to be passed on, usually from teacher to protégé, and perhaps it was a tragedy that they never had more than two generations alive.

"Being unheard of doesn't mean it is not possible. My gut tells me that this new summoner is special – that the human is not of ordinary existence. If not, why would we want to bequeath upon the human our contract when it is usually the human that comes seeking? Why would there be a new book unless it was preordained?"

Gamaden croaked in agreement, yellow eyes and rectangular pupils gleaming. "I will look forward to meeting this new summoner."

She might be the key that the Ōgama Sennin spoke of.

Chapter End Notes

Beta'd by wecantgiggleitsacrimescene
Thank you so much for 4000 reads and 200 kudos ;)

Conversations with multiple layers to it was surprisingly fun to write.

So, I'm intending to make a chapter as a huge thank you to all of you and I dub it the 'Why Omake' Chapter (literally, I shit you not, that's what it's called)

And this is how it goes: you say Why -insert something here-Eg. Why waking Shinobi up is an occupational hazard.
Give me some suggestions and I'll pick a few of my favourites to write out a prompt :D
Omake's Why

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Omake: Why

/ wʌɪ / · adverb
(with reference to a reason) on account of which; for which.

Why waking a Shinobi up is a hazard

If there something that Shinobi should be known for beyond their creative ability for coming up with scenarios for interesting deaths, it should be paranoia.

Paranoia.

Ninjas had too much of it for it to be normal. They thought about it every moment of their life (yes, even in their sleep), when they walked down the streets, when they took a drink or even when they took a shit. It was wondering if the person beside them with the weird hat had an ulterior motive, if that pin in her hair was sharp enough to stab or if the food samples being offered to them actually had something nefarious in them because they thought that kindness was not something that everyone was innately born with. It was a whole freight train of doubts that clouded them – they learn to censor some out with experience or become assured that they can handle it – and it was an inescapable part of life when they dance so close with death.

To know how to kill was also to know how they could be killed.

And when the story begins with a time-traveller who has seen too much in the final war, been up against the master of camouflage because he was literally one with the earth, she might just be the most paranoid Shinobi to exist. (Sans the Kage who have their living quarters so rigged that they could blow their enemies to kingdom come and have the ANBU trailing them even in their sleep. Let's also not forget that they have an entire arsenal of techniques ready at hand – the Sandaime Hokage probably stabbed someone with his pipe once.)

"Hey Kara, we need to move out—"

Obito could barely let out a groan when his outstretched hand almost crunched under her ferine grip and all forty-four kilograms (ninety-seven pounds) of him was flipped, her weight suddenly pressed against his chest, red eyes hazy and blazing, other hand augmented by sharp winds as it struck for his jugular –

"Kami," she choked out, crimson eyes suddenly clearing, her hand stopping short of flesh.

Her attack dissipated as she pushed herself off him and landed ungracefully on her butt, hand clutching on her shaking wrist. "Kami, I'm so sorry Obito." Her hair fell over her face. "I'm so sorry."

The boy sat up, gingerly pressing his fingers against the small wound. Something warm and wet dripped down. "It's okay," he said in a daze, "I probably shouldn't have woken you up like that either."
Her chest heaved as she shook her head rapidly. "No, it's my fault," said Kara hoarsely. "I should have known better."

*It was so easy. It was too easy.*

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**Why boredom pranks**

It was a humid afternoon.

The skies were bright, the birds were chirping to the screech of the cicadas and the grass was unnaturally cool to their skin. Sprawled on the ground and under the heat of the sun, their limbs were outstretched, some overlapping one another.

They laid there in silence and allowed for nature to be their background noise, too tired to even slap the annoying fly that was hovering overhead. Their clothes – covered in what suspiciously looked like an explosion of ink – was in a sorry state. An overkill of colours was splattered on them, their limbs and hair not spared, becoming a sickening mixture of shades that should never ever be together in the first place.

Kara was the first to break the silence, and also coincidentally the first to regain her breath. "Minato-sensei is a monster," she croaked. Her limbs attested to that fact, aching from the marathon to take her away from the speed demon that they called their teacher.

"He's out to get us," Obito agreed, his words punctuated by shallow pants.

"And whose fault is that?" hissed Kakashi, teeth bared beneath his mask. "Who was the idiot that decided to spike not one, but *two* of his ramen bowls with excess chili powder and soy sauce respectively?"

The culprit laughed breathily, utterly unapologetic about the events that came to pass. "I wouldn't call it idiocy," said Kara solemnly, "I call it *skill*." She tilted her head to face the silver-haired boy, a foxy grin curling her lips. "You're just jealous that you can't pull it off like I can."

Times may change from past to present but no one could steal her reputation as the Prankster Queen. That throne was eternally hers.

The Hatake growled, fingers grasping for stray leaves before he flung them in her direction, utterly peeved. The leaves floated uselessly back down while soft laughter rang out, finding amusement in his attempt to hurt her in his tiredness.

"I still don't know how she managed to do it," muttered Rin, flummoxed.

Their teacher certainly wasn't an idiot (unless they were in the presence of a certain heart-stopping redhead, his words, not hers) and even the Nohara, while tortured, could appreciate the sheer skill that Kara showcased.

To cover up the strong odour and obvious colours of condiments was not an easy feat. As a medic-nin who studied poisons extensively – laced some of her senbon with it even – the ability to mask up said smells to an extent where it could escape a Jōnin's detection was a skill near its highest calling. Kara's skill did merit some praise – she was pretty smooth in the execution of her prank given a two second timeframe of distraction.

That didn't mean Rin was happy to come under the crossfire of the punishment though.
She was agreeable to the idea of teamwork for improved chances of success. For shared punishment, however, she was completely amendable to. Even though she laughed at their red-faced teacher who regretted his decision to slurp down his ramen with gusto, she had absolutely no part in the ploy. Thus, she should not have to come under fire of a thousand kunai tagged with paint bombs, rigged to explode on impact.

Those paint bombs were like mini-explosions of Fūinjutsu tags with metal scraps; and she had enough experience pulling out said scraps from both her teammates and herself to know the pain that it brought. If she could avoid it, no matter how small-scale, she would, thank you very much.

Kara's red eyes glinted with mirth. "Trade secret," she hushed. "If I told you then I would have one less trick."

Well then.

The entire team made a mental note to check every dish and every corner they turned twice.

Why medics are dangerous

"Rin-chan," Kara voiced in puzzlement as she studied her two pale-faced teammates who were writhing on the ground. "Are they okay?"

Was it normal for them to be sweating so much? Or the fact that they were moaning about demons and nature that was out to get them? Were they even sane anymore?

"Oh, them?" Rin said demurely as she looked up from her entire row of senbon. "They volunteered to be my guinea pigs for my latest poison and it helps them build up their immunity. Don't worry about them – it's the predicted side effects."

"What was in your poison?" asked Kara cautiously as she prodded Kakashi with a stick. She giggled when he swiped at her like some feral animal.

"Some paralytics and hallucinogen, nothing too severe. Someone snagged a new scorpion from Suna's deserts and the department thought we should experiment on the variations."

"It has never been classified?"

"Nope," she popped the 'p'.

Kara frowned as she poked Obito's cheek. "… Rin-chan, they're changing colour." Why was the senbon still sticking out from various positions of their body? Some sort of new acupuncture therapy?

"Hm?" she sighed at her latest creation.

"Rin-chan, they're changing colour," Kara repeated, borderline hysterical as she checking Obito's eyes. Was dilated pupils a sign of extreme poison? For Kami's sake, this was the reason why she wasn't a bloody medic. She was basically immune to poison anyway, so she didn't really have to care – but that didn't mean her two teammates who didn't have the convenient help of a tail beast didn't have to.

"Oh…" Rin turned around, blinking twice. "Crap," she said belatedly, fishing out a purple vial. "Well the poison was more volatile than I thought," she finished lamely, coaxing the antidote into their system and flushing out the harmful agents.
"Rin-chan, is it even ethical to test poisons on your teammates?" asked her companion after their two teammates were out of the danger zone.

The silence was pretty answering, honestly.

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**Why geniuses should not be left to their own devices**

(Or alternatively: The four times Kushina was frustrated at the people she loved.)

1.

"Seriously?" she raised an eyebrow, taking in the sorry state that her boyfriend was in.

"Seriously," Jiraiya deadpanned back in exasperation, nudging his student who muttered something incoherent before his head lolled over.

Kushina sighed, brushing parts of her hair back as she allowed the two men in. She watched as the older man tossed his protégé onto the couch unceremoniously – *Serves him right* – before he rested on the couch, his head tilted to the ceiling as if he was contemplating every life decision he had made. Which, to be fair, was a lot if Kushina had to be honest.

"How did Mimi-chan end up having parts of his clothes ripped, green like he had puked his guts out and eyes red like he was crying?" She focused on his chakra even more. "And also with chakra exhaustion to top it off?"

"By being an idiot," Jiraiya snorted. "I just want to test out my new jutsu, he says," he did a terrific mimic of Minato, star-struck eyes and all. "Faint and puke from the vertigo he does. If that wasn't enough, he decides to keep trying again until he's dry-heaving *and* chakra exhausted."

"What an idiot," the kunoichi deadpanned, kicking the unconscious man's leg.

"Right?" He gestured, "This is what you're going to be dealing with if you marry him, Kushina-chan. I wish you all the best in dealing with this neurotic genius and who is somehow still a stupid idiot of a man."

Her eyes were only filled with tender affection. "I know, 'ttebane," she murmured softly, twiddling her red hair absent-mindedly. "Say, do you want to help me fill the bathtub with cold water and ice?"

Jiraiya laughed and gave her a wink. "I knew I liked you for a reason."

2.

"When someone calls you to the hospital after a long mission, 'ttebane…" Kushina rubbed her temples to soothe the incoming headache, "You expect someone to either be dead or dying, 'ttebane. Not because he was an idiot that wondered if he could see his new jutsu forming better in the dark so that he could master it, 'ttebane!" She yelled, fingers clenched and ready to sock the man into next year.

Minato laughed sheepishly, waving his good hand in surrender. "Sorry? I was genuinely curious."

You nearly *blew* your arm off, 'ttebane," she hissed, settling for a flick on his forehead. "Rasengan or not," she said lowly, pulling his face closer to her by the collar of his flak vest, "You try to re-enact your technique one more time without safety measures, I will blow you into the Great Village with a Bijuudama and not even the Shodai can save you, 'ttebane."
"That doesn't sound appealing," he winced at her fiery temper.

"What gave that away?" She sarcastically retorted. "That you heard the threat several times or that it is going to seriously hurt when you feel the power of the Bijuudama?"

"Both?" he replied meekly.

"Then learn your lesson, 'ttebane," she hissed. "One more time and I swear I will sic Tsunade-nee on your ass as well."

His face paled. The woman could crush mountains with a pinkie and maybe a continent with a fist. At this point, the Bijuudama sounded a whole lot better because the Slug Princess could heal him right up and punch him again.

He would never tell his significant other that though.

3.

"Jiraiya-sensei, what was that saying about a student learning traits from their teacher?"

The said man looked up from his manuscript in confusion. "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree?"
He offered, unsure.

She waved the suggestion away. "No, that's usually used for parent and child."

"Monkey see, monkey do?"

"We shouldn't insult primates," said Kushina sagely. "They clearly have higher intelligence in terms of common sense."

The Sennin shrugged. "Then I am fresh out of ideas. Why do you need a saying anyway?"

"So I can throw words at their faces," she pointed at the pair that were lounging on the couch, quiet as mice as they went through the various scrolls that they scattered on the ground. The younger of the two was sporting a wrist cast while his teacher looked definitively more roughed up than usual.

Is that a black eye? His eyes narrowed. "What did they do again?"

"Well," she began, the sound of kitchen knife chopping punctuating her words. "I think Kakashi-kun's arm speaks for itself. "I think Kakashi-kun's arm speaks for itself."

Realization dawned on Jiraiya as his mouth formed an 'o'. "So that's why I thought I smelled something burning."

"That's one way to describe it, 'ttebane," the jinchūriki laughed caustically. "If I was ever curious about how an arm would look like after being put through an electrical fire, his arm would be it."

"Let me guess – new technique with elemental nature manipulation tossed in?" Jiraiya glanced at the silver-haired boy strictly. "I know you want to outdo your teacher's genius, Kakashi-kun, but burning your arm off isn't the way to go."

Kakashi muttered an "okay" in return as he cradled his injured arm.

"Minato, this is still your damn fault, 'ttebane."

"What?"
"That—" Kushina turned around abruptly, hair slapping Minato's face—"is your fault," she snarled out, her fist snapping in his face and sending him a few steps back.

The man clutched onto his nose, jaw dropping. "What did I do?"

"You passed on your stupidity!" She trilled, pointing at her daughter's condition from the seal. "You and your stupid tendency was inherited by her and now she's blowing up her own arm to make a damn jutsu and it's All Your Fault!"

"Aren't you supposed to be happy?" He tried to convince incredulously. "Our daughter just made a new technique. She inherited our genius and she's doing us proud."

"That's not the point, 'ttebane! Our baby is hurt because of you!"

He gaped at her logic but years had taught him better than to refute. They may be dead but he still respected (feared) his wife a lot. He could fight an army and get out of the exchange alive but attempting to go against the freight train that was Uzumaki Kushina just wasn't worth it. For one, he would rather die than harm a crimson strand on her head. He loved the lady more than his own life.

The scales were incredibly tilted and he couldn't find anything in him to care.

So, he grovelled. He apologised and ran his hand up her arms, took a few hits from her and apologised some more. It took some time but she eventually cooled, more receptive to his affections and all smiles.

"At least she didn't inherit your crappy sense for naming techniques. Fūton: Rasenshuriken is pretty decent."

Now, that he had to take offence.

"They're not that bad!"

"Says the person that nearly named his Rasengan the Spiralling Coolness of Chakra."

---

**Why demons should never have a team**

Namikaze Minato was a demon.

It was not an opinion that just extended to Iwa or Kumo; frankly, his own students entertained the thoughts of defecting from Konoha every so often. Those times being the mornings where they had trainings with him of course, especially when he channelled his creativity and irritations into torture methods.

For someone who would slaughter dozens of enemies if they harmed a hair on their 'pretty little heads' (the cooing felt like sarcasm), he was pretty liberal when it came to him hurting them. He was convinced that if they stopped twitching at the pain now, they would probably survive better out in the battlefield. It wasn't wrong – *technically* – but that didn't mean it wasn't sadistic.

Because it definitely was.

Team Minato often had weighted runs with resistance or gravity seals, depending on how cruel he was feeling and had Ninjutsu and kunai shot at them like a battalion did on the other side of the field.
It left them worse for wear; singed, cut up and sore, and they couldn't even escape the man because he was so fast.

And he liked marking them with his Hiraishin whenever he could.

It meant rude awakenings (although never Kara, he learnt that a fellow Fūinjutsu practitioner's territory should not be treaded lightly and he was more worried about her not sleeping) with his weapon of choice: cold water, a huge toad, Kushina, paint or literally throwing them into a wall. The last one was only reserved for really heavy sleepers, and from the said person's account, it was not a pleasant experience to be flung through a brick wall.

He would then cheerfully remind them that they would be dead if he was the enemy since they would have been killed in their sleep. Trying to sass back at him and telling him that they would have been fried and thrown into the Naka River first before they killed them hadn't been her brightest idea, since he proved her wrong and surrounded her with mounds of soil.

From the composition of said soil, he might have actually gotten it from Iwa itself because Konoha didn't have many mountainous areas nearby. In Kara's eyes, the plot against her was unfair, since the other Great Villages didn't possess any skilled Fūinjutsu masters after the stunt they pulled with Uzushiogakure and she technically had a point. The chances of someone actually destroying her seal array to get into her marked territory was pretty low – unless they were burn-proof.

And if he wanted to follow up by criticising her seals (she was still learning, damn it), she wouldn't be so nice about the fact that she had deciphered his Hiraishin down to the last layer and was capable of replicating it. It would certainly be a blow to all the security measures he put in place and it would be a reaction she would recall while drinking a hot drink by the campfire.

But back to the topic at hand. Namikaze Minato wasn't your day to day slave driver – nooooo, he took it to the extremes. He pushed them to their greatest limits and made sure they barely had any energy left by mid-afternoon by when any mission he picked was mostly destined to be strenuous.

Taking care of babies: learning self-control to not hit an annoying client and keeping up with those demon spawns in their terrible twos could suck the life out of them. Weeding, painting or fixing structures tended to be physically exhausting due to its long hours.

It made sense why her previous sensei had taken the sick pleasure of watching them catch the hell cat named Tora; he had learnt that the misery of his students was classic entertainment, and if they couldn't screw the system, they may as well screw with their students. She was starting to blame her biological father the different training methods her Genin sensei later employed, although she would appreciated if he had also absorbed Minato's work ethics, punctuality and devotion to teaching.

Despite all her petty grievances about Minato putting her through the grinder, she knew she was improving. Like the rest of her team, she might occasionally complain and roll around the training ground in fits (stop laughing, sensei!), she treasured her teacher a lot. None of them could hate the man who was giving his all to ensure they would survive in the battlefield by slapping them into shape and getting rid of their flaws. She was grateful for his nit picking and it had made it easier to adapt to this smaller body of hers but she wished he would stop having that cheeky, small and smug smile he wore when he realised that she understood.

Fine, she would admit that she loved Namikaze Minato for it.

For everything he had done for her (she felt undeserving) and for being everything he was, even if it was out of expectations.
He was still a bloody demon with a speed addiction though.

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**Why you should never become Hokage**

Paperwork.

The bane of all Kage.

If there was one thing that could bond them despite their numerous scars and historical baggage during one of the informal Kage summits, it would be paperwork. It was the one thing that could make the strongest Nin groan and flee for the hills because it was lamentable; being so tedious that they wouldn't wish it upon one another. (And a warning would have been *fucking appreciated* – though if there was, there would be no Kage since they were of a unanimous decision that would rather face an army rather than deal the stacks and stacks of paperwork. Killing was easy. Clearing reports, reading about their economy and negotiating with civilian merchants who have gold pieces stuck so far up their ass their ancestors could feel it, however, was not.)

Perhaps that would explain why Sarutobi Hiruzen actually considered the petition by the Uchiha to erect a temple to defame the Senju as demons. He may revere both of his teacher figures – loved them as fathers, even – but he was definitely less than pleased that they had died early on him and left him with all this timber mess to deal with – that *they generated* due to their insistence on having records – and saying that every military was defined by the number of trees they cut down due to paperwork. (There was a lot of irony in this statement, because in actual fact, military might in secret villages was defined by quirky high-ranking ninjas in their bingo books, and how many nightmares they can induce… which was the actual main cause of said paperwork.)

In hindsight, it was probably Tobirama-sensei's master plan to ditch all the paperwork on village security on the Uchiha instead of the Senju, although the handing over of the Military Police also stemmed from the century old rivalry that was going on and the inspection of the Sharingan. But it was still one of the Niidaime's most brilliant plans; no one was more capable than the Uchiha in staring down at thieves and murderers and make them feel stupid like a child reprimanded, and they did it with elegance and *class*. It was almost an art form really – to see three tomoes swirling in their eyes as they bluntly tore down the criminal's façade with a glare.

Despite all the poise and maturity that Sarutobi Hiruzen was supposed to have, he threw his papers into air. He glared at his ANBU Commander who was shaking silently with laughter as he ranted at them about the stupidity of paperwork – but the best revenge would be when he gave him the stack of paper once it was approved.

If he was suffering, someone was going to bloody suffer with him, whether it was the desk Shinobi, his Jōnin or his ANBU. (Bless the Desk Shinobi souls though.)

He was the Kage of *Fire*, damn it, so why wasn't he allowed to burn the paperwork up whenever and however he wanted? Couldn't he make up the excuse that he was naturally talented at making the papers implode or explode in a myriad of ways and get away with it? He didn't mind being dubbed a pyromaniac – in fact, it made sense why Uchiha might have that title to themselves; with annoying flammables like pulp, filled with stupid complaints and insufferable Shinobi antics, it was cathartic to burn paper up; a suitable substitute to the people who wrote or caused said reports.

Maybe a coalition with them against the evil that was paperwork was probably due.

He cursed at his teachers again.
He hoped they were having a terrible time in the Great Village above and he hoped they would never find peace.

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**Why flirting with Kara is a one way ticket to the Hospital**

*Inspired by Demonwing2344*

"You are truly a YOUTHFUL flower that blooms in Konoha! Your hair is like black pine—"

*How is that a compliment,* Kara grated with the wooden chopsticks creaking in her hands, wanting to slam it into the eyes of her teammates—

Too bad she only had one pair on hand right now.

Although it was a good thing she needed one pair less then, since Obito was purple from asphyxiation. Now how would she get it up Kakashi's nose…? The mask was proving to be an obstacle.

"—your eyes are the beautiful colour of Rafflesia and you look like you have been blessed by the sun! Wondrous flower of Konoha, will you do me the greatest honour by dating me?"

Never mind, any orifice would do. That dog-licking-ruffian-teme-piece-of-shit threw Maito Gai on her. She had some platonic love for Gai as a friend and a teacher, yes, but love interest? No goddamn way.

Unable to take the laughing and the enthusiastic rant, she torqued her body and snapped at Gai, sending him flying through a few fences with the combined might of her chuckling beast. In all honesty, he should have been the last target of her rage, considering how genuine he was while confessing his sudden feelings for her.

*Shut up,* she snarled at Kurama who was rolling around their mindscape.

Apparently it hadn't just been in her head since the ramen stand and her team fell silent.

"Sorry," she apologised to Gai who let out a groan.

"…I think Gai-kun might need to go to the hospital," Minato finally said.

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**Why you should never drink with an Uzumaki**

*Inspired by wecantgiggleitsacrimescene*

*Past Timeline*

"I always knew the Uchiha were lightweights, 'ttebane," Naruto crowed, giggling into the crook of Kakashi's neck.

Unperturbed by her proximity, Kakashi glanced at the black-haired Shinobi that was collapsed on the opposite bench with a grey eye. The teacher supposed he should feel pity for his student since he would be waking up with a horrible hangover and he probably should have warned him about who he should never drink with, but no good Shinobi would ever give up the opportunity to watch someone make a fool of themselves (it was good blackmail material) and he thrived on the misery of others. Who knew the stoic Uchiha Sasuke was a clingy drunk or that he was over-possessive over
his medic? Okay, maybe the latter was pretty blatant even when the Uchiha was sober but it was something else to see him pout for the attention of Sakura and punch the waiter through the wall because he was getting too close to comfort.

Ah, jealousy can be so cute sometimes.

It was funny how Team Seven turned out after half a decade since their beginnings.

"Maa, one Uchiha is hardly a good sample size," Kakashi thought about it critically, still nursing his sixth cup of sake as he adjusted his posture to better support the kunoichi's head.

Naruto giggled, blue eyes dilated and bright. "Naw, it's for most Dōjutsu users. Neji and Hinata can't hold their drinks either. Think it's something about having more blood vessels and chakra pathways leading to their brain or something," she scrunched her nose adorably. "Sakura-chan mentioned it but I wasn't really listening? Dattebane. Either way, lightweights, all of them! The Uzumaki prevails!"

Kakashi raised an eyebrow at the revelation. "Sakura held out for the most part though."

"Don't care, sensei. I'm the one who's awake. Dunno why they thought they could go up 'gainst an Uzumaki. I mean, even Ero-sennin lost and Bunta likes me because I can hold my liquor and I'm not the one paying for the drinks since I won – wait, I might actually have to since they can't. Kakashi-sensei, do you know where they kept their wallets?"

"Sasuke keeps it in the folds of his left sleeve and Sakura in the waistband of her spandex. What about Jiraiya-sama losing to you?"

Naruto moved her head away to look at her teacher properly, albeit incredulously. "Wow, his hair really is silver. And looks kind of soft. Will he bite my hand off if I touch it? "How do you know about Sakura-chan's habit? That's kind of creepy and paedophilic, sensei. And he lost to me when he decided to introduce me to alcohol at sixteen." She informed him amicably. "I drank him under."

The Elite Jōnin stared back at her blankly. "I didn't think that it was possible to outdrink Jiraiya-sama, but I suppose you learn something new every day. Also, it's not considered paedophilia when you bypass a certain age, Naruto."

The jinchūriki considered his words seriously, or as seriously as she could while she was intoxicated. "You're right, Shinobi probably don't give a shit about age gaps as much as civilians," she decided, taking another swig of her drink. "Can you rob teme for me, sensei?"

"Are you paying me to do it? I'm known to be quite expensive."

She leaned back on his arm again. "Don't kid yourself, Kaka-sensei," she mumbled.

"About the price or the robbing?"

Naruto chortled at that. "The robbing. Out of the two of us, we both know that we aren't going to pay the drinks and we're not going to stick our hands down Sakura's pants. Robbing Sasuke is the better alternative. He's a rich kid anyway."

Well, there were also drunks that were brutally honest, and Uzumaki Naruto fit herself snugly into the category. He sighed, digging out his sole male student's wallet from his sleeve. He didn't even want to entertain the thought of being anywhere near his pink-haired student's nether regions. He would leave it to Sasuke. "Are you going to continue drinking?"

"Doesn't matter if I do or don't. Kurama would never allow me to get drunk – he breaks it down too
fast. Says it makes me vulnerable… he doesn't want that, so the buzz wears off pretty quickly. Shame," she crunched her nose, "I wanted to know what it feel like to 'let loose' or something like that people keep spoutin' like baa-chan and her lectures bout health."

_And ladies and gentlemen, this is why drinking with a Konoha Uzumaki is unadvisable._

"…That's cheating."

"And you don't?" She shot back. "I've seen you pour your drinks down your sleeve."

"It's understanding my own limits."

"Sounds like a euphemism for lightweight," teased Naruto, vibrating with laughter at his side.

He smacked the upside of her head before throwing an arm around the lady. "It's rude to make fun of your teacher. I taught you better."

"Tough luck, I'm horrible at listening to instructions," she grinned, wanting to take another mouthful of alcohol.

"That's about enough," he inserted, prying the bottle away from her lips. "You've already drank more than all of us combined, and you should stop even if you're not susceptible to the after effects."

"But I want to drink, it makes everything feel lighter and it makes me think funny, 'ttebane."

"At the point in which you start thinking like that, you should probably stop."

Full lips pulled into a pout. "But don't you drink sometimes to think less? Ero-sennin did it all the time – not so much in front me until I was legal, but y'know, I can smell it on him on some mornings." She sagged slightly, lost in remembrance. "He probably had a lot of things to deal with, 'ttebane. Never really knew 'em but he tried to numb the pain when it got real bad like how you read _Icha Icha_ all the damn time. Kind of understand why he did it now… Wished I did earlier. Could've helped, who knows?"

Kakashi sighed. Kushina-nee would probably be a little less than pleased at any inclination of vices that her daughter might have picked up despite the Toad Sage's best efforts, but he had to admit that there were worse coping mechanisms. Frankly, he was grateful for Jiraiya – Kami knew he was a poorer influence with his own tendencies and a dozen other issues that were exacerbated by his time in the shadows – drinking felt mild compared to all the scenarios he had witnessed.

Drinking was _normal_. Most Shinobi did it to wind down and dull their senses for a while, and that was the reason why it necessitated specialized bars that were stocked with beverages with higher alcohol content to have any effect and reinforced furniture because they could get _rowdy_. It was also the reason why these bars were the top places to set up an assassination or gather information but he digressed.

It might be one of the many warning signs that the psychological division looked out for a destabilizing troubled mind (he had an inkling they probably had ties with the bars, to be fully honest), but it wasn't an overwhelming cause of concern. The Hatake would just have to make sure that he stuck around to ensure that her alcohol intake was moderated, and to be there when she needed someone to vent to. Which wasn't a common occurrence, he realized with a frown, seeing how her want to not burden her precious people was largely hereditary and she preferred to hide her woes behind a bright smile.

"Naruto," sounded Kakashi patiently at the kunoichi who was pressed up against him, "Stop trying
to take the bottle. You're not getting it back. And I can see the clone that you snuck behind the bar counter. Are you going to dispel it or am I?"

The said lady pouted, "I liked you better when you didn't stop me from doing what I wanted, sensei. You would just laugh along to my whims back then, and that was a lot more attractive of you."

The copy-nin blinked owlishly with one eye. *That did not just happen.*

Noticing his distracted state, she balanced her other hand on his thigh to stretch for the bottle. Curse her teacher's tall genes because it was seriously unfair that she always had to tilt her head just to meet his eyes – and he had nice eyes, damn it, even if one of them was a Sharingan.

His breath continued to hitch at how close her cerulean ones were, blue like skies and the sea at the edge of the horizon. He could smell her distinct odour of forest, metal and sunshine burning and it was *attractive*. Colour left his face and fled elsewhere.

*I'm going to Hell after this,* a faint thought surfaced from the back of his mind. *Minato-sensei and Kushina-nee are going to kill me again.*

"Naruto, no," he admonished, strangled, tempted to throw the bottle across the room and be done with it. Damages or not, he was willing to pay it if he was spared from this… *Hell or Haven,* he wasn't quite sure. With the softness that was leaning up against his chest… it might actually be the former. *I'm going to Hell.*

His relief came in the form of the kunoichi giving up and moving away, although he made a sound of disappointment low in his throat. *What the fuck?*

Drinking with an Uzumaki was truly dangerous – they always challenged him beyond his limits and it always wanted to make his iron-clad control slip. Against his better judgement, he took a huge gulp of the alcohol, wanting anything to distract himself from the vulpine kunoichi that was clinging onto his arm and with giggles sweet like wind chimes.

Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto was poison like the alcohol that was killing his liver. But she was also his fix – made him think a little less about the past, allowed him to enjoy the present as a swirl of golds and blues – *Hatake Kakashi, what are you even saying?*

He gazed down at the beautiful woman that was muttering about another topic randomly. Then he turned to the glass bottle in his hand.

Kakashi took another gulp. He wasn't paying for this shit anyway.

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**Why Kakashi ended up with Mr. Ukki**

*Inspired by ReVealxMeMoRieS*

Kara eyed his apartment critically. Pulled her dry lips with her teeth, tugged her darkened hair, and sighed.

*Impersonal.*

Whether it was the past or the present, Hatake Kakashi had been impersonal since he was a child, refusing to form attachments since he thought it made him weak, and later in his life, fearing that he would lose whatever he tried to get close to because he had already lost so much. His apartment seemed to reflect his psyche; the monotonous walls of slate grey, dark furniture, the basics and
clinically clean. No pictures adorned the walls, his curtains and bed sheets were without designs – no sign of personalisation beyond the standard kunai in every drawer and perhaps the comb next to his sink.

"Wow, you really are a boring person, 'ttebane."

"Shut up."

"And your traps suck."

"If you are going to sneak into my apartment just to insult me, get out," he told her flatly. Frankly, Kakashi was wondering why he was even entertaining her in the first place. He should probably have knocked her out of the window when he had the chance.

"And you're horrible at accepting other people's concern," she added another negative to his list with a shake of her head. "If I didn't know better, I would have thought that this room was meant to be rented out instead of being lived in, Kakashi. That's saying something when you've lived here for a few odd years? Would it kill you to decorate?"

"I have no use for aesthetics."

"Yeah, because your personality is akin to a barren wasteland," she deadpanned. Sighing, she raked her fingers through her hair before a thought struck her. Huh, his apartment is missing a Mr. Ukki, her lips tugged.

The boy gazed at her warily, picking up the scroll as if to arm himself from her schemes.

"I'll see you later, Kakashi," Kara called out as she jumped out of the window she came from. "Upgrade your traps or I'll sic Minato-sensei on you!"

But her 'later' came in the form of a plant and a letter when he woke up early the next morning, and from the curtains that fluttered to dawn's wind, she had sneaked into his apartment without his notice.

Your house is more boring than the Shinobi handbook so I decided to gift you a plant. He's called Mr. Ukki and he's pretty durable. Just make sure at least water him occasionally. He better be alive the next time I come around to your apartment.

Kara

P.S. Fix your traps. Seriously.

His eyebrow twitched when he saw a small book called Traps for Dummies under the plant.

The parody of the henohenomoheji being drawn on it certainly didn't help his irritation either.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for nearly 100 bookmarks and over 250 kudos :D
I didn't write some of the prompts in fear they might conflict in the future or it would reveal too much.
The next chapter will be up by next week... (hopefully)
Beta'd by wecantgiggleitsacrimescene

In their hands, they held his Jōnin flak vest and a new set of dog tags and he received them with respect. Darker in shade as compared to his Chūnin vest, he cannot help but notice how big the apparel was; even the smallest size was made to accommodate broader shoulders, features that he did not have as a child of nearly thirteen autumns.

Like the previous article that marked his rank, this would be no different. It would stay in his closet permanently until he could fit it – if there came a chance. In another half of his life, he has reached a stage that most never did, but there wasn't a rush of accomplishment at all.

"Thank you," he accepted, grey eyes casted down. There was some refusal to meet the older eyes of his proctor, one where he could feel vitriol simmering or perhaps a monotony of pity.

A new rank, more expectations and more rumours. But what hasn't he heard? That he was a replica of his father but more prodigious? Another betrayer in the making, driven by ambition? A volatile soldier who saw too much for his young age? A potential hazard to his allies?

Kakashi walked out of the room, the dog tags wrapped around his fist and his flak vest clutched to his chest.

"Jōnin Hatake," Someone belatedly called out, causing him to turn back.

"Yes?"

"I forgot to mention that you have your first field orders. You are to meet with your team before the sun peaks and set out for Kusagakure effectively immediately."

"Duly noted."

_Huh._

…

Sometimes, it felt like she was cheating.

Which was odd because for a time-traveller who had been a Shinobi in both lives – cheating was basically second nature since she might have committed the biggest cheat in any history thus far. Getting a second chance in life? Who else had that other than her?

With her kept memory, it bestowed benefits that no other infiltrator would have. She knew the
cultures of the other Great Villages and its niceties; a convenient side effect from having lived amongst them during the Fourth Secret War. They had been rather segregated at the start, considering how it was suicide to expect everyone to get along like the previous emotional baggage did not exist. But sometime in the middle of the war, those lines faded; when fighting side by side had purged the distance and survival took precedence.

Shinobi were practical creatures – and in the words of Hashirama when he suggested a coalition of warring clans to form to form a village, "There were no eternal enemies, only eternal benefits".

In the heat of the battle where your common village partner was no longer next to you and you were surrounded by monstrous husks, you quickly learn that it didn't matter what standard of weapon you were holding; you took it and stabbed because blades were blades, no matter who it belonged to. It was to the extent where camps no longer went by village sections since everyone got tired of the roundabout attempts at being both diplomatic and logistic and it was easier to just set up camp in a linear fashion. Thy name was boredom when menial labour was involved, and greeting the random Iwa or Kumo-nin who was their neighbour for the next few weeks was entertainment; it was also common courtesy to ask if they were plagued by night terrors (that were all too common) so that there would be less false alarms. Whether they took the teasing lightly or threw back another jab or projectile varied from ninja to ninja but the point stood that differences didn't matter.

It was a creation of a true alliance where they could live amongst one another in acceptance rather than tolerance and Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto missed it so much.

They had even created a joint set of communication signals for the sake of information, mixing and matching the hand signs each village had. It was a security hazard once the war ended but they unanimously decided they could deal with it later since every village was putting equal stakes into the project. It had been an interesting experience to learn new meanings to hand signs and it definitely encouraged the jinchūriki to learn more than was necessary since it told her a lot about a village or a person.

Hand signs were basically its own language; everyone started from the basics. However, it would start differing the moment they found their own specialization since communicating would begin to orient themselves towards a particular direction. She could learn about where a Shinobi came from and what a Shinobi did just off their hand signs alone, even when there was an accidental mix-up of gear (they really stopped caring sometime into the war; all that mattered was the word Nin etched into their metal forehead protectors). Furthermore, each village was bound to have their own hilarious quirks. She had laughed like crazy when she learnt that the 'panic and run' hand sign for Iwa had been 'Horse' and Kumo had a specific one for Octopus like how Konoha had for snakes and foxes.

Having immersed herself in the different cultures and by extension developed an array of odd friendships, it also meant that Kara could catch the silent conversations that should have went over her head. Hand signs that were flickered across the streets about deployment were easy enough to decipher and so was working out the flight patterns of hawks. Sights and spots for the gathering of Shinobi were simple to find with both her foreknowledge; the impromptu tour she had gotten during Kurotsuchi’s abrupt ascension to Tsuchikage immediately sprang to mind.

Her eyes misted when she thought about the progressive Yondaime Tsuchikage who had defied the norms of what the Solidarity of Stone was. Everyone agreed that Iwa-nin were the most stubborn of their kind, grounded too deeply by their own ideals to change. But she had been the first out of the Kage to place aside their varying inflexibility and opened her village as a place of respite so that their Shinobi did not have to travel back long distances. She had been an advocate for the merging and closer relations of the villages despite her initial perceptions and she had won over the similarly
obstinate Kumo in that matter.

The time-traveller admitted to herself that she was taking advantage of the past Kurotsuchi's kindness and it felt so wrong. Her Rokudaime Hokage and fellow jinchūriki of a Kazekage would definitely have been less than pleased with her at this development, especially when she was once one of the symbols of their unity.

Sudden thoughts of the past and perceived disappointment made the senbi cracker in her hand taste as bland as the orders that were scripted inside the double wrapper in light grey ink, making her blanch slightly. She folded the flap down and tucked the snack into one of her pockets, absent-mindedly patting the hunter's knife that hung next to it.

It was the only weapon that she was allowed to carry around as she insisted it was for both sentimentalism's sake and a means for protection, although it wasn't even hers to begin with. The civilian-disguised-kunoichi didn't think that her caretaker would take lightly to a brace of senbon disappearing.

"Full already?" asked Minami with an eyebrow raised.

The girl looked at her feet shyly, "Mm. Probably shouldn't have asked for the snack, I was quite full from dinner. Thank you for the treat, Minami-san."

"It's kind of what I signed up for," she told her bluntly. "How has the past months been for you, kid? Liking Iwa?"

"Big," Airi commented after a few moments of silence. "Bigger than my home. And… odd."

"Odd?"

"I've never seen so many people sticking to walls like jumping spiders," she gazed at the Iwa-nin who just shot by. "And um… how no one really blinks at it."

"Spoken like a true civilian," Minami chortled. "Must have been a shock when you first stepped out into the streets. We aren't all the shadowy stories you hear about Shinobi, Airi. We are human, except we make better use of chakra."

Twiddling her fingers, she said: "Don't know about that? My classmates are pretty scared of Shinobi. Their parents tell them to stay away and to not offend any."

"Well stories do have some truths to them although it's always blown out of proportion," mused the older kunoichi carefully, squinting at something in the skies. "Do you believe them though?"

"Partly," muttered Airi. "You left blood on the floor when you came back last month but Tou-san—Tou-san used to do that too, except it's not… y'know. You took care of me although you didn't want to and I can't be scared of you because of it. You are really nice, Minami-san."

"Glad to hear that," she ruffled the younger girl's hair, earning a light flush on her cheeks. "You still remember the way home and where the keys are, right?"

"Yeah. Three streets down and turn left. And you always keep the keys under the doormat."

"Get home safe then, Airi-chan," she ruffled her hair again for good measure.

The said civilian looked at her in alarm. "Where are you going, Minami-san?"
"Duty calls. I'll see you soon."

"See you soon," she murmured softly, knowing her caretaker could hear her above the noise of the bustling crowd. Duty reminded her of something and her hand drifted back to her senbi cracker and the orders it was holding.

She had her own mission to fulfil too, and she probably had to complete it before Minami came back. With the deadline in mind, she quickly walked back to the apartment so she could crack the encrypted orders behind her privacy seals.

... 

There was no gratefulness in the fact that it wasn't a mission that tasked her to kill someone.

*Destroy the warehouse, huh,* the kunoichi bit her lip as she ran through the scenarios that could happen on this mission. She studied the map that she had painstakingly drawn while matching it up with the bare bones of information she had, pinpointing the factory she was to target.

_We can't interrupt their sales because they've already procured all they need and all that needs to be done on Iwa's part is delivering it to the stockpile nearer to the frontlines._ Kara thought, referring to the senbi wrapper again.

*Explosives?* She guessed.

'Are you sure that is safe and accomplishable, kit? It is nearly in the middle of Iwa.'

'Anything can be blown up with enough explosives, Kurama,' she said sagely. 'If it doesn't blow up, it means you're not using enough. It's more of whether the civilians nearby will be safe, *ttebane.*'

'That sounds like the making of a bomber, and you ask me why I was against your studies in Fūinjutsu, kit. Most Uzumaki end up being explosion lovers and your time-travel contraption definitely did not need you branching into that aspect.'

'Don't hate on what's useful,' she scoffed, going into the guest room to retrieve her supplies beneath the floorboards. 'But I'll try to minimise the damage where I can.' *And I need to conserve my supplies... just in case.* She added as an afterthought, realising how low she was getting.

Fūinjutsu was endlessly useful for all situations, especially stealth, and if it hadn't been for her chakra repressors, she wasn't sure if she could even pass off as a civilian. Her caretaker would never see the symbols that she drew across her thighs, not when Iwa had the tendency to wear longer sleeves and pants to fight against the coldness of the mountains in late winter.

'Like you said kit, there is no such thing as *minimising the damage* when you are using a technique that is suited to cause the destruction.'

'True,' she didn't try to deny. 'However, I can just target the supporting beams to send the whole warehouse crashing. Even though I've never seen the warehouse, it probably follows around the same layout like the other warehouses. Konoha had its own standard for the sake of convenience and set placement of goods. I don't see why Iwa would be different.'

'Will that achieve what you need to do for the mission though?' Her fox peeked one vermillion eye open.

She scratched her head. 'Jiji wants a wholesale destruction of the warehouse's goods, yes, but stalling
should work as well…?

'Why is that a question?'

'Crashing the building probably won't do much since the warehouse is used to store weapons. It would force them to clear the rubble, mend up some bent metal, and repackage them for easy delivery before it can be sent off. It lacks impact.'

'You cannot be sure if that is their only metal storage either,' he pointed out. 'So if you want it to be a threat – although it is highly likely you will never be able to pull off the same stunt again – you need the impact to send a warning so it can work in conjunction with whatever plans you mortals have.'

'Maybe I can add a lasting burning element to the explosive seal?' She drafted out the layer in messy ink strokes.

'High temperature.'

'The original explosives already have it. I just need a means to sustain it,' the Fūinjutsu mistress gnawed on the end of brush. 'Which is kind of hard because heat naturally disperses outwards and containing it might need a barrier.'

'And doing that would inform them of what sort of threat you are and you will be hunted like a rabbit in the wild. If you are caught, you will either be brainwashed for Iwa's usage or you will be killed. Neither of them sound like pleasant options.'

'Well it's not like I haven't worked with Iwa before and I have come close to losing my life several times,' the jinchūriki said cheekily.

'The cooperation happened under a different circumstance and therefore it is an invalid example and I would prefer if the latter happens less for both my sanity and your shortening life. Why be an inferno when you can be an everlasting flame?'

Something clicked in her mind. 'You're a genius, 'ttebane,' she breathed, kissing the Kyuubi on the snout excitedly. 'What if I made the speed of the circulating chakra within the seal even faster to the extent it produces even more heat before it explodes? It will take a built in capacitor to ensure that there is sufficient chakra, but that can be subtle and it is a working product.'

'Then,' her eyes were dancing fire while her hand sped through a chain of ancient language, 'I can eviscerate the metal instead of just melting it. Imagine the embers of glowing steel, Kurama. It will be glorious, 'ttebane.'

The said beast gaped slightly at her madness. He gave up trying to convince her otherwise in the next moment, having been her partner long enough to know that nothing could derail her once she got going. 'Just make sure not to blow yourself up,' he gave a half-hearted warning.

His host who was too engrossed with her work didn't hear him.

*But what plan will work in conjunction with this?* He mused aimlessly in her workaholic silence, sifting through all the combined information they had hoarded.

If Konoha intended to destroy the supplies that Iwa was building up, it would also mean that there would be huge push incoming. With Minami's early re-deployment to the battlefields, it further
supported the theory that Iwa was going on the offensive – one where it was reckless enough to deal collateral damage either to the enemies or themselves.

And if those were the constant plans and motivations, there was only one particular mission that came to mind, and one his own host desperately tried to avoid or ignore.

**The end of the Kannabi Bridge, where no Gods listened to mortal whims.**

The Kyuubi no Kitsune supposed it was fitting that Kara handled the other end of the mission. While Team Kakashi disrupted the line of supply by blowing up the bridge and Namikaze Minato ridding of human resource, Kara was in charge of demolishing the backline supplies to strangle Iwa's options into eventual compliance and surrender.

It was an operation that covered most areas, and Kara was also keenly aware that she could not be allowed to fail. Her predecessor hadn't screwed up Konoha's chances of turning the tables and emerging victorious from the war and neither could she. She had to complete it even if it cost her life and she refused to be the reason why the conflict was prolonged.

Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto would hate herself more than she already did if it happened and he feared what the extra damage might drive her to do. She might try to prop herself up and hide behind a façade to lessen the pain, but with his tool of pathos, he saw through every single mask she tried to put up. Felt every negative surge of emotion which brought about the mutations of darker sclera, recognised the guilt she was trying to bury, such that it drove her out into foreign land so she would not give into impulse.

There would be an inevitable day where he would have pry the porcelain away from her face to make her confront her own emotions but he would stall the breaking for a while more. He watched on as her current plans slowly took shape, confident that she would succeed either way.

...  

**25 Hours before the Collapse of the Kannabi Bridge**

Contrary to popular belief, Uchiha Obito wasn't all that dense.

He wasn't stupid to the extent of no return – that was a huge stretch, hardly any academy graduate was – if his ingenuity in pranking was any hint. If it wasn't for the fact that he wasn't book-smart, he probably would have been snagged by a more support oriented team to become a trap specialist instead of being in the combat-heavy Team Minato as dead last.

He wasn't a slip-shod at the intricacies of Shinobi life either, or 'underneath the underneath' as his sensei called it; taking it upon himself to distract the Hatake whenever he felt more irritated than usual although he never knew from **what** (the boy had **issues** and even Minato-sensei had to admit to that) and he noticed when his childhood friend started to like the teme a little more than a friend even before she realised it.

It had been tragically painful when she confided in him her admiration for their teacher and teammate; unlike her, he could discriminate between 'awe' and 'infatuation' where she failed, and it was clearly more of the latter than the former. Hearing her subconscious confession about her growing affections hurt like someone had stabbed his lung with a kunai because he was aware that he couldn't compare to the prodigy who had everything going for him while he had nothing in contrast.

The Uchiha stole his Academy records enough times to know what his teachers had commented
about him, of his troublemaking tendencies and his lack of skill, almost unsuitable for the Shinobi profession in his loudness and clumsiness. One of them had even gone as far as to say that he would be the first to be killed on the battlefield and he decided to get back at the teacher with a few well-crafted pranks to prove he could be stealthy if he tried. He was being petty but hey, one shouldn't try to provoke a Shinobi.

But that was just the surface of scorching remarks.

From his own clan, he was called a disgraced late-bloomer and a half-blood. In his father's last moments with him, he had been scorned a bastard – a mistake, an accident from one night of passion. Uchiha Obito was told that he was a product that should never have been born, and he should be thankful for the clemency that the Uchiha provided for their bastards. (What worthless pride, he thought, gritting his teeth and accepting his words.) His ailing grandmother, however, had looked at him with her depthless wise eyes and called him strong, and he never wanted it to be a lie. He wanted to be worthy of the first person that thought of him better; to show her that the potential she saw was not a mere illusion.

He digressed.

It was just so endlessly frustrating to see Kakashi who had all the talent waste it away by being a complete asshole. The Hatake was a prodigy – open and shut case. He knew his intelligence, of his confidence in his own abilities and what he could handle. But it didn't justify his obsession with following the rules and it definitely didn't mean he could disregard his teammates as useless junk simply because they didn't match up.

When he had told him to not chase after Rin, he couldn't believe his ears.

Even though he had been fully aware of his nature, he had hoped that time and numerous lectures would have changed him. He was such a fool for expecting better. What an idiot he was.

Tigers didn't change their stripes. Neither did people change their natures.

Utterly peeved, he exclaimed: "Do you even realise what you are saying?"

"Yes I do. Both of us will complete the mission."

"Rin… What about Rin then? Are you just going to leave her to die, Kakashi? She was taken. She's your teammate, damn it!" Do we really mean nothing to you?

"Rin will come later. The enemies will want to know our aim so they are unlikely to kill her right away. Luckily for her, she's a medic-nin as well – as long as she complies and is of use to them, they will still treat her well, even if she is their prisoner."

Methodically, Kakashi checked over the explosives and his supplies. "More importantly, our main concern should be the enemy discovering our aim. If the information leaks, they will make immediate preparations to guard the bridge. And if that happens, the mission will become impossible to complete."

"That doesn't take Rin's safety in account," he retorted sharply, jabbing an accusatory finger in his direction. His hand was shaking with anger and the lividness swelled to higher temperatures at his indifference. "What if those Iwa-nin just now were just some stupid underlings?" He barked. "Are you willing to stain the blood of Rin on your hands? Right now, more than ever, Rin's safety should take priority!"

Grey eyes were dead to him. "As a Shinobi, sometimes sacrificing a teammate is necessary in order
to complete the mission. That is law. Do you even understand the stakes? If this mission fails, the war will be prolonged, and more sacrifices will occur."

"That's just speculation," spat Obito. "Are you really capable of ditching a comrade who has been through life and death with you? Who healed you when you were injured, guarded your back so that you could sleep – no matter rain or shine – could you really do that, Kakashi?! If it weren't for her, you and I would have been dead a long time ago! She isn't nothing, Kakashi!"

"…That was her duty."

Duty? Was that all their bonds amounted to? Was that all Rin's worth, Rin who loved this heartless guy who didn't give bother to return favour?

Fury was a fire that was screaming within his veins. It was scorching and all blinding red, his knuckles white as he threw a punch. There was a satisfying crunch to it as he sent the teme flying backwards, and he darkly hoped that he felt every bit of that pain because Rin would be going through worse.

"You heartless fuck," he breathed, meaning every single word with all the venom he was capable of. "You are hateful after all."

"I don't care if you hate me. I'm the captain and it is your duty to obey my instructions. No matter what situation we are in, or that the team is scattered, the decisions are made by one person. That's why the rule that squad members must listen to their team leader exists. Obito, you don't have the power or the capabilities that's why I'm the capta—"

"So is not hitting your superiors but I did it, didn't I?" He snarled back, stalking forward to the prick to grab onto the holster straps. "But look, I hit you. I disobeyed." He glared. "If you have the power and the capabilities like you brag, why do you refuse to save Rin?" Why can't you see what's important to us?

"Think calmly about this, Obito. The mission is more important. Everything else is secondary. If you let your emotions run how you do something and you fail the important mission, you're going to end up regretting it. That's why Shinobi are told to suppress their emotions so they cannot interfere. You should understand why there's a need to follow it."

"Rin… Rin gave you the medical pack because she was concerned about you," the said boy fumed. Don't you dare call emotions useless. "She sewed a charm on it so it could protect you!" Don't you dare discount them as if they were nothing.

"The medical pack she gave me is part of Konoha's brilliant system to increase the success rate of missions. But doesn't that prove a point that I said yesterday? If you carry unnecessary things, it becomes useless luggage."

"…Unnecessary things?"

He inclined his head as if what he mentioned was the know-all and be-all. "All Shinobi are tools to complete the mission. Emotions and opinions are unnecessary."

His hold tightened, causing the leather to creak under the weight of his rage. "Are you serious about this? Is this really how you feel about this?"

Why did he continue to cling onto that foolish hope of redemption, why did he want to think better of Kakashi when he never proved otherwise? It was so dumb and asinine that he wondered why he tried – Maybe because you know he could be.
But right now, he wasn't.

"Yes, that is how I feel about this."

Gut-wrenching disappointment. There was no point in trying to persuade the unmovable, the unchanging and the despicable. He would be wasting his breath – he wondered why it had to come down to this – and his time. Time that could have been better spent to find Rin. Resolve formed in his mind.

"That's it," he announced, letting go of the captain. "We were like oil and water from the beginning. With or without you, I'm going to save Rin!"

"And you don't understand anything!" Kakashi called out. "What do you think happens to people who break the rules?"

He paused, thinking back on history and unclenched his fists. "I believed the White Fang was a true hero. It's true in the Shinobi world that those who break the rules are trash." He turned back, resignation and determination glinting in his dark eyes. "But those who don't care for their friends are even worse than trash. If that's the case, I'd rather break the rules. And if that is not what a Shinobi is, I'll crush that ideal – I want no part of it."

The black-haired Shinobi walked away.

Yet here he stood, on a branch (sturdy enough, he was a Konoha-nin, and it was in his damn nature to be one with the trees), indecision clouding him as he surveyed at the cave. Obito didn't want to admit it but his deficiencies were glaringly loud – it had took him a significant amount of time to track the pair of Iwa-nin down (Kakashi would have been faster) and he wasn't delusional enough to presume that he could outwit two men who had been in the Shinobi business far longer than he had. He had seen their movements, was almost cut by one of them before Rin was taken –

But for Rin, he had to do this. If he didn't, no one else would and Rin would be lost. If he was a coward, he would never deserve Rin, and he would never be able to look her in the eye ever again, afterlife or not.

The Uchiha slapped his own cheeks. You can do this, he told himself with a deep breath, pulling out a kunai from his pouch. "You can do this," he mumbled again, readying his weapon in the standard grip.

"Do what?"

He stiffened.

Death came in a shade of grey, dark blue and red. It was a warrior descending, a streak of white; a saviour, cutting down the foe that stood before him. Breath left him from the abruptness of the situation, that Kakashi was here and he had never felt such terrible relief before. Holy Shodai, Kakashi is here.

Scoring a diagonal line on the enemy, crimson blossomed from beneath the flak vest and his eyes widened and itched.

"Kakashi… How… Why?"

He scoffed, holding his chakra sabre perpendicular to his face. "It's not like I can leave a cry baby Shinobi like you by yourself, can I?"
His roundabout concern was almost affectionate. Had it not been the dire situation they were in right now, Obito probably would have laughed and teased the boy about it.

"Sliver hair and that white chakra blade… Are you 'Konoha's White Fang'?"

"Do I look like my father to you?" Kakashi deadpanned, channelling their team's odd humour. "No, this is a memento from him."

"I have nothing to worry about then," he smirked sardonically as he camouflaged with the background. "You're just his brat."

No shit, the Hatake lamented while he took a cautionary sniff of the air. Of course it wouldn't be this easy. He had been hoping that the downward momentum had been enough to cut down the Iwa-nin but he didn't account enough for his reaction timing. "His scent has been completely removed," he informed his teammate with begrudging respect. "I'll only be able to track him with the movement of air current and wind."

Then, a small tap on the tree branch in the tense silence.

It could been the tittering of the bird in forest or just the breeze rolling over a pebble –

"Obito!" He called out sharply, body jerking backwards.


"My eye!"

More blood. fUCK fUCK fUCK. Obito scrambled to catch his falling teammate, lowering him carefully on stable ground. Why was he so freaking useless when it came down such times? Why couldn't he do something – anything – constructive when it counted, damn it?

Angry tears welled. "Ka-Kakashi, are you okay?"

The Hatake pressed his heel of his hand on his left eye to stem the bleeding. It was probably out of commission and he wasn't going to risk more damage or infection by opening it. Pretty sure he cut into it, he deduced as he felt his cheek.

"The enemy is skilled. He's already gotten rid of the scent of my blood from his kunai," the said boy murmured clinically, adjusting to the pain. Glancing up at tearful Uchiha, he continued: "Did you get dirt in your eye again? I'm not dead yet, you know. And Shinobi don't cry."

"Oh, shut up," muttered Obito as he lifted his googles to wipe away his tears.

That was a shitty excuse and both of them knew it. All he ever seemed to do was mouth off and complain and whatever he said barely had value to them, save a few conversations. Kara liked making silly excuses to annoy Kakashi or set the limits of how far she could go with a person but she was strong and capable, and he wanted to be like that. He wanted to be like the White Fang who could protect his own comrades and bodily drag them back to safety, and he wanted to be the dependable instead of the dependent.

His own eyes seem to react to the will of his words as they pulsed and burned slightly. Everything became sharper. Lines in the trees began more defined as was the movements of the air, colours, and the discrepancy between shadow and light gained another dimension.

Kunai withdrawn, he twisted, frightful fire torqueing his limbs as he stepped forward and thrusted.
He trusted. The familiar feeling of metal impaling flesh was first some hardness and then soft, his own lips set into a grim line as blood splattered on his cheek. Next was a choked groan and the reappearance of their enemy, trying to mumble out words in his last heartbeats.

"How..."

"Obito, you!!"

"I shouldn't have been... seen... What are those eyes...?"

_The wrath of an Uchiha. The fans to the flame._

"I will protect my comrades," he solemnly swore, hand clutching tightening on his weapon.

He turned to look at his dumb-struck captain, his grimace worsening as he took in the aggrieved wound that ran vertically down his eye again. Most of the bleeding had stopped but it was ugly to look at, the first of the boy's obvious imperfections and his loyalty. A reminder of today.

"Obito... Those eyes."

"Yeah," he upturned his lips fruitlessly, "It's the 'Sharingan'. I can see movements and chakra flow now."

He had waited thirteen springs for this, for what was his birth right and the beginning of strength. But... it wasn't as overpowering as he had expected it to be; it was minute changes in observation and physiology and it was up to a wielder to use what was his.

Obito snapped his attention back to Kakashi who let out a low groan before he cupped his eye. A reflexive attempt to reopen his injured eye had hurt him, causing another surge of pain to shoot through the wound from the unwanted friction, making him to bend his head down.

"Teme— Kakashi, are you okay?"

"Yeah..." he grunted back, searching for his first aid pack. "It seems like my left eye is completely useless. I can make do with the supplies that Rin gave me until she checks it over. An emergency treatment shouldn't take long and then we can go and save her."

"Hai."

Carefully taking the bandage that Kakashi passed over, Obito wrapped it around his head and over the cotton that was on the cleaned wound. He made a few round before fastening near his ear, giving the dressing a slight tug to ensure the tightness.

"Done," he said quietly, offering a hand to the Hatake who took it graciously. They gave their fallen opponent a last look before they headed towards the cave, mentally preparing themselves for the worst.

_Let Rin be safe. Please._

He almost wanted to scream in joy when he found her slightly scuffed up but mostly unharmed, although the sight of her in binds and unresponsive to their presence made him panic.

"... Rin's chakra flow is erratic. It's completely different from yours and mine," he tried to report calmly.

Kakashi processed the information, concluding, "She might be under a Genjutsu to get information..."
out of her more quickly."

"Hm… looks like you're not ordinary brats after all." The Iwa-nin's eyes narrowed on the spinning tomes.

The pair's feet slid into a defensive stance. "We've already taken down one of them but the last time I fought this one, he was very fast. Be careful."

Obito made a noise of agreement.

The moment Kakashi made a dash to the enemy to clash at the centre of the cave, he immediately followed to protect his six. He ducked down when the enemy swung – blade glinting, both width and length quickly calculated in his mind – jumping up as his enemy targeted his kneecaps and forward rolled. Two clangs of metal rang out as he recovered his footing and then smoothly stopped the sword from slicing his face.

Attention divided, Kakashi took the opportunity to dodge another sweep of the Iwa-nin's swipe before he swung, parrying a few strikes and ignoring the strain it placed on his arms. The Sharingan had blessed him with amazing clarity: the ease and the velocity of the spins executed by his foe – *step back, kunai up* – Kakashi blocking for him before flipping out of range of the oncoming twin blades.

Obito bent backwards and thanked his sensei in his head for the trained flexibility but was quickly derailed when his eyes picked up the same weapons closing in on Kakashi. Not missing a beat, he supported the weight of his body with one hand and knocked the Iwa-nin's arms back, creating a bigger opening for his partner to chop down with the help of a leap, cutting a clean line down.

Their coordination was perfect.

*(Minato-sensei would have been proud.)*

The chakra sabre made a full circle and barely missed him, a few inches from his face before Kakashi landed on the Iwa-nin's back and pushed him to the ground. By then, he was already gone, running towards Rin with the Hatake closely behind.

He watched as Kakashi released their medic with a tart "Kai", smiling when she called out their names.

"Kakashi! Obito!" She said, her voice achingly sweet despite the sharp note of disquietude.

"We're here to save you now, Rin," he gave her an assuring grin.

"Let's get out of here," commanded Kakashi as he untied the ropes that held her wrist and legs together.

"Both of you make a good combination but you're still immature," someone spoke weakly behind them. The said pair snapped their heads towards the source, alarm widening their eyes.

"You're where I want you now."

The enemy should be felled stood up on unsteady limbs, his hands transitioning through a series of hand seals. "Doton: Iwayado Kuzushi!"

The ominous rumbling of rocks told them that the happiness of their reunion was short-lived. Obito *really* didn't like the sound of rocks falling and colliding with the ground and it was starting to
happen *all around them*. It was chakra, he ascertained belatedly, having felt it running through the joints of the stones and deconstructing it.

They all thought the same thing but Kakashi vocalised it: "Run!"

Swiftly, they ran for exit like their lives depended on it as the rocks crumbled overhead and around them. It was disconcerting to be around so much destruction but he was single-mindedly reaching for a goal; the literal light at the end of the cave, where it was safe.

But then, life never worked out like the shows he accompanied his grandmother to watch. There was no happy ending for the Shinobi after saving the damsel in distress or a success where they come out unscathed. They were romanticised and ludicrous but no one can blame the hopeful for wishing for the same.

Because for all the rotten luck in the world, the rock had to be where Kakashi's new blind spot was. And Obito, fortunately and unfortunately, was a person of his words. He would never go back on his nindō which vehemently fought for his comrades, and there was no hesitation when he braved the rocks again to haul Kakashi by the waist in attempt to carry him out.

But he didn't have the strength for two nor the speed, and so when he saw the rocks descending, when it came to the push and shove, he made a choice.

He threw Kakashi towards Rin.

He let the stones fall.

There was a sickening crunch and a scream lost in the midst of the chaos of collapsing structure. It was excruciating pain as half his body was crushed, blood rising from his destroyed systems and spat out and coughing and more pain, more pressure until he couldn't feel his side anymore.

Obito wondered if this was how the White Fang's team felt, the one who stayed behind to buy time and distance for his comrades to get away. Maybe he was struck by the choices he had made in the dire straits of enemy territory and thoughts of who was the best option to keep the others alive, and he chose to be a martyr. Likewise he chose to let Kakashi live just like how someone else chose his father; because he knew that Kakashi was better equipped to protect Rin.

He contemplated all that while he was under the rock and clinging onto the last shreds of his life, waiting for his teammates' chakra to stir. When they did, he asked: "Rin… Kakashi… Are you all okay?" *Please let my efforts not be for naught.*

It was the first time he had seen their eyes so wide, horror framing their features so prominently even for the boy behind a mask. He decided that he hated those expressions, preferring Kakashi's nonchalance and Rin's smiles because he didn't want them to regret a decision he made.

When Rin called out his name in anguish he felt his fading heart twist. When Kakashi tried so hard to push the rock, chakra depleted and wounded, he was breaking. Why *why* do they try futility?

But he supposed he was an idiot like them since he wanted to console them. "Stop… It's alright Kakashi." *It's no use.* "I'm not going to make it. My right side is complete crushed. I can't feel it at all."

"Damn it!"

"There's… no way. Why?" He spat out more blood in reply. "Obito!" She cried out, silencing herself afterwards.
"Don't cry... Please don't cry. Damn it Kakashi, don't kneel like this in front of me. It isn't like you. Stand. Didn't you say Shinobi don't cry? Why are you crying?"

"Damn it! Damn it! If I'd gone along with you to rescue Rin from the beginning, something like this wouldn't have happened," he wept, slamming his fist on the ground. "What kind of captain and Jōnin am I?"

It was weird for him to smile at a time like this but it was so rare to see Kakashi display emotion or admit to his shortfalls. He had wanted to see Kakashi laugh and cry freely because he trusted them and he wanted to be there when it happened. It was a shame that he no longer could.

A thought struck him. "That's right... I almost forgot. I was the only one who didn't give you a present for becoming Jōnin, Kakashi. I didn't know what to get you, and I just thought of something..."

The Uchiha glanced over. "Don't worry," he smiled faintly. "It won't be some useless luggage. I'll give you... this Sharingan of mine. Regardless of what the village might think, I know you are a great Jōnin. That... is what I believe. Please... accept this, alright?"

There was some guilt left over from the previous encounter and perhaps this would make up for his weakness that cost Kakashi his eye. He would be needing both of them if he wanted to get far. "Rin, use your medical Ninjutsu... to take out my Sharingan... and transplant it into Kakashi's left eye."

Watching her wipe away her tears in compliance made him remember one of the many traits that he loved about Rin: her ability to put aside own emotions to do what was necessary, even if she hated it. He loved her; loved the girl that approached him and helped him up when he was crying, the medic who healed him after a mission, the one who empathised and cared for everyone and it influenced her vocation. She chose to heal when Shinobi killed; fixing what was broken; never abusing the lives she held in her hands and embodying the healer's soul.

He was glad that she would be the last thing he would ever see – her serious expression as she healed the damage inflicted on Kakashi first, extracting his eye before getting his.

Although if he had a wish... he wished he could lift his hand to wipe away the tears and silence her when she asked for the last time if it was what he wanted. Of course he didn't want this. He wanted to live. He still wanted to be part of Team Seven, wanted to see Kara and Minato-sensei again and maybe win her affections. It was so easy to break then and there under the gaze of her honey brown eyes and she would never know it. But he would be the strongest of the trio in his last moments; he wanted them to see him die with a smile on his face, content with his end.

(He would die a hero rather than a coward.)

Uchiha Obito would content himself by becoming Kakashi's new eye and in a twisted sense, be the one to protect him.

It was so strange that he cherished his last minutes without sight – without the eyes that he had waited for so long since it would finally mean acceptance and coming one step closer to his goal – and all he has left were sound and touch. He could hear the soft discussion his teammates had as they fixed up the explosives before they blew off the roof and nearly shattered all their eardrums from the proximity, the soft patter of Kakashi's footsteps and metal being drawn. He can feel the warmth of Rin's hand growing hotter and some wet drips on his own.

"Kakashi... Protect Rin... And Kara, kay?"
The rest was all faint but clues of a fight ongoing – a short lift off, a lithe dash of steps, metal shattering, impact and a sharp crepitate of energy. He strained his ears to hear more but there was only silence and Rin's grip trembled.

He squeezed her hand comfortingly. "Don't be scared, Rin."

Faint panting.

"Kakashi… Rin… Hurry up… and get out of this place." His voice was getting weaker. Damn it, he wanted to say more than what was necessary. He wanted to say his goodbyes but a dead man's burden was his own. "The enemy reinforcements… are probably coming."

"Obito…"

"Hurry up…" He threw off the warmth of her hand. "Just go…"

"Rin." Kakashi first intoned before he spoke again. "Rin! Hurry up and take my hand!"

There was urgency in Kakashi's voice and he could faintly sense what his partner did. The ground was trembling again and he hated it.

"Rin!" Obito snapped, straining his breath and all he had. Please go. Please live. Live the life I couldn't.

When another rock stabbed his limbs and he could vaguely perceive earth closing in, he was struck with the same thoughts again.

He really didn't want to die. He wanted to be with Rin, Kakashi, Kara and Minato-sensei again. There was so many things he had left undone, so many things he wanted to do – but he couldn't. He wanted to live. He wanted to breathe. He wanted, he wanted to see Konoha again even with half-sight, he wanted to hug his grandmother and he wanted to tell Rin he loved her.

But all those were wishes. He was glad they couldn't see his face.

Because he certainly didn't die with a smile.

He couldn't. He wouldn't. Uchiha Obito was just a boy on a battlefield who reached his end, would just be a name on the memorial with the rest, finding honour in death. But he didn't want this honour. He would rather be alive.

He felt more than just blood dripping from his dead eye.

Then… there was silence.

A fading heart.

Some scrambling and digging.

A smile in the dark.

(Found you.)

…

22 Hours before the Collapse of the Kannabi Bridge
There was once a field medic that told her this: "Don't blink when your sensei is fighting. If you do, it'll be over before you even open your eyes again."

No matter how many times she witnessed it, even with her teammate limp in her arms from exhaustion and wounds, she wondered if her eyes and mind could have the cognitive prowess to move at the same speed Minato did.

From the loud 'thunk' of the tri-prong kunai embedding the ground from a last-ditched attempt of a throw by Kakashi, the Yellow Flash appeared; golden hair blazing in the shaded darkness of the forest bringing down swift vengeance upon them. From the struggle Kakashi faced against numerous enemies – emotionally compromised and weak from an unaccustomed eye – the disparity was vast. Her sensei didn't even paused when he was randomly summoned, every stroke of his blade seeking for colours other than green or blue, puncturing organs and slashing throats, ending all the lives of the Iwa-nin.

Nohara Rin let out a sob of relief when he turned back to give her a look of assurance that said it was safe, but while it was true, nothing was the same.

She was sure Minato knew when his icy blue eyes dulled to a darker colour, taking in space where a Shinobi of black hair and uchiwa sewn on his back was supposed be. When his brilliant flames of chakra was suddenly non-existent; a fire dampened and lost.

When the same anguish may overcome him even he hid it better behind the grim line of his lips and the slant of narrowed eyes because they have all lost. He was better at compartmentalising and she needed his strength, needed him to be the glue for herself and her fragmented team where she could not.

"Sen-sensei," she could barely choke out her grief, grip tightening on Kakashi for the words she cannot verbalise through her tears.

The said man knelt down before her and brushed away the droplets that streaked her face – understanding and not blaming her where she had failed.

He picked both of his students up gently and said, "Let's get out of here."

…

15 Hours before the Collapse of the Kannabi Bridge

"How do you deal with this, sensei?" asked Rin quietly as she brushed Kakashi’s silver hair back to check on his eye wound.

"Losing your teammate?"

"Mhm."

"You don't," he said simply albeit quietly, checking the sharpness of his kunai. "You just live with it."

"But… how?" She questioned. "How do you… How do you deal with losing someone so important to you, who has always been there for you and suddenly they're… they're not?" Her voice cracked at the last word; a whisper broken and wanted to be unsaid.

She cannot fathom ever getting over this – she cannot think of a reality where he did not exist. If she tried, she could still feel the coldness of his clammy hands and still picture his bloodied smile with
perfect clarity. Pictures may yellow and memories may distort but this pain… was alive. A lone tear slipped like blood dripping from an open wound, and everything about this setting suddenly felt bleak.

No matter how bright the stars or crescent moon shone, it was dark out.

"It takes a while to realise that they're no longer caring for your back," he told her. "That you will have weak spots and sometimes you'll turn and expect for them to be there but they will never be. It hurts every time that happens but you get used to it."

"You'll get used to the sting of loss such that it dulls to barely an ant bite, and you push it to the back of your mind. It gets easier on some days where you wake up feeling okay but on others, it's not. But what can you do? You get up. If not for you, for them because they would have wanted you to do the same. You try to find people to fill the hole and deep inside, you are aware it will never be the same. You just… don't really ever 'get over it'."

"I… I don't think I want to get over Obito. It'll make it seem…" like he was insignificant and he's not. He's my best friend and I wanted him here with us.

"That's part of it as well," Minato leaned back, sliding his kunai back into his holster. "We never want to forget them because we don't want them to just be a name on the memorial. A person only dies when they are forgotten. So... we live with it."

2 Hours before the Collapse of the Kannabi Bridge

She was walking bomb.

'That is a terrible joke to be making right now.'

Kara pouted. 'It's not terrible—' she paused, checking for her weapon braces that were wrapped in explosives, explosives folded into weapons, explosives under her stolen flak vest, explosives with an incendiary component added to it and her black hair ribbon that was also an explosive. 'Okay, maybe it is a terrible joke.'

'What gave that away?' said Kurama sarcastically.

'I don't know, maybe the fact that I'm covered in explosives that have explosives over them and I almost figured out the ability to make explosives with the tip of my fingers?'

'You are well on your way to unleashing destruction second to the Bijuu then,' he told her. 'Congratulations.'

'It's not that bad, she argued weakly. 'I only added two dozens to my previous batch of explosives.'

Tucking her hair behind her ear, she plucked the clipboard from the wall holder along with the brush and started to walk down the aisle. She should feel a little remorseful for the kunoichi on duty whom she knocked out with a sleeping tag while under the guise of an innocent curious child, but she just wanted the mission completed.

'Again, quality does not equate to quantity and in this case, the size or lethality of the explosion should you be in it.' Kurama opined as he watched her swap out a brace of kunai with her version.

She checked a few boxes on the list. 'Maybe I should give a pre-emptive warning?"
'So you can show them a little kindness by allowing them to salvage the debris?' He deadpanned back in exasperation, wondering why he had to be stuck with her sometimes.

'I would like for there to be lesser casualties?' She said meekly, pushing a folded piece of explosives into the brick of the wall as she pretended she was inspecting the goods.

'How nice of you. You may as well abandon ship and call yourself a missing-nin.'

'Jiji and Minato-sensei probably wouldn't be happy with that, 'ttebane.'

The Kyuubi no Kitsune rolled his eyes. She was truly asking for his sarcasm and it was only mid-afternoon. He was hoping that her stupidity worked like the hours of the day: magically decreasing as the sun peaked, giving him some quality time with logical thinking rather than her constant errant thoughts. The amount of free time she had on the infiltration mission wasn't helping either.

'Just do your job. You are going to miss the other supporting pillars if you keep interacting with me.'

She huffed, tossing the senbon-thin rolled up explosives into the pile. 'I can multi-task, Kurama.'

'... No, you are horrible at that. I have seen you run into the door or wall multiple times when you attempted it.' The said fox smirked, 'Actually, on second thought, feel free to multi-task.'

'That's just rude, 'ttebane. Why are you wishing harm upon me?' inquired Kara, appalled.

'So the structures can do harm to you when I cannot.'

'Can't or won't?' she asked absent-mindedly, feeling if any chakra signature was getting suspicious of her as she slipped an explosive note underneath the crate.

'I cannot, I am still bounded by parts of this wretched seal. If I kill you now, I am killing myself as well.'

'Don't lie to me, Kurama;' she sang, dancing around him in their mindscape. 'You know you won't kill me because you actually like me, 'ttebane. She petted his fur comfortingly and jumped over a swipe of his claws, 'It's okay, it's mutual.'

'You're going to miss another pillar;' he grunted out.

Kara blinked in real time. She nearly ran into that one. 'Right,' and she nonchalantly brushed her hand against the wall to place and camouflage another seal. She surveyed the entire area and noticed she had come full circle, and she promptly checked off all the unchecked boxes on the list.

Pulling out the first piece of paper before lifting some papers off the clipboard, she pasted another seal for good measure and placed it back neatly with the holder.

Then, with all the poise she had, she walked away from the warehouse like she had done nothing wrong, greeting the Iwa-nin who was guarding on the way out. Had to keep up appearances after all.

An hour later, the warehouse went boom.

....

1 Hour before the collapse of the Kannabi Bridge
"Art," a bystander shivered as he witnessed the ensuing fire and smoke, "is an explosion."

(This line was added for the fun of it. Do not take it seriously.)

Chapter End Notes

As promised, here's the next chapter :D
Then, a rant from yours truly:

I hate writing Canon scenes – and I wrote this damn note before I even started writing it. Honestly, I had wanted to skip all together, but I wasn't allowed to do it, so my next best choice is to psycho-analyse the shit out of it apparently.

And also they're incredibly flawed.
A. Obito should never be this incompetent and he shouldn't have frozen up at this point in time because he's been ninja for three years and should have had some field experience. Plus, Minato doesn't seem like the character who would allow for such a thing either, considering the fact that he is a planner as seen from the Hakke no Fuin.
B. There was no way in Hell the Iwa-nin knows enough medical jutsu to actually heal himself up. There should have been a scent of his own blood at least, if Kakashi commented about the fact that he wiped off his blood. Like, plot error much?
C. What kind of Shinobi doesn't check if their opponent is dead, or at least tie him up before getting Rin? I mean, come on, standard protocol and you only need one person to dispel the Genjutsu.
D. Felt almost like Obito pulled a Tom and Jerry or a Road Runner where you just stand there and watch death descend upon you.
E. What they say on panels/anime sound fine there but when you attempt to write it out, it's just… weird to say the least. There's also the problem of translation from Japanese to English.
There was silence.

It was so quiet that even a pin drop would be amplified and become deafening. The room stood at a standstill, the shallow breathing of council members in tandem with the radiating wrath permeating the room from the head of the table. Face casted in the hard lines of a scowl, the Sandaime Tsuchikage looked every year of his age, wrinkle lines set in stone and becoming more apparent by the furious red.

His chakra intent, too, reflected his years as a practitioner, sharper than the mountain's jagged edge and thicker than carbon. He drummed his fingers on the stone table, rhyme and harsh, causing deeper indents in the fine structure.

"A portion of our warehouse for metal supplies exploded…" he gritted out, the weight of his hands becoming heavier, "There is an unknown infiltrator within our midst."

"One of our vital lines of supply being cut off due to the destruction of Kannabi Bridge—" his voice became louder, angrier and violent with rage—"And that blasted Kiiroi Senko of a Namikaze took out nearly five hundred of Iwa's Shinobi in the span of two weeks." To add insult to injury, that tree-hugger, manure dipped Konoha-nin dared to send a single Iwa Shinobi back alive to deliver his message, one that reached so deep into his aged bones like the hatred that already filled his marrows:

'Tell your leader to leave the lands of Konohagakure no Sato alone.'

The Tsuchikage didn't need a translator to decipher what the Kiiroi Senko meant.

Or I'm willing to give it a repeat.

Some fucking clemency that was.

Part of the stone table cracked. The furniture levitated for a moment under his controlled technique before it slammed down again, making all the council members wince from the physical evidence of his temper. None of them dared to make suggestions or go against their powerhouse of a Kage, oppressed into a fearful silence by the intense bloodlust he was emitting.

His most trusted advisor brushed off some of the dust on the table, not meeting his eyes. "What should be our next course of action, Tsuchikage-sama?"

"Pull back the troops," he spat acridly. "We'll regroup before we attack again. Raise the damn bounty on Kiiroi Senko's head and put one out for his living students. We'll make an example out of any Konoha-nin that has been captured, especially if it's that twice-damned infiltrator."

…
It was a gift right?

He stared back at his own reflection, features pale and sleep deprived.

Yes, it was a gift. So that I could protect Rin.

His fingers reached upwards to brush over the new scar that ran vertically down his left eye, the lid eternally disfigured and shielding Obito's gift from view. A gift that was implanted into him with trembling hands, whilst both brown and grey eyes overflowed with tears in the knowledge of whom they were losing.

It was a gift.

His left eye opened, and he saw the accursed crimson, two tomoes spinning as it should. Perhaps someday he would come to appreciate its colour, but for now, he could not. He could not allow himself to attach more sentiment to it than it already has, his rational mind forcing him to treat it as a functional eye – a mere Dōjutsu tool – yet it twitched violently as if in protest.

No, it's a memory. A memory of my failure.

He clenched his eyes shut as he felt tears burning hot behind his lids. They slipped down his cheeks as the darkness became tainted with the afterimage of Obito's body, half crushed under those rocks with a damnable smile on his face (Why are you smiling you idiot), all he can hear was the tumbling rocks that drowned out the words he made him promise and all he can feel is his thunderous heart that wept, that admitted to the mistakes in his perception.

He can still feel the raw and twisting guilt in his heart, his stomach emptied of its contents every time he remembered Obito's death. He cannot eat or drink without remembering the meals that they shared. He cannot sleep without remembering the fact that just a few weeks before, he had the Uchiha guarding his back, taking three hour shifts to ensure that everyone got their share. Everything was a reminder, a quandary of being on the same team, and his knuckles were ghoul white as he gripped onto the basin.

His head flickered to look up at his own reflection again.

Hatake Kakashi could not look at himself without being reminded of Obito, could not see anyone else other than his own deceased father and teammate, and can't seem to stop repeating the same mistakes with each of his own precious people. He was his own recorder, replaying both the scenes in his old house and the cave, hitting repeat on each death throe again and again. He tried to yank at his silver hair, tried to ruin his bone structure, wanted to stab out his left eye and be done with it, but he can't.

There was only so much he could cover up, and this was his limit.

He can't destroy the life he still has because he – no, they – wouldn't want him to.

I can't – he raged with grief.

Impulsively, his hand shot forward and it smashed the mirror into pieces, and he watched all the shards fall onto the ground, coating the sink and his feet below. He watched as his fist bled He took a larger piece of the mirror and smashed it again, the sharp edges cutting further into skin.

It was almost relieving to see a physical representation of what he was. Maybe once he was the unbroken mirror. But now it was all too clear that he was only left clutching the shattered fragments that life had left behind. It was cathartic to break something, to destroy something so insignificant
because he had broken more.

It became a compulsion and he can’t stop, and before he knew it he was wielding a weapon and his own fists, smashing everything that reflected something onto him, turning his own well-kept apartment into a warzone of shrapnel. He can’t stop as he stomped on them, feet bleeding, he can’t stop even as there were as many droplets of blood as there were shards.

He cannot stop the grief that overwhelmed him as he knelt on the ground, bloodied fists clutched to his chest and weapon abandoned, sobbing his heart out for the things that he tried to deny and lost. He tasted salt in his mouth and his nose was blocked, his mask was lying somewhere and his feet hurt even more. He was hungry, sleep-deprived and with an unaccustomed eye, and he knew he was a mess but he didn’t care.

He just wanted to turn back the clock and tell himself better, to not be stupid and hold on to the people that actually matter. Hold onto them so tight before he lost them, such that he steals the air from their lungs and constrict their ribs with his arms. He wanted to give physical gesture as a means to the words he cannot utter in his emotionally-stunted state but all he wanted was to treasure what he still has.

For a first time in a long time, Hatake Kakashi cried.

He cried for the friend he tried to avoid, a precious person that had unconsciously taken root in his heart but was violently ripped out by his own selfish ideals. His tears were for the people he could not regain in death and a solemn oath that it would never happen, ever again.

(But it does, and it is not his fault.)

…

Fugaku gazed at the pair before him impassively, placing down the tea cup he was sipping on with a noble's grace. By all accounts, he should be angry at Minato's inability to protect one of his clan members but he has written enough names into the death list to know that no one could ever promise such an absurd thing. An idealist and talented the Namikaze might be, he could not be everywhere at once and persuading him to protect one of his clan members at all costs would probably kill him and definitely a part of himself.

So when the blonde man sat in front of him in a traditional yukata with a guilty conscience framing his expression, he had already been well-aware of the motive of this visit. The fact was made worse by Kakashi's fidgeting, whether it was from an unfamiliar setting or remorse, told the story they had yet to speak.

The Uchiha Head graciously poured them both another cup of chamomile tea.

"It might have been a terrible loss dealt on the Uchiha to lose such a prospective and bright clan member like Uchiha Obito," he told both of them afterwards with a sigh, "But we see no reason to pursue the matter when you have sufficiently shown your contrition on numerous occasions. We understand that you have already done all you could have and thus, on behalf of my clan, I accept your formal apology on his death. You can raise your head."

"You're not going to ask for compensation?" asked Kakashi lowly.

"I think you punish yourself more than anything I can afford to dole out, Kakashi-kun," he replied, inky stare shifting to the bandages beneath the boy's garb for a brief moment before he diverted it to Minato.
"I'm presuming this isn't the only reason why you have approached my clan?"

The blue-eyed Jōnin smiled tightly. Nothing would ever slip past an Uchiha's vision. "Kakashi-kun, if you will?"

As the said boy nodded and slowly opened his left eye, his teacher spoke over his actions. "During the mission where we lost Obito-kun… He gave one of his Sharingan eye to Kakashi-kun to replace the one that had been damaged by an Iwa-nin."

Obito-kun finally achieved the Sharingan? He first thought, his own eyes bleeding into its own crimsons to meet the two spinning tomoes. His lips pursed as he took in the state of the repossessed eye, but he was a prodigy that bloomed too late. Shame.

Dissimilar eyes stared back at him, one grey and one sorrowfully red, the apology even more apparent on his demeanour.

"… Did Obito-kun really wish for you to have his eye?"

Kakashi clasped one hand to it. "… I wish he didn't have to."

Fugaku took another sip of his tea to calm himself and allowed his Dōjutsu to fade to non-existence. He disliked the fact that his initial assumption was always suspicion of a kekkei genkai theft but years of conditioning from his own father had honed him to think that way. The village may preach that Konoha always came first, but older clans were still shaking off ingrained teachings even after more than half a century and he doesn't think there will be a day where the doubts fully fade. The guilt the boy carried, however, was akin to cold water being dumped on him, reminding him that a Konoha-nin would never resort to stealing what was technically Konoha's. And Kakashi was too loyal a soldier to ever consider it.

Alas, he didn't apologise, for a clan's pride was not something to be meddled with.

"Will you leave us for a bit, Kakashi-kun? I need to talk to your sensei in private."

The boy nodded, retreating out of the tea room as he was asked.

Fugaku threw Minato an exasperated albeit stoic look when the door was shut. "Of all the fights that I have to wage on my clan elders, Minato, I truly didn't expect this to be one of them, let alone coming from you."

He scratched his head. "Sorry about that, Fugaku, I'll owe you a favour for this."

"Several, more like," he inserted sternly, resisting the urge to rub his temples. "While I have the title, the elders still wield more influence over my clan. A transplanted eye, even if it was at the wishes of another Uchiha, will not be dropped easily since its borders on kekkei genkai theft. They will ask for nothing less in terms of repayment or the absorption of your student into the clan, Minato."

The said teacher grimaced at those options. "Are you of the same sentiments, Fugaku?"

"I would prefer if I could check on Kakashi due to the Sharingan eye," he acknowledged. "It is ultimately clan property and it gives me a peace of mind to know what kind of hands it is falling into. However, I am not in favour of crippling your student."

"That's a relief. I would appreciate it if you can keep it under the wraps for the time being, or at least until the condition of Kakashi-kun's eye stabilises and I've garnered enough support for his case."
"The best case scenario you want takes a lot of wrangling, Minato."

"Am I that obvious?" the said man tilted his head.

"I have been in this business longer than you have and it's not hard to guess what motivations you would be seeking. You want to guarantee his autonomy as a Shinobi, is it not?"

"I hold little regard in clan business," Minato told his friend in kind bluntness. "As an orphan who has been detached from it, I would prefer if Kakashi-kun doesn't have to be burdened by it either. It's too restrictive for him, and he will not thrive there."

"I do not disagree. However, does the exchange of autonomy and benefits not merit some thought?"

"In a minor clan? Perhaps." A glint of pain flashed past his cerulean eyes as he continued lowly. "I've seen what the Clan expects of Obito-kun and Mikoto, Fugaku. I respect all of you as individuals but I don't want it to be the life of my student who has never been raised into that situation. You've seen Kakashi-kun. He's been so troubled these days... and I don't wish to add on to it."

And putting him in a place where he might be discriminated and Obito once was? It was unthinkable.

"Fine," said Fugaku, resigned. "Nonetheless, this will be a tedious process."

"It won't be if it isn't settled bilaterally."

"Oh? You intend to throw your student to the very wolves you intend to save him from?"

"No," replied the Hokage candidate with a thin smile, "I intend him to put him in a room of allies. I might be owing a few more clan head favours if need be but I intend to create the most favourable arena for him. Grounds where your clan leaders hold little power and where Kakashi can get a fair chance of a jury."

The Head of the Uchiha Clan huffed inaudibly. "If that is your arrangement, I hardly see the need for my help."

There was no doubt in the Namikaze's ability to find support in the current generation of Clan Heads after all, considering how he was in the same age batch as them. He was one of the few civilian-born Shinobi that could draw their attention and had the charisma to hold it.

"No, I still need your cooperation," he disagreed, "If you do not stand as the Head of your clan, Kakashi-kun would be facing far more persistent and manipulative elders whilst he has better things to focus on. This will be my fight to take as his unofficial guardian."

Fugaku almost snorted but he was an Uchiha. "With the guarantee you would win, of course."

Cerulean eyes glimmered with calculative intent. "It's a military tactic to win a battle before it even begins... And it is one I intend to win. It might even be the scene to increase your own standing if you play it correctly, Fugaku. Think about it."

"... That would be a really sly move."

"Mikoto would have approved," said Minato nonchalantly. "Thank you again, Fugaku. I'll iron out the details again with you soon."
"As if you would let any of your plans go awry, with or without my knowledge."

"Never hurts to double check with someone who knows clan politics better than I do," he sang winningly.

…

"Would you ever hate me?" She asked, eyes closed as they lay on the rooftop near the break of dawn.

"What kind of question is that?" He gave back another question incredulously. "You're one of my best friends."

"Even if I betray you?" she persisted.

"I don't think I could ever hate you. It's hard to hate people you know – you have to want their death every moment of the day and that sounds tiring."

She laughed, sadness tinging the high note.

He wonders why—

And he awakened with a sob.

…

A month later

The moment the Sandaime Hokage strode into the room with his smaller council behind him, all small chatter died down till it became silent. The Clan Heads rose in respect to their leader who walked to his seat in a glide, his robes aflutter as he settled into his chair comfortably. He raised his hand to gesture for the rest to sit, an affable smile on his face.

Sarutobi Hiruzen was in no hurry; lighting up his pipe and taking a long drag, letting the puffed out smoke drift forward from his lips. "We will now convene the Shinobi Clan Council meeting proper."

"On 20 March, 56 years After Konoha's Founding, this meeting has been called by the Uchiha Clan about the security of their kekkei genkai after one Hatake Kakashi has come into possession of a Sharingan eye after the Kannabi Bridge mission that Team Minato was sent on.

While the Uchiha Clan is valid to protest that this is a Clan affair and Konoha's legalities have no right to interfere on the grounds of the Clan Charter which was established upon Konoha's founding, but the Hokage, which is myself, has reviewed the case and finds it necessary to involve all the Clans to come to a proper resolution. The reason is that the Shinobi in possession of late Uchiha Obito's eye is Hatake Kakashi, the next in succession for the seat of the Hatake Clan after the passing of the late Hatake Sakumo. Therefore, as Hokage, it is my responsibility to ensure that the young Hatake is allowed a proper mediator in the conflict since he has yet to claim the seat to make it a bilateral issue between both clans."

He paused for a moment.

"As the Sandaime Hokage, I solemnly swear to the Will of the Fire once more and to my preceding Hokage that I will uphold impartiality towards all parties in the hearing and have all opinions taken in consideration. With the understanding that the Uchiha Clan has higher stakes in the conflict, the Council has willingly allowed the Uchiha Clan a concession of three votes instead of one during the
voting of the resolution. To pass a resolution, a two-third majority in the Council has to be reached. However, if no conclusion has been found by the end of this hearing and any succeeding ones, Hatake Kakashi will continue to possess the Sharingan eye and no harm should befall him for having said Dōjutsu, as per the wishes of the late Uchiha Obito.”

He gave every Clan Head and advisor a meaningful gaze, appraising their attitudes towards the matter, or their lack of.

"Before we open the opinions to the floor, we will first review the case. First the account of events by Nohara Rin will be read. She is the certified field medic who was in charge of the transplant, and the information verified thrice by the Head of Intelligence, Yamanaka Inoichi. It is to be noted that the last verification was made through the usage of the Yamanaka's mind walk with the permission of Nohara Rin, and he has labelled her account to be credible. The second will be the hospital's report about the Sharingan eye and its effect on Hatake Kakashi and it has been directly overseen by the Head of the Hospital himself. After both procedures are complete, we will then open it to the floor. Koharu, if you will."

The elderly kunoichi nodded, unfurling the scroll that held the accounts of Nohara Rin and read it word for word. Soothing in the lower mezzo she spoke, she retold the non-fiction which started from the moment she had awoken from the Genjutsu placed on her by the Iwa-nin to the collapsing cave and Obito being crushed, then the transfer of eyes that led to the hearing today. The clan heads sunk into deep contemplation as they absorbed the information with some of them internally wincing at the thought of losing their teammates in such a manner.

Hiruzen gestured for the Head of the Hospital to go ahead.

Nodding, he gave his report: "The operation that Nohara Rin performed out in the battlefield was efficient and properly done. After extracting Kakashi's injured left eye, she placed late Uchiha Obito's activated Sharingan immediately, joining the optic nerve and bridging the chakra pathways. Thus far, no complications have risen from the operation nor has there a rejection of the optic organ as it has acclimated well to the young Hatake. He is able to use the Sharingan like other Uchiha and his brain wave signals have yet to show signs of distress from the extra sensory information that the Sharingan has allowed. However, it is noted that the Sharingan eye constantly drains his chakra even if his eye is closed by minute amounts, and Hatake Kakashi has no means to switch it off like an Uchiha who naturally possesses the Sharingan. The medical team have theorized it is due to the lack of more developed chakra pathways that lead to the eye in the average Uchiha, however it should not affect his chakra reserves or capabilities for another three decades when natural chakra regeneration slows down significantly in all Shinobi. Should removal be necessary, there will be a 100% success rate without lethality, however, installing another prosthetic in the future will be painful and depending on his growth, his Jōnin rank might have to be reconsidered for the sake of his safety."

"Thank you," he nodded politely at the Head of the Hospital before turning back to the rest, "The representative of the Uchiha, you may have the first say."

Fugaku stood up as he was called, arms folded in his sleeves. "Hokage, Elders, Clan Heads," he greeted, commanding the room with his inky stare. "Even before the inception of Konohagakure no Sato and to the times of the Warring Clans, every one of us have guarded our own secret techniques zealously in our own compounds. With the Aburame, their Kikachu, with the Akimichi, their Baika Jutsu... And the list goes on. While the Uchiha Clan has no wish to desecrate the wishes of the late Uchiha Obito or bear him ill-will for the choices he has made, we believe that it is necessary for the Uchiha Clan to retrieve the Sharingan eye, either by subsuming Hatake Kakashi into the Uchiha Clan or removing said eye from him."
"It is not that we doubt the ability of Hatake Kakashi to remain loyal to Konoha. However, he might accidentally reveal the secrets we intend to keep by possessing the Sharingan eye. He was not raised an Uchiha and he does not know the restraint we have instilled in our children. If he is left unchecked and overexerts the abilities that the eye has gifted him, it might harm rather than help. It is of paramount importance that our Dōjutsu is handed back to us, in the hands of those who truly know how to wield it."

"I don't think it's just about the secrets to your Dōjutsu, Fugaku-sama," Tsume spoke up while scratching Kuromaru's head. "We have to consider the pup's future."

"Tsume-sama brings up a valid point. Why? Hatake Kakashi has proven to be an exceptional soldier of Konoha who has an excellent mission record and he obeys his superiors well. If he loses a functioning eye, his full potential may be crippled and we will be discarding a powerful Shinobi in the making."

"There is also practicality," added Chouza. "While the Sharingan eye has been bestowed upon him by the wishes of late Obito-kun, Kakashi-kun is better off utilising the eye to increase his potential rather than just having it as a memento. Nohara Rin's account mentioned something about Kakashi-kun finishing his own jutsu with its help, right?"

They have clearly practiced this well, Fugaku mused, although his own believed dogma would not be deterred.

"It is undoubtedly true that Kakashi-kun can reap the benefits from the Sharingan. But as a wielder myself, I am throwing caution at his future as well. The Sharingan is not just a physical manifestation that allows its user to see movements and chakra flow with greater clarity. It has a psychological impact that comes with clear sight—" the Hyūga Head nodded in confirmation—"and we instil certain qualities and teachings to migrate said effects which are needed from a young age to take hold. The excessive chakra input and memory retention might harm the young Hatake in a long run and that is why the Uchiha Clan advocates for either the removal of said eye or bringing him under our wings."

"Can you elaborate on the harms?" Danzo asked.

Fugaku pursed his lips. "The lack of non-Uchiha Sharingan users speaks for itself, Danzo-sama. According to our own history texts, there has been sightings of such people but their lives have been short-lived. Without the special chakra that an Uchiha is predisposed to have to trigger the manifestation of the Sharingan, it also means that any usage of the Sharingan will be more taxing, and the person is more liable to chakra depletion. We are all widely aware of the dangers that come with chakra depletion and I feel no need to further into the topic. If you remove the eye, it will eliminate the possibility. If you allow the Uchiha to train the young Hatake, we will hone him the proficiency needed to decrease the chakra usage."

Shikaku leaned on the table, his eyes half-lidded. "If the strain can be controlled through training, the better option would be to let Hatake Kakashi keep the functional eye. He has proven that he can make good use of the eye despite having it for the first time, and being a Hatake… He will be an asset to the village when he has more years of experience."

"Are we in the consensus that Hatake Kakashi should be allowed to keep the Sharingan eye of late Uchiha Obito?" inquired the Hokage, looking pointedly at the Uchiha.

"I withhold my view until we decide how Kakashi-kun should be dealt with, Hokage-sama."

"What do you suggest should be the arrangement in regards to Kakashi-kun then?"
Some of the Clan Heads struggled with the urge to not put their heads down like what the Nara Head was doing.

"Let the Uchiha subsume Hatake Kakashi," stated Fugaku simply. "We will provide for him as if he were one of our clan members and he will be entitled to the privileges we can afford. Be it training, lodging or his general necessities, he will be ensured."

"That sounds like the treatment you give to a bastard child," Tsume snorted, earning a few wry glances her way. The Inuzuka were hardly ever known for their subtlety and the kunoichi inherited the brashness in spades. No one could refute what she said and some even approved of the scorn, as if she was daring the Uchiha Head to lower the boy's status.

Calmly, their leader diverted their attention elsewhere. "I'm afraid that will be impossible, Fugaku-san. What you are suggesting is the annexation of a Clan and no matter how small or blackened it may be, it still requires a Clan Head to undertake such a decision. The hearing exists for the same reason; the Shinobi in question is the only choice to be the next Clan Head, and he is only allowed to claim his title once he is sixteen, as per the wishes of Hatake Sakumo. Hence, he is deemed to be unsuitable to carry out such complex negotiations in the eyes of Konoha."

"Hatake Kakashi should be ensured of his agency and autonomy as a Shinobi no matter what outcome," Hiashi commented at last, "It is unthinkable that we should restrain him in traditional customs he never had to follow and expect him to assimilate well enough to be comfortable with his environment. After all," he added nonchalantly, slanting his head, "Kakashi-kun should not have to relinquish his freedom for the shortcomings of another."

"I assure you the Uchiha clan gives its members plenty of agency and autonomy to act upon, whether it is inside or outside of the clan, Hyūga-sama. We find little appeal in subjugating some of our members to those higher up in hierarchy." Fugaku retaliated smoothly.

"So your conditions to the Hatake his newly acquired Dōjutsu is if he is in relation to the Uchiha?" Inoichi interjected, tired of the underlying jabs of the Uchiha and Hyūga. It had been a battle of philosophies a long time coming and he had already heard enough of them to last him a lifetime. He was frankly grateful he wasn't in his parents' generation where the rivalry was far worse.

Fugaku blinked, re-folding his hands into his sleeves. "Either directly or by marriage, yes."

"Still not part of the Uchiha," muttered Tsume under her breath while Kuromaru whined softly.

The other Clan Heads rubbed their temples. Who wouldn't want the acquisition of an abled Shinobi, and one that was the student to another powerful one who was rumoured to be a Hokage candidate? It was a rather short list on who would be running but the question now lied if any of them wanted to fight for the hand of Hatake Kakashi.

The times were changing: back in the Warring Clans period where numbers dropped like files, procreation was an act committed to ensure the survival of their own clans. It meant arranging marriages for the strong to give birth to the strong; for hopeful and powerful warriors that would survive past infantile stage and fight for the clan, and fertile women that could bear the next generation wells and in litters.

But now they were a coalition, their numbers bigger and more effective in covering their flaws and marriage didn't have to be just that. It wasn't just about a good match of genes but also chemistry – every parent wanted their children to be happy with their partner rather than just cold tolerance from a union borne out of necessity. They have seen and lived through products of it, and if there was something a village could provide, it was for things to be different.
And it was another battle waged between practicality and idealism.

Thankfully, the Hokage offered an impasse with a small smile: "For all those solutions, it can only be implemented in due time. Invoking the Clan Restoration Act or a plain engagement is something that can be arranged in the future. From your discussion thus far, I can deduce that none of you wish for Kakashi to lose his functional Sharingan eye. The only conflict is the willingness to teach."

His brown eyes flickered to the Uchiha in amusement, and he blew the smoke gently in his direction. "If your clan is truly disagreeable to the idea of the non-Uchiha, I can make a request, Fugaku-san. You are under no obligation to accept," someone coughed and looked away, "But it is one I humbly make as a Hokage in concern for a prospective soldier of Konoha. It would be a shame if we have to seek out less equipped teachers from other clans to solve the problem."

"Your thunder will not be stolen and you will be credited where you are due, naturally," he continued right after, nailing the hidden threat deeper, "Is that not a fine proposition, Fugaku-san?"

The said Uchiha Head's lips twitched. "I'm sure my clan will be willing to accept you given solution, Hokage-sama. In fact, I have half the mind to oversee Hatake Kakashi's training myself."

"What honour you do unto young Hatake," Hiashi remarked.

"It is only right to bestow the correct attention on a talent," replied Fugaku with the capital of arrogance.

"And I appreciate your high judgement of Kakashi-kun, Fugaku-san." The Hokage smoothly intercepted, too experienced in the field of politics to be distracted. He knocked his pipe against the ash tray. "Shall we call for a consensus? The resolution of the meeting shall be as such: Hatake Kakashi will be allowed to keep his Sharingan eye and it will be listed in his file as his property hence forth, paralleling to the late Uchiha Obito's wishes. The Uchiha will oversee the training until Hatake Kakashi can properly control the Sharingan to a combat suitable level under Fugaku-san's instruction.

"No one is allowed to abstain from this vote. If you agree to the resolution, raise your hand." His eyes surveyed the room, making a mental count. "The resolution passes with more than a two-third majority. We can conclude this Council meeting unless someone has another agenda to bring to the table."

He skilfully signed the report and stamped it. "Then we shall convene this meeting."

And perhaps, it was one of the easiest he has attended thus far – though he could feel the invisible influence of a certain blonde haired Jōnin all over the matter, if the looks the Clan Heads were subtly giving one another was anything to go by.

Not that the Hokage wasn't already aware of the collusion prior to the meeting, of course.

…

The end of the Iwa-Konoha War started with the whispering of rumours rather than the violent bang that begun it.

It was a smattering of gossip that was discussed in the streets, pulled from the grapevine and the stagnant deployment to maintain the stalemate near the edge of Tsuchi no Kuni's borders. The diplomats were sent out for a battle of words (at last), decreasing the bloodshed to mere skirmishes due to the warnings of the higher ups, but such news did little to dissolve the dissent of the civilians at last straw.
Of all the major actors in the war, Iwa had taken it the hardest; despite their initial enormous rampage made to the Hi no Kuni borders, their stranglehold on the perimeter had fallen along with the destruction of one of their main supply lines, the Kannabi bridge. The tables had turned right then and there, and they were forced back unless they wanted to line up for slaughter.

It was a bitter retreat and a huge blow to morale; one that they would never recover from as they lost more battles. Slowly but surely, Konoha took the lead, pushing out of Kusa and into Tsuchi no Kuni, finally stopping a few miles off Iwa's doorsteps before the loser had called a ceasefire for negotiations.

A drawn out war had come to an end with acrimonious defeat, one that even the daimyo were getting sick of funding, although it was a means to show their country's superiority.

As the announcement was finally being made, the time-traveller stood amidst the crowd in conformity, with only a poem repeating in her head like bad omen.

To whom did she pray?
To every name and to every grave
All to the end of the dying day.

Their lives are too short, she say
Too soft and they caught flame
But in her mind she replies nay

Everyone dies at the end of the day.

The silky voice of her old Yamanaka comrade seemed so close that it was like she was whispering right next to her ear, feeling like it was yesterday that it was truly told to her in such a fashion, and the distinct feeling of nostalgia was unshakeable.

It was a refrain written in the midst of war, amongst the graves and dying. Where the Yamanaka had been driven by the scenes she saw, expressing herself through words to quiet her own mind, and it was one that spread around the entire camp. Morbid art tended to resonate with Shinobi and in the times of hopelessness where they died by the dozens and sometimes hundreds, well—

She forced the bitterness down, pulling at the darkened hair she wrapped tightly around her fist.

Black on black, the jinchūriki looked absolutely dull in her funeral attire, blending into insignificance with the rest. With her lack of height, everywhere she glanced was just a sea of obsidian, and looking up was no better when she could only find anger and sadness. Suddenly, the cotton on her skin felt too rough; too scratchy and foreign; wrong against her tanned complexion and she didn't want the long sleeves and drabness.

It was too perfect as a backdrop to project her memories on and she hasn't felt the clawing sensation coming at her throat in a long time. But it was there, leaving imaginary marks and she doesn't know how many other funerals flashed across her mind.

Certainly, funerals of the past hadn't been as large as the one she was attending right now but it still hurt, too familiar with the procession – standing, speech, names, flowers, carving, standing, crying and crying, screams – the time-traveller let out another shaky breath, hardly different from the cries that surrounded her.
What made war different for both sides?

Absolutely nothing other than the difference in the casualties, at whose hands they died and the names carved on basalt. It was still the same overwhelming hatred accumulating within the village, one that would never fade even with their thwarted history. It was still the same pain and loss and Kara doesn't think she'd ever understand war.

She'd never comprehend why they put themselves through such unnecessary pain – someone near her was hitching with sobs – *why* they wouldn't learn that war got them nowhere after the first and second time. She hated funerals *so much*.

She barely saw the Sandaime Tsuchikage in the front of the crowd, although his chakra was as tangible and thick as she remembered. Despite his short stature, he was every inch of what a Kage should be, his mastery in three elements displayed for all to see. He had yet to speak but the crowd was silent, deep in reverence for the warlord that has led them for decades and perhaps fearful of interrupting his ritual.

Around the huge dome of a memorial he levitated, his fingers brushing against the upper circumference of the jagged surface and etched names, lips parting slightly to whisper words of veneration. He lingered at a spot and pressed his large forehead against it before he turned, facing the crowd who had lost just as much as he.

(Naturally, he would take everything harder, for these were his soldiers that he has lost by the thousands. Death was all statistic as some point but he wished for them to be more, and he prays to the Solidarity of the Stone.)

"Citizens of Iwa, my soldiers," he begun, voice empowered by his own strength, "Through the years we have fought valiantly against the scoundrels of the South and East, refusing to accept the false exceptionalism that Konoha put themselves to be and refused to bow under the tyranny of Kumo. A great many have sacrificed for this honourable cause, giving their lives to protect our home.

"Today, we commemorate and thank them for everything they have done. Every name inscribed and every drop of blood, sweat and tears they have shed, the Solidarity of the Stone accepts and praises. They are truly, truly the pride of Iwa and we would have them as nothing less."

"But it is enough," he so daringly declared, his left sleeve sweeping an arc with the grandeur of his action, "It is time for the war to end. We have gained more than we have lost, we have weakened out enemies and showed them the might that we possessed. We will lose to them no more. They fear our might so they surrendered without conditions. They know of our tenacity and they decided they can drag this attrition out no longer. Iwa is victorious, as She has always been. Our soldiers have not died in vain."

*Lies. Lie lie lie lie lie*, her mind resisted. Kara had the information, she knew the circumstances and how history perpetuates itself when not altered.

No one wins wars. Everyone loses.

Even if the victor wrote the narrative, no right minded person would believe that someone won.

Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto had lost too much and she was too aware of the truth.

What the fuck did she ever win?

The Fourth Shinobi War?
When she was one of the scatterings of survivors?

That was bullshit.* This* was bullshit.

She let out a strangled sob, now hunched over and shoulders shaking, smaller and harder to notice. She clasped her mouth to stop the wails, felt the shudder of her frame with her own trembling hands but it was hopeless.

She might not seem out of the ordinary for some reacted even worse to the speech, but at that moment, the time-traveller never felt more alone.

Despite the grief shared, the same negative emotions but in different magnitude swirling in air, festering like a plague – one and the same – she stood alone.

Without hands on her shoulder for comfort, without lean arms wrapping around her and not even a soothing touch of warmth transmitted from glowing fingers.

She was not in the same scenery, she was in a different place, shamed for something else that no one will ever understand. She doesn't expect them to, she doesn't want them to –

But she brought this onto herself.

Something within her mind rumbled.

The ceiling in her mindscape started cracking once more, revealing ugly veins of darkness beneath, causing granite to fall with the rain. Droplets rippled the murky waters while the solids caused a splash; distorting and muddying reflection with black.

The tailed beast that resided within it roared, intense like her heartache, forcing its retreat. For a moment, everything stilled, even the vibration of sound – suspended – as glorious orange and flowing tails swept and closed the distance to reach her side, bundling his partner in her protection.

Kurama muted her cries in his fur, detected the agony that was finally rising like the water levels and ignored the pelt of raindrops and stone that were falling faster. The hatred he was once removed of was an old companion, sticking to the shadows which were looming in. Yet he stayed steadfast, his presence bright, always by her side.

'**Cry,**' he allowed to the sound of chains rattling louder.

It started pouring.

…

The sky was grey a lot these days.

Overcast with looming clouds, they were dark and heavy, consuming the sparse sky in its entirety and hiding the sun from the earth's surface. It left the world cold without the touch of light, leaving the ground rigid and resistant to manipulation.

Kakashi exhaled as he pressed his hands on the ground, seeping his chakra and spreading it thinly, taking note of the properties of the soil. Pushing in a larger surge of chakra, he compacted the soil and pulled out small structures, the wall columned with bulldog's face as the centrepiece.

*Not fast enough,* he thought, crumbling it into a mound of dirt with the electricity he tangled between his fingers. *Again,* he created another wall, trying to be faster in construct.
"Not enough," he punched it down this time.

Again.

Again.

Again—

"That's enough," a mezzo tone called out, soft and compelling.

A calloused hand extinguished the white chakra that was sparking in his palm, touch gentle as she removed his arm braces. It traced the entire length of his limb, glowing fingers skirting the edge of his scars, tracing up his chakra pathways and healing the damage he had done.

He doesn't flinch as she made a small swipe across his right eyelid, removing the blurry vision that had been plaguing him for the past ten minutes and yet, he doesn't look into honey brown eyes.

"How long have you been at this?" She murmured, fitting back the armoured plates.

"I can't tell the time," he mumbled.

"Kakashi-kun."

"It's been cloudy these days," he said irritably, withdrawing his hand back to shove it into his pockets. His legs were feeling kind of weak but he wasn't about to tell her that.

"And you have been stressing yourself out every single day," Rin countered back easily. "...Ever since we come back from that mission."

"Like you haven't either," he interrupted, gaze honing on the dark circles below her eyes. "You've been pulling double shifts when you can."

They were both incredibly good at finding distractions – their lives were full of them – and as he bore singed marks and cuts on his hands, she had scalpels and blood. The smell of rust hung off her not like it did on a bloodthirsty and malicious warrior but more like a coat she unwillingly don on, a necessary item that comes with her vocation. It was heavier these days, he discerned, her indulgence in her work becoming something that she indulged in every day.

"I don't have a say in that as a medic," she sighed, tending to his other hand gingerly. "The amount of patients in the hospital have been piling up and we're already hard pressed for resources. Every extra set of helping hand is appreciated and it means that both patients and staff can more time dedicated to themselves. I still take breaks when I have to, Kakashi-kun. You don't." Not when the person who usually finds you to pace you is gone.

The short silence hung in the air like they were waiting for another person to chime in his concern, and guilt was the elephant in the room.

"I understand why you're training so hard, I really do," she continued. "But there's only one of you, Kakashi-kun, and there is only so much you can take."

If it had been a few months back, he would have pushed off her concerns and told her to leave him alone. Yet, he met that instinct halfway and withdrew his arm, away from her warmth, ignoring the slight disappointment which drooped her lips.
"I'll be fine. You don't need to worry so much, Rin."

"Don't worry?" She frowned at his dismissal. "I'm doing this because I worry, Kakashi-kun. You are going to wear yourself out if you keep training like this. I've seen cases like that in the clinic and I don't want you to be like that." Her face distorted into a more sombre expression. "I… There's only one of you left."

"And I need to be strong to keep Obito's promise. If I want the strength—" he pressed the heel of his palm on his throbbing left eye—"I need to keep going like this."

It was the only way he knew how and he knew nothing else. This was how he coped. To keep practicing his jutsu and kata, to run simulation of fights one after another because if his mind stopped, halted for an instant, he would be dead on the battlefield.

(He might start thinking of Obito again.)

"But at what cost?" asked Rin, crumpling the fabric of her skirt in her fists. "We've already lost Obito-kun, and I don't want to lose anymore. I don't want to lose you because you keep over reaching yourself. I want to help you achieve your goals and you're not letting me. You hardly ever do."

The last sentence was in painful and soft admittance, and it made the medic so worn out. She was so tired of trying get through the boy with subtlety in respect for his need for space, wanting to be of use and yet treated like some kind of relic which was untouchable and needed to be protected from everything. She was a kunoichi as much as she was a medic, damn it, she wouldn't break.

"I don't- I can't-" he paused, searching for the right words, "I don't deserve your help, Rin. I was the asshole that wasn't there when you needed me to be, and you don't have to feel obligated to help me."

They were clearly wrong because Rin's brown eyes darkened into the shade of burnt wood, rare anger surfacing as she burst out: "Why… why… why would you think like that? Why would you even consider that a possibility?" She raised her voice higher, accusation sharp. "You think I stay because I'm obligated?" A broken laugh slipped past her lips.

Her rough hands, marred by small lacerations and scars clasped onto his. It was trembling and hot, he realized, the heat keeping him still. "Would it kill you to realise that sometimes people do want to be here because they care? That we are of emotions, we form attachments even if our profession is the mauling of so many. Minato-sensei, Kushina-nee and Kara-chan stay because they want to and they care. I care."

"Obito-kun's promise with you isn't just about 'protecting me' you know. What he would have wanted was for us to have each other's backs and work together and tell you that 'you are not alone'. We're here if you dare to look, and trust me when I say we are here for the long haul. We won't disappear, we won't abandon at the first whisper of rumours and I hope… I hope that someday you truly believe that. So listen. Let me help you and stop… stop pushing me away."

In his eye, there was similar pain – bare bones of restraint – but more towards the spectrum of anguish, of not knowing what the proper reaction was because he never has. All he has known were situations that were too stable or ones he could not control: his father's guilt and subsequent suicide, Minato's stability and then Obito's death.

But if there was one thing he was sure about, something the Hatake couldn't misconstrue, it would be that he wanted to protect Rin not just due to a promise he made. No, Kakashi didn't think of it as
something he had to be forced to do. It wasn't an onus – she wasn't, he stated – and it was more of a situation where he didn't want to be her burden. They were his issues and it was his fault. She didn't need to step in when she had enough on her plate.

Despite having all those thoughts, formulating them was another matter.

"I'm not pushing you away," he admitted. But I don't know how to keep you close either.

"I don't need empty words, Kakashi-kun."

Because it seemed that all they had ever done was leave was something unfulfilled.

"I swear I will try," he continued thickly, "But it'll take time."

More conditions – but this, this, she could accept.

"I know," she said. "I know it will take so much out of you and that's all I ask."

(But promises were meant to be broken.)

...

And they shattered.

"Ka.. Kashi.."

His hand was going through Rin.

...

He doesn't know who screamed.

Chapter End Notes

Beta'd by wecantgiggleitsacrimescene

We hit 300 kudos WOOP!
And yes, I'm a bloody demon, apparently.
Previously...

Something within her mind rumbled.

The ceiling in her mindscape started cracking once more, revealing ugly veins of darkness beneath, causing granite to fall with the rain. Droplets rippled the murky waters while the solids caused a splash; distorting and muddying reflection with black.

The tailed beast that resided within it roared, intense like her heartache, forcing its retreat. For a moment, everything stilled, even the vibration of sound – suspended – as glorious orange and flowing tails swept and closed the distance to reach her side, bundling his partner in her protection.

Kurama muted her cries in his fur, detected the agony that was finally rising like the water levels and ignored the pelt of raindrops and stone that were falling faster. The hatred he was once removed of was an old companion, sticking to the shadows which were looming in. Yet he stayed steadfast, his presence bright, always by her side.

'Cry,' he allowed to the sound of chains rattling louder.

It started pouring.

'You can change the world if you willed it so, kit. You have the information in the palm of your hands and more for the taking, and nothing is impossible if you dare attempt to try.'

'That's why it's so scary,' Kara confided with a whisper, hugging her knees to her chest. The debris and darkness laid all around her, and even her cerulean eyes seemed to have lost their light. 'I can change things so easily. Just one small action… And it ripples and causes a storm. What if I caused someone else to die before their time? I'd be the reason why they're dead and what if they were meant to do something important that they never got to do?'

'You tend to forget this a lot, kit,' he murmured. 'You are living this life too. The moment you came here,' his claws traced the ancient symbols that were once alive on her skin, leaving a brief red
marking, 'You have already changed history. And if you do not incite change, would the world not be the same from whence you came?'

'We can't change anything now,' she sounded back, pained. 'You know we can't. We made plans, Kurama, and I said I'd stick to them no matter what.'

'Interacting so intimately with your father and his team was not part of your plans either. You made those plans under the assumption you would not get close.' The fox snorted in a melancholic way. 'You have always felt too deeply, kit, and that has not changed.'

Miserable laughter bubbled forth, mocking and crude. She was so stupid.

So stupid to start sympathising with the enemy, to befriend them all and to love a girl who was going to die – who had to die for the spiral to move again. It was as if she willingly placed her hands on the spiral, allowing it to injure her, allowing the edge to cut into her and the friction to burn.

'I'm so stupid…' Kara laughed again, notes more fragmented than before.

'Foolish, you are. Stupid, not so much. You neglect your nature, Naruto and now you feel the pain as a result of what you are.'

His voice cut above the din of noise, ancient and tired. The power that circulated within him slowed, like a timepiece unwound and put to rest.

The jinchūriki flinched and their mindscape rumbled again.

'However, I suppose I am foolish enough to hope that you would keep those plans so that my brothers and sisters can have a future free from confinement and chains.' He raised his head slightly, thinking of better days where they were gathered and the sky was their only limit. 'Abandon those plans if you have to, kit, I do not mind. I would rather see you living happily rather than distraught at the choices you have to make.'

'Then what about you, Kurama? What about your future?' Her fingers dug into his fur as she steadied her voice. 'I would willingly compromise everything if it meant that I won't lose you, 'ttebane. And I would rather the world you live in be a beautiful one rather than the one we came from. That, I will not yield.'

'There are multitudinous paths to achieve what we want, just as there are different formations to techniques. But I refuse a peaceful ending at the cost your century, kit. What you are doing is breaking you apart and my objective for joining this journey is to keep you alive. I do not need a broken vessel or one that will not see it to the end. With the rate you are going, you will be either or both.'

'I'm fine with that, 'ttebane.'

"You deserve to die! Why are you alive when they're dead?!!"

'The mortals you have once bound yourself to would be furious if they knew what you were thinking. All they have ever wanted from you was for you to live as well.'

'I wished the same for them and yet here we are.' She mocked severely, heart dropping—"What is living if they are not here to live it with me? What is the point in being happy if it's not shared? I fought for a world where they existed,' she heaved, 'but they were not there in the end.'
"I don’t need you to always be there to save me, Naruto," Tenten yelled, half-mad and half-desperate as she pushed her against the tent's metal pole, forcing the jinchūriki to look at her. "More than anything else, I want you live as well. I don't want you to die."

'Don't use my memory of them as cards against me, Kurama!’ Kara hissed, as loud as her once comrade's volume was. The impact, however, was sadly lacking with all the tears she was crying.

'You allow those memories to be used against you as weapons every waking moment in this life,' he accused back irately. 'They may motivate you some but they hurt you even more. I live within you, I know your thoughts like they were my own and you cannot fool a sentient such as I. If these memories are the drivers that make you tread this path, they may as well be the ones to shatter it with its weight.'

His eyes were crimson and fierce, one eye peering so closely that she was reminded of how small she was in his reflection. 'You need to kill the hope that they will be the same if you do not change some things, kit, because the world has already been altered as we speak. Those mortals you hold in high regard will never see you as they previously had when they are conceived and you will never see them in a similar perception. The shadows of your memories live amongst the dead. You, are no longer the Naruto of the past and the very fact you bear another name proves it so. You are living, breathing, changing as much as the next mortal does and you can afford to be a little selfish with what you currently have.'

He paused, taking a deep breath. 'Since it is all you can possess.'

Her eyes were like pools in comparison, tears welling and rippling cerulean blues. She let a short gasp, and then another one, palms slamming flat on her mindscape's waters slipping between and above her fingers.

'I don't know how,' she chokingly confessed.

All Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto has ever wanted – ever needed – were her companions of old.

Everything she has done thus far in this life was to stabilise who her enemies were and make them predictable but she had never envisioned it would come with so much pain. So similar, she wept, but she knew she was lying to herself.

Of all the truths she had learnt in her previous life, one was the most profound: Losing someone close to her was always… always excruciating.

(So why does she keep lying to herself?)

'Abandon those plans,' he murmured again, more of a command rather than a request. Solemnity filled every inch of his baritone, and her physical body quaked from the flooding of his power.

'Come Hell or high waters, kit, we will make it through even if we are broken by the finish line.'

Ah, sweet temptation – It caressed, soft like velvet and sweet like the sap dripping from the bark. It was in the mist of gold that filtered so close, mere swirls around her head.

This time, Kara doesn't resist.

She leaned forward –

And breathed.
He couldn't wash it off.

No matter how many times he ran his hand under water, emptied bottles of soap and scrubbed with frantic fingers or brush, he couldn't wash it off.

Kakashi couldn't wash away the sensation of his hand tearing through flesh with searing heat and velocity, feeling brittle bones give way and break into shards – eviscerated – then through lungs and organ, her heart's blood spilling on his appendage, the smell of charred flesh, the sound of her choking out his name to fill the void the crackle of electricity had left.

He scrubbed harder.

He cannot wipe away the image of her brown eyes losing light, her face contorting in pain, how his wrist fit the hole with some space left – Kami, I killed Rin, her blood on my hands, her face paling, heart stopping. I can't get off the blood – his hand bruising red now – get off blood WHY won't you get off, I'm so sorry I failed please get off kami please please get off GET OFF. He choked. He can still see the blood in his mind's eye, the crimson dripping down his wrist, splattering wetly onto the white basin like a steady macabre metronome in an otherwise silent soundtrack.

He can't stop wanting to do away with the image that was burned into his retinas like how the phantom blood was still on his hands. His left eye still twitching from the pain and he can't breathe – Rin can't either – and then he was sobbing, wailing, trying, I beg you please get off me and he couldn't.

He collapsed to his knees, the heels of his hands digging into his eye sockets and his nose still picking up the scent of blood. All he can feel the wetness of his hands dripping and he's struck with the thought that this. This is what it is like to go insane. This must be what it is like to want to gouge your own eyes out. To stop seeing, maybe then I will stop seeing, He held the thought for a trembling, fluttering moment before grimy fingers began curling and prying his own eyelids open.

But the moment he opened his eyes them he saw red all over again, and then brown, and then black because more than Rin there was also Obito under the crumbling rocks, in pain, unable to feel his side.

He wanted to be like that, he realised, and he wanted to be crushed. He wanted to be torn apart by his enemies (as if his demons weren't enough), he needed the pain, he wanted to be dead DEAD dead like how they were and he was fucking screaming at this point.

Frantically, weakly, he fumbled for the drawer that was right in front of him and dug out the closest kunai, hands trembling as he pointed it at himself.

It would be red all over again. The thought made him slam the weapon into the floor, eye twitching as he keeled over. It was red that Obito spat – the imaginary screams, his name being choked out, that he failed them, he was wrong, their corpses rising, their skeletal fingers digging into his flesh, into his heart and he can't he can't I'm sorry I'm sorry fornotkeepingmypromise I'm so fucking sorry – the red that Rin was bleeding, her slumping onto the ground, unmoving, and everything else was inconsequential.

I want I want I want – to forget, to stop regretting. I want them to be alive here with me, not dead, alive – he was gasping, he can't think, someone save him. He doesn't care at this point, he just wanted it to stop. The pills didn't work, the therapy was shit and everything was a lie that he wished applied to them but it doesn't, it wouldn't and it couldn't. Because they were dead –
And it was his goddamn fault. He should have died. *He should have been the one that died.*

All because he didn't listen to them and he was too stuck up and caught up by the rules. That he didn't move fast enough to go get Rin, wasn't skilled enough to stop himself from piercing through her chest, too adamant on using a technique that was so dangerous, uncontrollable and fast. He was told time and time and time and time again to not use it, told that it was incomplete and he refused to listen.

There was so much pain and regret inside, so much *hate* that he wanted the wretchedness inside to pour out of him so everyone could see it. Like the torment inside wasn't enough – enveloping every cell and pore of his being; a furious drench of sins and mistakes; an existence that should not be – it should have been him that died in that cave, him who was caught in the crossfire –

**Because he was useless. I am worthless. I couldn't keep Obito's promise I didn't save Rin couldn't protect her I killed her I killed her I killed her**

Before he realised it he had raised the kunai and plunged it into his right hand – the traitor, the offender – and he kept going at it, unstoppable. It stained the tiles beneath him red, the splatter arcing up his arm and hair, saturating his pants. The pain was all he could feel and it was *real* and he wanted to stop – didn't want to stop – needed to stop – he can't stop –

And there must have been something listening as someone grabbed his arm.

"Hatake Kakashi, what are you doing!?” It was a shriek, louder than his own mind.

It was someone ripping the weapon away from his hand and sending it clattering to the ground, red hair a veil as if it was marrying him to death. Kakashi screamed again at the sight of it as it mixed with his crimson view—his so much darker, *corrupted*—struggling to get out and get away.

But her arms are strong, warm, holding him tight. It's enough to make his breath hitch, once, twice, before he was properly sobbing. Tears flow unrestrained as the grip turns comforting, and whilst he feels numb.

**There was still pain** –

**Pain which she gave him relief from by knocking him out with bitter tears, holding another broken boy in her arms. It was regrettable and painful and all she has now was a shell of a teenager becoming a man, who had too many terrible demons of his own conjuring.**

**Uzumaki Kushina seldom sees a desperation and terror like the one in Hatake Kakashi, and she hasn't seen such great fear until she meets her significant other's cerulean eyes.**

**So ridden with self-loathing and *anguish* that she gasps, and then cries because this was all they have become.**

**A kunoichi who doesn't know what to do with her hands, holding a tortured boy who was *bleeding* and *hurting* in her embrace because that was all she could do, and a Shinobi who grips on the basin, not caring about the blood that stains porcelain since he doesn't know where to begin to fix the damage which had been wrought.**

**Uzumaki Kushina doesn't know how to heal others and she only knows how to destroy (and protect with her barriers, she refutes, but she has killed just as many people with its burning intensity) and she could only bring him to someone who could physically heal him.**

**Or rather, Minato does in a flash of yellow and blue, sweeping them up in his arms to bring him to**
She breaths with ruthless efficiency as the medics tend to Minato's student with urgency, stitching back muscle and tissue methodically and carefully. She has faith that they could fix the damage she sees – the large twisted wound of flesh torn –

But despite her convictions, every muscle within her was as tense as a strung bow.

>This wasn't enough – it wasn't it. The true damage wasn't physical, the Uzumaki experiences this with every imaginary scars that still lines her heart; it lied beneath the skin, under cartilage and veins, so unreachable that even the most legendary medics did not know where to begin.

*Tsunade-nee had left because of her own wounds,* she grievously thought, fists clenched and trembling, the blood still on her hands.

What could she accomplish when the professionals failed?

But the damage was there, she knows that much, insistent pain of sharp reminders which were far more agonizing than any actual wound. His method of dealing with it was beginning to look like a sick joke:

*As if* the scars that run horizontal of his limbs could actually be what he was on the inside, *as if* the expanding hole in his hand could show what was gaping within.

She cannot remove his weapons for they were vital to him. That they were comfort as they were demise like how memory kept him alive and left him better off dead. She feared for his life but where could she tread to save him without hurting him at the same time?

When did they begin to descend so suddenly, plunging headfirst into the abyss?

The Uzumaki could only kiss his wounded hand after she finally laid him back on his bed, holding it gently as she sat by his bedside. She could only stop him reaching for weapons and help him to muffle his screams in her shoulders. She could be the living warmth amidst the death that surrounded him today, but she couldn't always be his crutch.

*He's so damaged* – and she wondered why the populace couldn't see that. Why they couldn't see that he was just a child traumatised by his own mistakes and why they persist on calling him a 'friend-killer' as if he didn't already believe it? Hatake Kakashi didn't need more persuasion when his mind was already enough. She wished they would stop it and give him reprieve to stop tearing his wound wider – kami, was he not already in enough pain?

What was this injustice? She was so tired of it all, feeling the hot stares and whispers they bore into the boy out in the streets, so much so he preferred the training grounds and the memorial. That he would request to go on solo missions to avoid their criticism, raising the possibility of death due to the lack of back-up as he felt like it was a crime to replace his lost team. It was isolating him even further and it left Minato and Kushina so worried all the time and they couldn't constantly request for him during missions.

*Damn it, 'ttebane,* she wept, biting into her lips to stop the woeful sounds from escaping her mouth. What else could she do to help him?

(She felt so so useless.)
Minato unlocked his door and pushed it open, his hand resting on the doorknob as he allowed some light from the living room to trickle into his office. His eyes roved over the bookshelves against the two walls that were mostly filled with scrolls and books, first arranged in sections by principle. Unsurprisingly, Fūinjutsu took up the most space, before it was splintered off according to the kana alphabetisation. Much of the left shelf was covered in the colours of the element, the scrolls stacked in a more haphazard manner and untouched.

Quietly, he moved towards the large table in the centre of the room, calloused fingers brushing the smooth edge of the red wood, his vision settling on the large unravelled scroll that lay on the surface. His hand came to rest on the complicated seal work, briefly skimming over the smaller pieces of paper stuck onto it; notes of modifications and ramifications to the array that brought his Hiraishin to life. Some to lower the chakra expenditure, others to make the transportation from real time to dimension and back faster –

He scrunched the paper tightly in his fist, flinging the papers onto the floor, alongside with the brushes and the ink stone with blinding rage and pain. It smashed into the bookshelves with such force that it caused a loud thud, clattering down onto the wooden boards and something broke.

It was a shattering; the dried piece of coal cracking into smithereens on impact, its dark bits flying and leaving skid marks on the wooden floors. The paper tore with a sharp rip like limbs torn and his own person crumbling inside and out, pieces clawed out and tumbling to the ground.

What was the point of making all these improvements if he wasn't even there for his students when they needed him the most? What was the point of trying so hard if he never knew they were in danger, when they slipped out so fast that he didn't even have a chance, that maybe he wasn't fast enough, he didn't hold tight, he didn't try to be with them because he trusted them –

The trust was not a lie. He would never regret having trusted their ability to save one another but he wondered if – if if if if if he didn't teach them enough, didn't hone their limbs to evade faster or train to them sense even more and beyond and maybe they would be alive – they would be alive –

The hot tears started dripping faster from his eyes as he collapsed in front of his desk, his hands gripping on it for support.

What did I do wrong? Where did I fail them? Was there something I could have done better for them? Did I not try hard enough? Minato sobbed, his heart breaking as he thought about his sweet Rin and energetic Obito.

Why was it that for all the speed that he possessed, he was only fast enough to react only to the aftermath? To arrange their funerals and tell their family that he was sorry? Why wasn't he ever fast enough to save them, to stop Rin from being captured both times, to save Obito from the collapsing cave and stop Kakashi's tears from falling?

He slammed his fist against the table in his brokenness needing to release some of the turmoil he felt and knocked his head against the table with another heart-wrenching sob. All he could think of was his two students smiling, laughing, training – young and beautiful, filled with so much potential – suddenly nothingness, just thin air, or bleeding with a hole in their chest and he can't.

Why had it come down to this now? They were so close to the end of war, so achingly and frustratingly close to safety and yet –

He turned his head to look at the love of his life who leaned against the doorframe whose violet eyes were brimming with tears and asked:
"What have I done wrong? *Where* have I gone wrong?"

Her tears spilled down her cheeks as her own heart fractured even further. Hadn't she asked herself the same questions? Hadn't she been stewing in her own regrets?

She looked at the man that was always strong: a perfectionist, oftenest neurotic but somehow still so *fragile*, despite being tempered under the highest heats of war in the Toad Sage's experienced hands, the blood of his enemies drenching him, and his love for the village only doing so much to stop him from cracking. Namikaze Minato was strong – *yes*, her mind whispered, memories of her rescue on the night of full moon surfacing – but he was not indomitable like he would lead others to believe. He was not infallible; his brilliant mind could not come up with all the solutions and they have neglected that; *disregarded* the fact that prodigies were human and while talented, rare and coveted, always rising above their stations, they fall as they ascend. Their lives were so desperately short – *she knew this* from the rising stars that plummet, a meteor that leaves its crater marks but *they burn out*.

Wordlessly, she walked forward and sank to her knees in front of him, tugging Minato into her embrace. She doesn't attempt to say anything to alleviate his guilt. She felt as if she was holding frosted glass; filled with thousands of cracks but stubbornly remaining in one piece. They were like the great Hashirama trees slowly scaling towards the havens, surviving through rain, sleet and storms. Their roots intertwine with one another deep within the earth, firmly grabbing on the soil, their barks thickening and leaves evergreen in the face of winter.

But there was a certain beauty to seasons –

Because seasons changed.

There will always be scars that line their trunks but they were destined to become faded with time. They would live with everything that has transpired, their transgressions numbered in the patterns of their ringed structure but they would not be cut down. They would not be felled.

They were *hers* and she would make sure that her boys would be alright. She would make sure that picked each other up and dusted them off, making do with everything they still had.

Like they had done before. She believed that they could do it again.

*Or else, what other options were there left to choose?*

…

"There you are."

Minato groaned as someone poured some warm water on him, slapping his arm on his eyes to wipe the wetness away.

"Wow," the man continued to speak loudly – *On purpose too*, the suffering Jōnin groused, "This is how you treat your sensei after not seeing him for nearly a year? I thought I raised you better than this Mimi-chan."

The term of address snapped him out of his tired haze, and cerulean blue eyes blinked furiously to focus on the older man standing in front of him. His broad figure made an ideal shade from the afternoon sun and Minato rolled to his sides in attempt to get up.

"Jiraiya-sensei?" He mumbled drowsily, the low chakra levels throwing him for a loop of weakness. *Were there always so many trees?* He squinted at the swimming mirage, groaning before flopping back down again.
"Who else could it be other than me?" asked the said Sennin cheekily as he picked his student up off the ground. "Stop groaning, weakling."

"But I'm tired." The Namikaze gave a half-hearted scowl to his mentor that looked more like a pathetic droop of features.

"And whose fault is that?" Jiraiya snorted, dumping him on the bench.

Minato ignored him in lieu of accepting half the ice stick he offered. "I thought you weren't due back to Konoha for another two months, sensei."

"I flow where the rumours go, Mimi-chan. Though Kushina-chan might have had a hand in changing my trajectory this time around." The ice lingered and numbed a part of the said man's tongue.

"She told you, didn't she?"

"The vague details? Somewhat." He shrugged. "Other than that? It's one of the only pieces of news that has been coming out of Kiri thus far. And that place has been dead silent for a while due to the chaos of internal affairs."

"Was it that bad?" Minato winced, biting off the edge of the flavoured ice.

"You tell me," he nudged his apprentice. Noticing his sombre expression and the dessert he left dangling to drip, the spy master's heart sank unpleasantly. This was precisely why the Uzumaki had urged him to come back, and he would be lying if he hadn't ran.

It was rare for Uzumaki Kushina to be panicked about such things, and part of him was hoping that it was just an overreaction rather than his own strong-willed student truly being in distress.

"Talk to me about it, Minato." He prodded gently. "Take your time."

The younger man's breath hitched. "There's nothing to say," he tried to level his voice and failed. "I lost Obito-kun at the Kannabi Bridge and Rin-chan to Kiri's plots. It's my fault."

"You can lie to everyone and fool a civilian into thinking that eating insects can cure his illness, kid, but you've never been good at lying to yourself. Or me. So stop it."

His shoulders hunched forward. "But what can I say, Jiraiya-sensei? I've already thought about it so many times and there's nothing I can do—" the stick cracked slightly—"to change the fact they are dead. I can keep wishing but it won't bring them back alive."

"The deaths of your students can never be simple, so don't try to simplify it into a simulation and hope everything gets better," criticised the Toad Sannin. "You can keep training yourself to the ground and you can keep thinking scenarios on what you could have done but they won't help you, Mimi-chan. They weren't meant to be easy. That's why so many Jōnin-sensei break and even more are scared of taking a team."

"Then how do you deal with it?" asked Minato in frustration that drove him nearly to tears.

He usually had answers – he was used to having answers but none came to mind. All he can think of was the name he just carved, he may as well have carved it deeply into his skin, and the sweet child he just had to bury. He can't stop the overwhelming regret and he was bitter and angry all the time – and the people around him didn't deserve that.
So he looked at his teacher with tormented eyes, pleading for a solution because he usually had one.

Under such a gaze, Jiraiya gave up and said the first thing on his mind.

"I thought it would be like losing a comrade too, you know," he conceded, spinning the ice stick and watching the edges blur and letting it drip. "I've lost so many in the second war, kid," he whispered, "That trying to differentiate one similar pain from another no longer works and you just… jumble them together and everything becomes automatic from repetition. Go to the funeral, offer your condolences, maybe get punched once or twice, carve a name, and cry. Whether you want to or not, no matter how much they meant to you, you moved on. You moved on because you have no choice; there's a war on your borders and your village needs you."

"Is that why you don't ever talk about Kaikon and Warui?" asked Minato lowly, disbelief tinged his voice. "Were they just another death to you, sensei?"

His teacher stiffened as he heard the names of his two former students. "No, that's different," he said slowly and hesitantly.

He may be a writer but he had never pinned down the right explanations for the feelings that still linger. "That's why it's so hard to talk about them... Ever. Still is today. Losing them was so different and far more painful than I could have imagined," he swallowed and paused for a moment.

The leaves rustled as Minato waited him out. The older man sighed and started again. "I loved all three of you like you were my own children that I could never have. Kaikon and Warui's deaths weren't that simple. I don't want them—I don't need them to be but I've tried to do that before and it felt like betrayal. When they died, even if I murdered their killers a few times over, I couldn't view the streets of Konoha without their laughter. I can't forget that years ago, they swore to become accomplished Jōnin and make me proud when they were entering the Chūnin exams. Yet, they won't have a chance to do that because... they're dead. And I thought—" his voice cracked—"What kind of Sannin am I when I couldn't even protect my own children or be there for them when they needed me most?

"I couldn't view it as another death but that's all I've ever been doing. How do I change something that you've done for so long? I've never lost a teammate from the Sannin, kid, and I never realised how bad it could have been."

He pressed a hand on his blonde head. "But, you know, mulling over everything made me realise I still had you. You are the only one I have left, and caring for you was the most important, so I picked you up for an apprenticeship and we left. It's not the best coping mechanism," he acknowledged, "But it worked for me. You can't change how the outcome came to be and you have to deal with the aftermath but you can change how you deal with it. Sometimes you have to accept there are things you cannot control and fight for the things you can: the people who still live and what you can do for them."

Minato leaned against his broad arm, allowing a lone tear to leak from his cerulean eye. "I wish I was as strong as you sometimes, sensei," he made a noise close to a sob. "I look at Kakashi-kun and I don't know what I can do to help him. I try to make sure he's not alone, I try to make him interact with those his age but I feel like it's not enough and I've failed him somehow. I keep thinking that I've ruined him somewhere by making him my apprentice early and taking away his chance to develop with his peers and that's why everything went so wrong. What if that was truly the case? Was I—Was I ever right?"

Such vulnerability was rare coming from the Namikaze, especially when he hardly ever allowed himself to be. Minato was the type of Shinobi who readily accepted expectations and piled it onto
himself without complaint, always focused on the task at hand. As long as he accomplished it, he
could convince himself he was fine and he could deal with it. It was such a worrisome trait in the
eyes of Jiraiya because everyone wanted him to be strong, to lead and breaking was never an option
for a prodigy.

But Jiraiya treated Namikaze Minato as his own son and had all but adopted him, only that he didn't
have a surname to show for it. He had seen him in his worst moments, was the reason why he was
still standing and made him the Shinobi he was today. His arm went around the younger man to give
him comfort, noting that he was taller again. It has been awhile, he discerned thoughtfully.

"In the eyes of your students, everything you do always seems to be right," he broke it down gently.
"They will always confer to you believing you are right and that you know best for them. That you
will give them everything you can give. But the hardest lesson you learn when teaching them is that
you can be wrong; about their aptitudes, their potential and the plans you make for them. Accept that
sometimes you aren't enough. You never will be."

His grip then tightened, assuring. "So what if accepting the puppy ruined his chance for interaction?
Even if you did, remember that you also plucked him out to care for him when he just lost Sakumo
and you dedicated time to make him strong. The most important thing is that you will always be there
unconditionally, holding an umbrella out for him in the coming storm, even if he no longer needs you
as much, and you will continue to worry yourself to death about his future. You will find the greatest
satisfaction in each achievement he makes, thinking 'I helped him get there', and yet it will also be the
same things that will break you if you lose it. Being a teacher is both joyous and regretful, and you
will always try to be enough although you will never be. Just know that they're both the same sides
of a ryo but you can choose which side you want to focus on."

"For me, I'd like to think that I can still hear their happiness even if they're somewhere else, and I
hope they're at peace. And I want you, to someday be the same."

Minato stayed silent as he wiped his tears away, absorbing everything that his teacher had told him.
Within the good advice he was given was Jiraiya's own dashes of insecurity and perhaps, even a little
bit of indirect guilt that he couldn't help Kakashi either.

"I think you're the greatest teacher there ever is," he expressed his gratitude, his eyes finally a clear
crystalline. Jiraiya ruffled his blonde hair affectionately.

"You mean I'm the only teacher you ever had," he corrected, secretly pleased at the high praise.

"Technically Kushina is my teacher since she taught me Fūinjutsu as well," inserted Minato idly,
eating the last bit of ice that was still on the stick.

"Did you ever tell her what she said?" Silence. "Blackmail material then," Jiraiya decided to the
slight pout his student was wearing.

"In all seriousness though, I think what you're doing with the pup is fine. If a broken Shinobi could
be so easily fixed, the Yamanaka would have solved the puzzle by now. The fact that it is still a
question our resident psychologists never managed to overcome tells you how hard it is."

"Kakashi-kun is not broken," the Namikaze defended, loudly and a tad bit too sharp.

"Kid, I haven't seen someone who lost both their teammates come out well, and I'm nearly thirty," he
told him bluntly. "The pup is dangling and he will need time to get back up. You are quite possibly
one of the only living anchors that keeps him alive and you've subconsciously internalised it, which
is why you're making him interact with others. Even if you keep him close while introducing him to
others, anchors takes time to form. You're better off calling back that gaki of yours I met in Iwa."

Another pang of pain shot through his heart and he winced. To be stabbed twice by someone's
deduction was never a great feeling, and his teacher had done exactly that.

Jiraiya's expression turned ugly in an instant. "She's really still in Iwa?"

Minato shrugged uselessly, his shoulders hunching like someone had piled even more weight on
him. He wasn't one to forget things, he knew this, but if Kakashi reacted like this, what would Kara
be like in comparison?

She might try to hide her true personality but the Namikaze saw the fierce protectiveness she had
clear as day. She was the type of kunoichi that would willingly flip the world upside down for those
who entered the ranks as her 'precious people' and she was incredibly attached to them, a side effect
of having nearly no one in the past. She drew strength from the motivation of protection, loved so
deeply despite trying not to and harboured a terrifying strength to couple with all her traits.

If Hatake Kakashi was fractured by the deaths of his two beloved students, Kara would *shatter*.

She'd destroy herself in grief, and perhaps the world with her.

He shuddered at the thought of his exuberant child breaking, his own heart feeling like it could fail
any moment. He didn't want to lose any more. Two was already too much – *he couldn't*.

But that didn't mean he didn't wonder why his two most prodigious students ended up being the most
problematic. The loss of Obito and Rin wasn't just a psychological thing; in losing them, they lost
their stabilisers, and without them, they would infect each other and take off with their talents.
Growth without a proper consolidation of foundation would lead to crumbling – a house atop of a
sharp hill – and they were bound to fail.

Namikaze Minato would rather die than see the day it happened.

Like every other teacher, he wanted his students to outlive him.

The hardest thing he has ever done thus far was burying his own students, and no teacher should
ever have to do it. No one should have put their own child six feet under and constantly question
themselves where they went wrong.

"Yes," he admitted at last, miserable. "Infiltration missions take such a long time and interfering
might jeopardise her safety. I don't even *know* if she's still alive sometimes. And if she does come
back, I don't know how I'm going to tell her. I can't fathom how she will take the news and it almost
certain that she'll react more violently than Kakashi-kun. She didn't even get to say goodbye to them.
She *trusted* that they would be alive—" he clamped his mouth shut, slight waterworks renewing.

All too raw, he exhaled shakily.

"One step at a time," Jiraiya reminded, patting his shoulder. "I'll see what I can do to get her back to
Konoha. You should focus on the pup first."

Minato sent him a look of appreciation.

"Plus," the Toad Sennin continued, "She might fare better than you think. You've raised a dangerous
prodigy of a kunoichi, Mimi-chan. I haven't seen such a strong-willed infiltration specialist in a
while. What have you been *feeding* her?"
"Her temperament? She came to me like that. I hardly had a hand in it, although it did strengthen as I trained her. I thought I would have mentioned that to you."

"Who was her previous teacher again?"

The blonde-haired Jōnin shook his head. "She refused to tell me anything, but she respects whoever it is a lot to keep such a secret."

"A secret or a lie?" muttered the spy master under his breath. "I've been digging information about her, Mimi-chan."

The said man glared at him. It was one thing to research on their enemies but it was quite another to look up an ally. The girl had done nothing to deserve his suspicion.

"Occupation hazard," Jiraiya replied nonchalantly to his silent disdain. "Either way, she is rather strange. I can hardly gather anything on her other than her public life, and this is Konoha. The Hidden Country was his domain, and such information should have easily been in his grasp, should he want it. "Even her file was redacted to the Pure World because it shouldn't be so empty. It's like someone ripped out pages from a book. You didn't adopt a simple student, Mimi-chan. Her background runs too deep to find."

"Jiraiya-sensei," Minato said patiently. "I am your student. I am already aware of that."

It really does make a teacher proud when his methodology was inherited. Jiraiya beamed a little too brightly at that.

"Does it not bother you that her background is not even open to you?"

"It definitely bothered me at first," he said distractedly as a fond smile pulled at the edge of his lips, "But as the weeks went by, I stopped caring about it. As long as she was around, alive, laughing and loyal, I thought that everything would be fine. I couldn't care less if she was a Kurama or somehow connected to the Uchiha and I owe them quite a bit. I know she's hiding a lot of things and I do hope there will come a day where she will trust me enough to confide in me. Even if she doesn't, she's still like the daughter I wish to have. She's family. And that's enough for me."

"I'm not as complicated as her so I can't relate," he added, crystalline blue eyes earnest. "But I would like to do what you have done for me, Jiraiya-sensei. I just… from the perspective of someone being cared for, I truly treasure all you have given me."

The said man blinked owlishly as he registered the praise. Unable to help himself, he pulled his son-but-all-in-blood into a hug.

"You are a good teacher," Jiraiya finally said with a half-croak, "Don't ever doubt that, Mimi-chan. After all, you are the type to find all and the best solutions until you have it."

"…Thanks," said Minato sincerely.

His teacher ruffled his hair for the last time after releasing him before he got up. "No problem, kid. Now do your sensei a favour and stop worrying yourself to death. And that also includes over training. You're making Kushina-chan prematurely grey with whatever you're doing to yourself and you love her red hair."

Minato flushed in protest. "I don't over train—"

Jiraiya looked pointedly at the destroyed scenery in front of him before looking back at the younger
"—Okay, I'll try to cut down on it," he conceded reluctantly.

"And he wonders why his students tend to vent their emotions by training until they are sent to the hospital," grumbled the older man, adjusting the scroll behind his back.

Minato gave him a similar pointed look, this time with a raised eyebrow.

"Who's the one getting reprimanded?" Jiraiya almost demanded in exasperation. "I swear, kid, if I wasn't fond of you I would have set Kushina-chan on you. She's been frantic about how her boys—" he raised his pitch slightly as if in hysteria—"were straining themselves to death and she doesn't know what to do to stop them."

Minato stilled mid-stand. "… I owe her a serious apology, don't I?"

The Uzumaki had been so helpful through it all – picking them up, wiping their tears and sometimes even blood. She had been so selfless and understanding of their pain, that his negligence felt like someone had pricked him with senbon a thousand times.

"Kid, you better grovel, hard." He paused as he turned. "She does understands how you feel though, so she'll probably spare you after a few hours."

Minato hummed in agreement. His teacher's prediction on his lover had always been on point. "Are you leaving Konoha soon again, sensei?"

"No, I have matters to deal with first," he informed him. "I'll probably pay you a visit again before I leave to gather more reports."

With that, he signed his goodbye and casted a shushin in the direction of the Hokage's building.

…

For someone who was awfully carefree and outgoing with a small case of wanderlust, Jiraiya had undoubtedly mastered the art of looks speaking volumes.

He had even used a door this time, although he drew a line at having to make an appointment with his secretary first. Too iffy, his Toad student would say and that sentiment was shared by his other teammates when they were around.

"What do you want, Raiya?" Hiruzen asked, following his student's curious inspection of his office warily. Mild irritation was rolling off the white-haired man in waves, and as much as the show of attitude amused the Hokage, he had paperwork to clear and wasn't really in the mood to deal with his student's antics right now.

"Am I not allowed to visit my old sensei when I want to?" He asked, an idiotic smile on his face as he placed his own scroll of reports on top of the pyramid of scrolls.

Perhaps the common person could be fooled by his expression, but Sarutobi Hiruzen had a hand in creating the façade he put forth and he could easily differ between a smile that was masking annoyance or one that was genuine.

"I am busy at the present moment, Raiya," he sighed, rubbing his temples as he sanctioned the orders that needed to be sent out. "If you have anything to say, would you mind saying it now?"
The Sennin's demeanour smoothed out. "I want to pull Kara out of Iwa."

Unfazed, the Hokage shifted a pile of papers away and gave him back another scroll.

"Done."

He blinked in surprise. *That was too easy.*

"You planned for this?"

"Who do you take me for, Raiya?" asked Hiruzen, exhausted. "It's not the first time I've shifted my Shinobi to ensure their sanity, and it certainly won't be the last. It has always been my intention to pull out Kara-chan. I have never planned to keep her in Iwa long term."

"She should never have been there in the first place, sensei," he rebutted. "You have more options other than a ten year old."

"Who is an abled and talented Chūnin kunoichi no less," he gave back. "It was a trial of sorts, to see how capable she was."

"Like what you did to us?" Jiraiya bit out resentfully.

It came out so quickly – a slip of a tongue – that resentment shocked even him, but he supposed that the abandonment of his own teammate might have been a little too new.

Sarutobi Hiruzen had the undying philosophy that situations under duress forced potential bloom, and to an extent, it was undeniable. It *did* produce results. (Hence the man's fascination with the concept.) But that did not mean that one could squeeze the vessel so tight and not expect them to crack or slip out of their fingers from all the pressure. He knew the Sandaime's beliefs because he himself had been a product or such a trial and like the rest of his Sannin, his own sanity was questionable.

Power always came with a price; and they paid for it in fragile vices.

He saw it in Tsunade-hime's drawn out drowning as she turned to alcohol after losing the two most important men in her life and could no longer find the grip, despite all her strength, to hold on to the rest. He could feel the growing depravity that was no longer just innocent curiosity from Orochimaru, and even in himself, those cracks widening – not blooming flowers but dark matter, the empty space within neglected as they were forced to balloon in their own potential with barely any support.

The legendary Sannin were strong – fact uncontested – but only in the Shinobi aspect. Away from the front of war, they were left with an ugly dissonance, the remnants of individuals who invested too much into their careers and barely left anything for themselves.

It had taken him years and the warmth of students for him to heal and find humanity, and he would rather be damned than let his apprentice's student walk down the same road as he did.

He taught his students differently for a reason.

"Why change a method that gives results, Raiya?"

"Talent or not, it doesn't mean she has to be put through such a grinder, sensei. Infiltration was not meant for the young or light hearted. It breaks the toughest of Shinobi with disassociation, Sensei, so... *Why?*"
The Hokage steepled her fingers. "I saw it fit to. A sword is nothing if not tempered. If she has been forged by the best, folded laboriously and carefully, shouldn't her mettle be tested through the heats of war? If she survives – which she still does – she will be an asset to Konoha."

And there it was, Jiraiya thought with gritted teeth, the scales of benefits and costs that would never stop teetering in his teacher's mind. The operations of such a metric would never cease – not when the hat was on his head – and it was turning the man cold. Sometimes, this was all Konoha's Shinobi might amount to him; just figures and statistics on paper, a tool to serve the village.

*Where were the times where we were just Nade, Orochi and Raiya?*

Try as the Hokage might to show that he cared with his crafted grandfatherly persona, both the calculative streak and the kind were intrinsically part of Sarutobi Hiruzen. He was both the cold-blooded domineering dictator of a war leader and a nurturing father in the same hand, and this was something Jiraiya knew considering how many years he had spent under his teacher's guidance. Perhaps it had not been his intention to reveal such ugliness (then again, maybe it had carefully revealed to be truthful to the students who once revered him) but it had been exposed; those days of innocence and blind faith were too far gone to be retrieved.

"And what if she breaks?" he asked quietly, tone heavy and low.

A flash of *something* flitted past the older man's eye but it was too quick to catch.

"I prefer not to doubt potential unless the worst come to worst," he stated, scratching on his signature on another complaint. "Is that all you came for?"

Jiraiya glanced at the scroll in his hand. "Yes," he replied, taking the window out instead.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Thank you for 350 kudos despite my sadism (and the fact that people read this piece still amazes me till this day, lmao. And its going to be a year since I started, holy cripes)

Soooo.....
I'm self-aware that I am a cruel writer, but I would like to think I give as I take?

This is probably (and hopefully) the most angst filled chapter I will ever write. It honestly broke me a little to write this - Kakashi hurting himself to punish himself, Minato breaking because I don't intend for him to be perfect, and the revelation of the flaws in Shinobi's mindset of prodigies.

Most of you are justifiably angry that Naruto didn't change much... but I already mentioned in the first chapter: this is not an ideal world. My logic flows like this - if there was a way to win the war easier with lesser casualties, why wouldn't you do it?
“Clean up your mess,” he issued, voice muffled through the door she was passing by.

It was a heartless order which the middleman scarcely gave thought to – he had given too many of these to have a shred of compassion left – and the words coming out of his mouth were not his own to begin with.

Dark eyes twinkled with sadness.

All things, bitter, sweet or bland had to come to end.

Kara approached Minami with an ageless innocence; an act of pretence; the skip of her steps light and some heavy.

“Minami-san,” she greeted enthusiastically, wrapping her smaller arms around the older woman’s neck. Her attempt to channel some longing was not in vain because the time-traveller was sure she would add her to her list of dead names.

The said woman laughed, hands holding fast to the girl. They were like a choker pressing down on her throat, not yet suffocating, but it was still a reminder of her responsibilities. *And affection,* Minami wondered, but Iwa-nin had never placed too much importance in attachments.

‘Let me do this, kit,’ the ancient voice sounded in her mind, tails curling and pulling at her consciousness.

The jinchūriki allowed him to take control, relinquishing it with a small gasp, but not enough to rouse suspicion.

It was over in an instant.

A tail of chakra whipped out from human limb and tightened the hold to strangle. It was too fast to comprehend and the Bijuu expounded on that, its movements swift as it snapped the fragile neck.

Unlike its vessel, the Kyuubi no Kitsune did not care for mortal chains. Perhaps it was a blessing for both of them.

‘It is done.’

“I know, ‘ttebane,’” she whispered back, blue eyes doleful as she held her caretaker in her embrace.

A lone tear fell as she gazed out of the window at the rising sun—

And at the sea of red that encroached the skies.

…
“Are you okay?” they often ask.

“No, I’m not,” he wants to say.

Instead, he crinkles his eye close and replies:

“I’ve been better."

...

“It’s you?” Kara sounded her surprise.

“It’s me,” a cheery voice replied, pushing off from the wall that he was leaning against, a shit-eating grin so large that it threatened to split his face in two.

The jinchūriki quirked an eyebrow at his smugness, adjusting her backpack subconsciously.

“Since when did escorting people require such high skill?”

Jiraiya guffawed. “We’d be screwed if they did, gaki. We’d be all out of business.”

“True,” she snorted, “Then why are you here?”

“Personal interests,” the Sannin continued to grin freely. “And matters I intend to see through.”

“… That’s totally not vague at all, Oji-san.”

Even as she said that, she naturally had her own suspicions as to why Jiraiya was her designated escort; she has lived two lives and she was once his student. More specifically, Kara was the matter that he was interested in, because she was sure that any search for her history would yield no results.

(You can’t find a senbon in the haystack if there wasn’t a senbon to begin with after all.)

And if there was something that could peeve a spy master, it would be the lack of information.

“You don’t need to worry about it,” said Jiraiya as he adjusted the grass hat on his head. “We ought to get going before the sun peaks. The guards are about to change shifts.”

The time-traveller hummed out her acceptance before biting into her lip.

Stop reminiscing, she chided herself, although she didn’t want the sight of his broad back walking in front of her to fade from her eyes. It was too close to the time where it was just him and her, the two of them on the road, laughing and training without a care in the world.

She missed the simpler days where she was ignorant to the dangers that lurked in the corners of the Elemental Nations, content in his protection. But, she admitted with sorrow, I can never go back.

“Are you going to stand there until afternoon comes?”

“I was waiting for you to walk faster, Oji-san.”

“Brat.”

...

When the smell of steam, wood and perfumed oil first hits her nose, she realised she shouldn’t even be surprised to be at such an establishment.
“An onsen?” She couldn’t help but ask, almost teasing. “Oji-san, it’s not very nice to do your ‘research’ when you have younger company around.”

“I have standards, and you have nothing to look at yet,” he replied, giving her a bored one-over.

You have standards? Kara was almost incredulous. She had seen the man peep in broad daylight, disguise as a woman to view a brothel and had to bail him out numerous occasions. Standards was not an attribute she would give to the man, and if her mother had worried about her picking up vices, Jiraiya was the prime example of what to avoid.

“Stop being condescending,” he smacked the back of her head, “This is for your benefit, gaki, not mine.”

“Mine?” Echoed the girl, confused.

“I’m not sure if you’ve noticed but you look like an Iwa-nin. From the way you move,” he gestured at the more forceful steps she took on pavement, “To the way you smell and dress, it reeks of Iwa. If you were to report at the outpost now, I can guarantee you wouldn’t make five miles in before the patrol arrests you.”

He pushed her forward towards the ladies’ side after throwing the room’s key in her hands. “Go relax and centre yourself. You look like you need it.”

Kara tugged subconsciously at the ends of her dark hair. “Are you going to be around, ‘ttebane?”

“I’ll be around until my mission ends,” Jiraiya reassured.

Mission, she reminded herself. Of course. It’s an obligation to him.

‘You’re awfully affected by this,’ Kurama noted as they walked into the establishment.

She shoved her bag into the cubicle before stripping off her clothes. ‘It’s the first time in a long while,’ she told him, breathing in the dense steam that was being emitted from behind the curtains. ‘I think it’s been years actually. Ero-sennin… he was usually the one who pushed me to relax, remember?’

‘Whenever I was training too hard,’ she sat in front of a mirror to look at her knackered visage, ‘Whenever I was feeling stressed. He just knew, and he would bring me to an onsen, ‘ttebane. It was his habit and how he showed that he cared.’

‘Good memories,’ her beast surmised for her.

Allowing the shower head to drench her from the top of her head to her toes, she indulged in the sweet relief of heated waters loosening her muscles.

‘Very distinctly him. But this time, he’s wary of me, ‘ttebane. It’s not the same… like it’s been ruined somehow. He doesn’t trust me like before.’

‘Can you blame him? A timeline ago, you were the known daughter of his student, and he was your god-father. He was making up for lost time. Now, you are but a student that mysteriously appeared, and you have done nothing nor are you anyone who deserves his trust.’

‘And that sucks,’ she grumbled, sticking a toe into the onsen before sinking in fully. ‘You don’t
really appreciate trust until you don’t have it. I want him to be the Ero-sennin I knew. I mean, he is, ‘ttebane, but he just… isn’t.’

They enjoy the waters quietly for a few minutes.

‘…How far do you think his suspicions go?’ Kara asked hesitantly.

‘Not too deep but it should not be shallow either. He does not know what to expect when it comes to dealing with you, considering how your origins are untraceable – or unthinkable, really. But I am confident he will not be able to piece two and two together so long as you keep them under the wraps.’

Before their arrival to this timeline, both the Bijuu and jinchūriki had already theorised that if there was any possibility of them being found out, it might be due to the Gama’s influence. Having been with the Sage of Six Paths and Naruto, the Kyuubi had never doubted the power of their prophecies. If the future were to change drastically, the omniscient Ōgama Sennin would have been the first to know.

And by extension, Jiraiya would be aware that someone held the key to his own future.

But to identify Kara as the person who changed the prophecy would be ridiculous or just dumb luck; if anything she would be one of the last few on the list, no matter how mysterious her beginnings were.

‘Do you think the toads will tell him?’

Kurama shook his head. ‘The Gama believe in allowing nature to take its course. If they had wanted to tell him, they already would have, especially when you are easy to reach. Prophecies are fickle things – they, who are the most intimate with them are also the most aware, and it is unlikely that they will spoil your plans unless they are detrimental to the future.’

‘That’s good,’ she murmured, closing her eyes.

She doesn’t need anyone to know that she’s a time-traveller.

…

When she was done with the onsen, the girl was unsurprised that their shared room was empty. Conveniently positioned at the corner of the hotel on the third floor, it had numerous long windows – sufficiently large to jump out of in case of emergency – and with enough space between the window and door to be safe. It was to the spy master’s usual requirements, she decided with a critical eye, dumping her bag and towel near the wall.

She’d bet that this place had a good price to quality ratio, considering how he was usually quite miserly about his travelling expenses.

Kara smiled slightly while she bounded over to the table situated in the middle of the room, picking up the folded clothes. The orange jacket material felt right in her hands, albeit slightly rough since it had yet to be worn in. The kunoichi quickly slipped them on, pleased with the correct proportions (it’d be weirder on the Jiraiya’s part if he was wrong), tugging on it a few times to smooth some of the wrinkles out.

What should I do now? She pondered. There was no use in being in an empty room and it was too early to sleep. Decision made, she formed her usual hand seal for a clone.
“Stay here,” she ordered. “Write down my location on paper when you receive the information and pop yourself. If you’re bored, trap the windows.”

“Okay,” her replica chirped.

With that, Kara opened the window and jumped out, senses extending to find a clear space to practice her kata.

She had been conditioning her muscles even during her infiltration – gravity and chakra suppressing seals and all – but she was effectively out of combat for nearly two years and her movements were probably rusty. She sighed. It would be painful to get up to speed again.

And that was exactly how Jiraiya found her when he finally done gathering information.

In the middle of a small clearing the kunoichi stood, slowly repeating her kata one set at a time, paying close attention to each action she transitioned to. From punches to kicks, she exerted a certain strength and intensity, wanting to make the most of the daylight left.

The Toad Sennin remained perched on a small boulder as he quietly observed his apprentice’s student, scrutinising her movements like any other teacher would. The elegance and force in her fighting style that Minato talked about wasn’t unfounded, he supposed, somewhat appreciative of the effort she was putting forth.

“You know,” he called out after she was done with a set, “You’re wasting the bath you just took with the exercise you’re doing.”

“So what?” She half-yelled breathlessly. “It wasn’t like I had anything to do while you were out gathering information Oji-san! I can take another shower later!”

He rose an eyebrow at her perceptiveness. “Quit calling me Oji-san, I’m not that old.”

“What can I say?” He sniffled, grinning behind his palm. “I’m sensitive.”

Kara groaned. “Then what do you want me to call you?”

“Well, you can begin by calling me the great and gallant Sennin of Mt. Myōboku, Jiraiya-sama!” exclaimed the older man cheekily.

The girl resisted the urge to hurl a rock at him. “I wouldn’t call you that even if the Shinigami threatened to take me, ‘ttebane,” she deadpanned, indignant. “One, it’s a mouthful, two, you’re more like an Ero-jiji.”

He gaped while she nodded as if to approve of her thoughts. “Okay, I’ll call you Ero-sennin from now on since I can’t call you Oji-san.”

“….Your decision making skills are terrible.”

She glanced over her shoulder to grin at him brightly, “Really? I think my naming sense is pretty good.”

“Who are you even comparing yourself to?”

“Minato-sensei,” Kara chirped winningly.
He contemplated that. “Point made,” he conceded. “But it’s still terrible.”

“I’m not changing it, Ero-sennin,” she emphasised each syllable slowly just to annoy him.

Her vermillion eyes challenged him to out-stubborn her, and he immediately decided it wasn’t worth his breath to do it. He was an adult and she was a child; she would eventually grow out of that retarded nickname she gave him.

“What kind of kata were you doing anyway?” He shifted the topic casually.

His features narrowed slightly at her tensing muscles. “Self-adapted,” she finally replied. “I took some of the popular styles and merged them together.”

“I don’t know much about it,” said Jiraiya as he jumped down from the boulder and strode towards her, “But when you kicked and released—” he tapped her thigh and knee—“It was too tense. It restricted your following pivot.”

Kara became abashed at his comment. “Um…” she stepped back, “I’m out of practice, ‘ttebane. My body was kind of in shape because Minami-san would never let me become unhealthy but it’s been awhile since I’ve fought anyone. I couldn’t practice it without raising suspicion.”

“Shame that you chose infiltration then,” Jiraiya mused, “You’d have been fierce.”

“Are you trying to get me change my specialization, Ero-sennin?”

“Is it working?”

“Nope,” said Kara, retying her askew ponytail. “I don’t want to waste the time I spent becoming good at infiltrating.”

“Huh.”

“…You’re not going to drop this any time soon, are you?”

“You can’t blame a man from trying.”

Her eyes crinkle close as she feigned a smile. “But I don’t think you can stop me, ‘ttebane.”

…

They don’t talk about the conversation that they had after that.

But relations do get better, even if they started with begrudging respect.

(She was kidding, by the way.

They argued all the damn time.)

“Why would I tell you my Fūinjutsu method, Ero-sennin?” Kara said in disbelief. “Which Fūinjutsu user would tell you their methods because I want in too, ‘ttebane.”

“Mimi-chan totally did and I know his Hiraishin seal work because I helped him with it. And you should share your Henge seal with a fellow spy. It’s useful and you know it!”

“Invent your own, old man—” She moved away from his grabbing hands with the dexterity of an eel—“Damn it, Ero-sennin, I’m not telling you! It’s not that difficult to adapt a Henge and mine is too
chakra consuming for you, ‘ttebane!’

“It’s easier to use something that already exists. Less effort and all.”

“Well, I’m not telling you and you can’t bribe me with Minato-sensei’s Hiraishin array because I know it too—”

“Does he know that you know it?”

—No he doesn’t but that’s not the point, ‘ttebane—“

“Mimi-chan is going to be so mad when I tell him,” Jiraiya cackled,

“—Stop blackmailing me!” She hissed back, leaping forward so he couldn’t touch her. “And he showed it to me for reference… Although he probably thinks I don’t understand it,” she admitted to the last part.

Seeing the original piece rather than having to mock one up from the remnants of his seal work had been an eye-opener. His had been a thousand times more refined and chakra efficient than her crude imitation – chakra expenditure really wasn’t a problem for her – and it had added insights to her own knowledge.

But what Namikaze Minato probably didn’t know was that she comprehended his space-time Fūinjutsu completely; from the pocket dimensions he built down to the marking of the coordinates and defences to stop someone else from replicating his work, she understood. After all, he wasn’t aware that she reached the peak of what space-time could reach – time-travel.

Her magnum opus had spanned over thousands of layers and it was unfathomable just from a moment’s glance. There were new matrixes, her own sealing language and perhaps more new variables that were scarcely considered since it was usually impractical to piece together. Till this day, Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto was surprised that it even worked.

It was a rare spark of madness and she frankly didn’t dare to repeat the experience even if she knew the formula.

“Did you really understand it though?” asked Jiraiya out of curiosity.

She kicked up some pebbles beneath her feet. “I did,” Kara didn’t try to hide. “Kushina-nee always said I had a natural aptitude to just get Fūinjutsu.”

“Kind of like an Uzumaki then?”

She laughed with a twinge of guilt in her heart. “Uzumaki? I don’t dare to compare, ‘ttebane.”

“Compare, you can’t. But you respect her so much that you would adopt her verbal tic, right?”

The girl blushed at when he brought the attention to her habit. Well, she’s my mother, her mind cried out, aching dully as it yearned to call someone family after being an orphan for so long.

“Actually… no,” the spy master corrected himself as he peered closer, “You love her immensely, don’t you?”

‘Right on the nail.’

Sometimes, she wished he could stop being so good at reading people.
Before the girl could attempt a weak retort, someone intercepted loudly:

“Jiraiya-san!” One of the Konoha-nin dropped down in front of them, greeting the Sannin dutifully. Kara immediately shielded her face away by looking to side, wishing that the sun could somehow cool her cheeks.

“Hey,” the said Sennin waved back amicably. “We’ve hit the patrol area?”

“Around five kilometres,” he confirmed. “And this is…” he gestured at Kara.

“She’s a Konoha-nin, Yun, rest assured. If you get yelled at for letting someone through, just tell them I’m vouching for her.”

“Right. I won’t ask too much about her then. You should rush back to camp though. Orochimaru-san has been expecting you for quite a while. He was still commanding when I left and he looked more annoyed than usual.”

“Really?” Jiraiya groaned, proceeding to mumble something about ‘damn’, ‘hebi’ and ‘passive aggressive’, not necessarily in that order. “Thanks for the information either way. You should be back on your fun patrol, Yun.”

The Shinobi made a face at his salute. “Don’t joke about that Jiraiya-san. You know how boring they can get.”

“Hey, everyone gets their fair share of patrol missions before they rise through the ranks,” laughed Jiraiya. “Builds character, the higher ups would say.”

Jokingly, Yun replied, “They meant building mold hills right?”

“Don’t let them hear that,” said the older man in mock seriousness. “You should get along with it though, or you’re going to get bitten for slacking off.” Then he turned to Kara. “We’re running for it. You up?”

“Ero-sennin, I’m a Konoha-nin,” Kara grinned, using his words.

He ruffled her hair.

“Isn’t that right.”

…

The moment they hit camp, Kara was struck by how much she missed Konoha.

When she was perpetually surrounded by reds and browns – signature colours of Iwa – it hadn’t bothered her per se. There hadn’t been a dramatic need to acclimate herself to high rock towers and the colder culture; she hardly had to when she spent the last few years of her previous life in the company of many. Granted, Iwa wasn’t Konoha, but it didn’t mean she had to feel uncomfortable.

The time-traveller had longed viewed the entirety of the Elemental Nations as her home.

Where had she not roamed in the alliance of Shinobi?

Now, all she could see were greens, blues and blacks and everything under her chakra sense was mostly fire; varying sparks of fluttering firefly-like reds in her peripheral with occasional dots of earth and water in between. Green tents were lined up in an orderly fashion as Konoha-nin roamed about, the atmosphere at ease with the end of the Iwa-Konoha war having been called.
“Where’s the base commander at?” Jiraiya nudged the random Shinobi that was passing by.

A snarl suddenly resounded in the back of the jinchūriki mind, the Kyuubi no Kitsune’s senses ringing at the depravity and human suffering which tainted the approaching soul. Even if it wasn’t as dense as the previous timeline, it was still repulsive. Her skin prickled at the warning about ‘Snakes’, and she forced her expression to be blank.

“I’m here,” Orochimaru smoothly said, stepping next to his old teammate in a soundless slither.

“Orochi,” Jiraiya greeted, slinging an arm around the shorter man (it was the sandals and the hair). “Just who I was looking for. I have some information for you and I found this little informant along the road.”

“You’re late,” he snapped, irate. “You were supposed to be here two days ago before the sun set beneath the mountains.”

Jiraiya waved the criticism away. “You know I still get my job done even if it is at my own pace, Orochimaru. If it was urgent, I would have sent word in advance. Take it as a good sign that things are calm.”

“Duties are duties, Jiraiya. You ought to stop taking them so lightly and cut down on your shenanigans.” Before his teammate could retort again, he turned to the girl with narrowed brows, the rings around his eyes thinner and reproachful. “And you are?”

“Orochimaru-san,” she acknowledged stiffly, her voice soft as she confirmed her identity. “When leaves fall, they burn. And from ashes, they become dust.”

“Ah. Another latecomer. I expected better of you, Airi.” he patronised her slightly with her code name.

“Apologies,” she replied back, keeping the disdain out of her tone. “I was with Jiraiya-san since we had to report to the same place.”

Of all the people Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto disliked, a number that could only be counted with two hands, Orochimaru was in her shit list for all he had done. Even if he was a good teacher to her brother figure, she couldn’t forgive how he had stolen Sasuke away and corrupted his mind for a time, going as far as to desire his younger body for his own. He was a disease, craven; having overstepped the boundaries of creativity and science, toying with mortality so much so that living victims would never forget the damage he had dealt onto them. Tenzo, even with his perfected blank face, could not stop his features from darkening as he remembered the lights going out one by one. She had even been privy to the confidential files about his cruelty and they still brought chills down her spine. Adding on to the fact that he had killed the Sandaime and destroyed Konoha. His actions had once been irredeemable in her mind.

The only thing that made him worthy of redemption was that in the Fourth Shinobi he had been an ally, who had faithfully protected Tsunade as she healed until her last dying breath. The vengeance he wrought on the husked army soon after had been glorious and before she knew it, their relationship had morphed into cold tolerance. The Snake Summoner was the last of Sannin - the last piece of the legacy of the two people she loved and she had clung onto that, just as she was used an evidence to prove that both existed and everything they had fought for hadn't completely been for naught.

Orochimaru… He had also been one of the survivors of the last war. They hadn’t communicated much afterwards, but the last time she heard about him, he was trying to create a companion.
Different methodologies, she used to think, as both of them were trying to find company although hers went beyond the realm of logic and biology.

But that was all in the past (or future?), and in this timeline, she had hardly seen the Snake Summoner nor witnessed the start of his descent to the vile and unspeakable atrocities she knew him capable of. Separated by shifts of war and their different ranks, even catching a glimpse of him was difficult and that was not even factoring the researcher’s preference to stay in his lab.

“Don’t patronise her, Orochimaru,” Jiraiya gently placed a hand on her head. “It was my fault for taking her on a detour. I wanted to get to know Minato’s student better.”

“And infect them with your habits in the process? I find your bonding session quite counterproductive.”

“Counterproductive?” Jiraiya quirked his lips. “I think it is a good thing to slow down sometimes instead of hurrying ourselves to our deaths, Orochi. There’s always something to appreciate along the road – going too fast would risk you missing it.”

Gold eyes, silted and unreadable, stared at its fellow Sannin. “Hand in your report and head to the supply unit,” he told the young kunoichi at last. “I’ll tolerate it this once. Don’t let it happen again.”

She nodded wryly, not in the mood to become the target of his moodiness. She’ll let Jiraiya be the dummy for that.

“Go get your hitat-ate and weapon stocks, gaki. You look bare without them.” He encouraged, taking her report and knocking her forehead with it lightly. “We’ll leave for Konoha after that.”

“You’re going back with me?” She asked in surprise.

She was half-expecting him to go back to gathering information.

“I told you I would. I’m not going to disappear or abandon you halfway for my own convenience, kid.”

She blinked owlishly at his proclamation, trying to progress what he just said.

“Okay,” she acquiesced quietly, trying to still her swelling heart as she walked away.

Jiraiya shook her head. Why did she fear him leaving her so much when she barely knew him?

Worse, why did it seem like she was so used to people leaving?

…

The smell of black oxide lingering was the first sensation that she registered when she opened the tent flap to the supply unit. In accordance to the room’s purpose, dark metals and flak vests were either on racks or piled around the dim room in some semblance of order, leaving the middle of it empty enough for an administrative table.

The desk Shinobi looked up from his papers with a raised eyebrow. “Just came back from a mission, kunoichi-chan?”

She hummed her affirmative. “Just from the backlines,” she smiled innocently, picking up a weapon brace with some interest.

Just? He pondered, his eyebrow unable to raise any further. “Kudos then,” he saluted despite not
fully believing her words. “How’s the situation back there?”

“The call for the end of war, a lot of mourning and anger, ‘ttebane,’” replied Kara absentmindedly. “About the same for every village I think. Can I have a pouch and a hitat-ate please?”

“Did you lose them?” He was going to have to record it if she did.

She shook her head in the negative. “It’s more like I couldn’t bring them for the mission and left it back home. It would have blown my cover if I brought it around.”

“Here,” he tossed the said items he fetched to her. “Welcome back to the ranks then.”

Smiling faintly at the metal protector, the girl tied it gingerly to her forehead, processing its coolness against her skin. “Thanks. How’s Konoha?”

The Shinobi who expected the question this time, shrugged. “Last time the news came in, we were still negotiating peace with Kumo and the Sandaime voiced his intentions to step down from the Hokage seat. It was the backlash from the pacifist move he made with Iwa, I think.”

“Is it necessarily bad?” She frowned more to herself, testing the grip of the kunai in her hands. “Being a pacifist, I mean?”

“Not really,” he answered cautiously. “It means less resentment for later between the two villages since there are no conditions attached. But from a political standpoint? It really wasn’t the best idea for him, especially when so many people are angry at those rock bastards.”

Looking over her shoulders, she asked: “Are you one of those people that are angry as well?”

“Like every Shinobi who lost someone, yes. But I’m still grateful for the end of the war,” he waved his paperwork around like a white flag, “Less deaths and less work to process.”

Kara giggled at that. “What else?”

“Well, there have been more people short-listed for Hokage, for one. Orochimaru from the Sannin was an instant vote in,” the time-traveller’s features darkened a little, “And the Yellow Flash is second in running. With the stunt he pulled on Iwa,” he let out a low whistle, “It’s a no-brainer that he has the popular vote.”

*Matters I already know*, she idly thought. *Minato-sensei is going to win the seat in the end.*

“Strong,” she mumbled half-heartedly.

“Personally, I think Namikaze Minato is the better pick,” the Shinobi continued on his rant. “He’s younger and with more potential for growth and he’s known to be more charismatic too. A lot of Shinobi – especially those that fought on the Iwa side of war – would willingly follow him. I heard he also has quite a few connections to the current heads of the Shinobi clans. Orochimaru-san can compare in curriculum vitae but his influence is more in the fact that he is the Sannin rather than just an individual alone. And he kind of gives me the creeps with his eyes honestly.”

The jinchūriki let out an inaudible sigh, subconsciously pressing a hand to her cheek. They were always so quick to judge people by their appearances. With powdery pale skin and haunting gold eyes, alongside the gruesome reputation Snake Summoners tended to have due to the conditions of their contract, Orochimaru hardly had it easy.

Even being at the peak of the Shinobi world didn't save him from discrimination and neither did
talent, his looks still being used as a tool to criticise him.

Perhaps, she speculated with rue, that was why he had branded the Sound-nin with curse marks beyond the artificial boost of strength it provided. If he was been surrounded by monsters and mutations of his own making, he would be normal - oddities would have been revered rather than shunned in his created village. A beautiful notion, she thought, but expecting benevolence from a man who took advantage of the misery of others was like swallowing poison and expecting it to not kill her.

“Although I must say,” the Shinobi proceeded with a click of his tongue. It's a shame that the Yellow Flash ended up raising such a terrible student, friend-killer and all. His only stain, I’d say.”

In an instant, the sweet-smiling and accommodating kunoichi turned; terrible killing intent bursting out of her and eyes glowering crimson. Without hesitation, the senbon shot off from her hand, coming too close to his ear and piercing through the fabric of the tent.

The desk Shinobi froze at the sudden change of temperament, one which was too cold for a girl of nearly eleven autumns.

Teeth bared, she spoke. “Don't you dare speak of words you don't even know.” She fumed. “Friend-killer? Who are you to judge, Shinobi-san? Do you know what actually happen, ‘ttebane? If you don't, why do you spout those stupid rumours to everyone who steps into this tent, ‘ttebane?”

“Why do you even care?” He stuttered out, regaining his senses.

“Because I'm also the student of the Hokage candidate you were praising,” she said slowly, threat unveiling like a looming shadow. “I'm teammate of Hatake Kakashi who you just insulted.” She hissed, spitting fire. “Hatake Kakashi has a name and it is not friend-killer. If you spread that bullshit one more time without knowing what happened,” she glared, “Don't blame me when you find yourself in a ditch. Because that’s a promise ‘ttebane.”

She was standing in front of the desk now, claws digging into the hardwood, her face so close such that he could see every line of anger contorting her face. He leaned back into his chair, suddenly intimidated by a kunoichi so much younger than him because he could almost see a red outline and smoke surfacing from her body like bad omen.

Kara was akin to a predator staring down on her own prey, ready to rip his tongue out from his throat. No – it was a larger monster bearing its presence down on him, overbearing like a mountain and furious.

The girl then moved away, her nefarious aura receding and returning light back to the room.

“Good day, ‘ttebane,” she smiled, incisors glinting.

The desk Shinobi only let out the breath he was holding when she was finally out of sight.

He looked back at the small holes she pierced through the tent fabric.

What in the name of the Shodai was that?

…

Hatake Kakashi looked at his hand absentmindedly, gazing at the angry patch of skin he inflicted upon himself. What he had tried to mutilate had scarred; cross-hatched in so many directions like it a moment caught in mid-explosion – and he supposed it was an accurate representation.
It was fitting that he had another scar... his father had left one on his heart, Obito on his eye and now, Rin on his hand. Momentarily, he felt phantom pain shoot through the latter two parts and the boy told himself that it wasn’t actually there.

His hand would heal like most wounds although it would never be the same. He had tried to practice his hand seals and felt the skin stretch – a minor strain, not too bad – and the medic had told him to be thankful that it hadn’t permanently damaged his motor skills. Should I be? He quickly thought, bringing his palm into the sunlight.

A soft knock interrupted his inspection.

The young Jōnin looked at his teacher who was leaning against the door, cerulean eyes concerned.

“Hey,” murmured Minato, fist still resting against the door. “Can I come in?”

What an odd question, Kakashi thought. “Sure,” he replied nonetheless, “It’s your home, sensei.”

The man chuckled as he sat in front his student. “You seemed preoccupied. A ryo for your thoughts?”

Casually, Minato picked up the roll of dressing in front of him and grabbed the wrist of Kakashi’s injured hand. He flipped it over the palm and pressed the hem of bandage onto it, wrapping around his hand slowly.

“Nothing I haven’t already said,” mumbled Kakashi, watching his teacher’s movements.

Those pair of hands were nicer looking than his; aside from the bump on his right finger and the assortment on the sides from handling a tri-prong kunai, there was nothing ugly about them. They were Shinobi hands – calloused and rough, to grip onto their weapons properly and with the flexibility to form seals.

“Feeling better?” Minato tapped the bandaged area with his thumb.

“The medics said I’ll be making full recovery.”

“Do you have anything to do today?”

“I’m due for my patrol duty in two hours.”

Minato held back a sigh. His student seemed to come in two modes, either brooding and emotionless or on the verge of a break down. Unintentionally or not, Hatake Kakashi had inherited some of Sakumo’s traits; too capable of bottling up his grief until it reached the limit, breaking the glass before popping the cork, willing to suffer in silence rather than scream. And now having already spilled the contents of his grief, Kakashi was emptied out; his bottle hollowed; making it difficult to pinpoint when his emotional surges ebbed and flowed when the last droplets of guilt remained hidden for the most part and easy to ignore.

But unlike the late Hatake, his son was less condemned, and Minato would do everything in his power to ensure that his student didn’t end up like his own father. He had promised the man that much – a fact he’d never tell Kakashi – and he loved the boy like his own blood.

Love, however, would not be enough to help the younger Shinobi through everything. Perhaps, time would fall short as well.

He chose distractions instead. As he tied the final knot and tucked it into the folds of the bandage he
said, “I’m intending to propose to Kushina soon.”

Grey eyes blinked at the suddenness of the news. Despite it all, he was genuinely happy for the couple even if it didn’t show on a quarter of his face. “Congratulations, Minato-sensei. She’ll definitely agree with your proposal.” For his missing teammates, he added, “Took you long enough, I think.”

He chuckled quietly. “Indeed it has.”

There was a beat of silence.

“…You’re surprisingly calm about this, sensei.”

“Calm?” Cerulean eyes looked into his, slight panic visible in larger pupils. “I’m still afraid that I’ll mess it up and I’ve been planning for a long time.”

Kakashi nearly laughed. There was the teacher he knew – the one who had written a long confession letter and tried to get him to pass it to his lady love. It seemed like the Uchiha – a brief flash of pain stabbed at him – would be right on the mark about the process.

“You’ll be fine, sensei.” He tried to assure. “The worst case scenario is that Kushina-nee ends up proposing.”

“Don’t even joke about that,” scolded Minato, slapping the boy at the side of the head. “I want to do it right this time,” he continued softly. “She deserves only the best in the world.”

Awkwardly, he nodded. “I’m sure Kushina-nee will appreciate it.”

“I hope so. But more importantly, I would like to ask you for a favour.”

Kakashi nodded his head again to prompt him to go ahead.

“During the wedding… Would you be willing to be the one who bears the sake cups?”

The request surprised the Hatake. Why would he want someone with such tainted hands to carry such an important matrimonial instrument? Was he not afraid of him tainting their union?

Alas, under his teacher’s hopeful gaze, there was only one answer:

“… I would be honoured, Minato-sensei,” said Kakashi, sincere. After a moment, he looked out of the window to judge the sun’s position.

“I need to arrive early for my briefing,” the younger Shinobi muttered, giving the explanation so that he wouldn’t offend his teacher.

“Okay,” Minato waved his hand, smiling warmly. “Your shift ends after eight hours right? Kushina and I will be waiting on you for dinner. She’s cooking your favourites.”

She has been cooking my favourites for the past few days, he meant to say but he decided he’d just be grateful about it. That was probably the best repayment he could give.

“I’ll be there,” Kakashi confirmed as he opened the window.

“And Kakashi-kun?”

“Hm?”
“You know that I’ll always be here for you if you need to talk or you just need someone, right?”

“I know.” He gave back calmly, any other statement he wished to make stuck in the back of his throat.

The boy had already realised long ago that no repayment would suffice for the kindness he had been shown by the older man. In a sense, Namikaze Minato had always been his benefactor; he pulled him out from the house where his father had committed suicide and gave him a room – a home – in his own, made him the warrior he was and accepted him despite all his failings.

Nothing he could do would ever be enough.

So, he repeated:

“I know.”

*I always have.*

*Thank you for that.*

…. 

“This was where you wanted to go?”

When she requested that they took an alternative route, he certainly didn’t expect this place to be her checkpoint.

“Yeah,” she murmured, staring at the scene ahead.

*It’s so ugly,* the time-traveller frowned, taking a few steps forward to look down the edge.

Pillars that once supported its beam jutted out in open defiance to the havens above, its jagged cement like broken needles worn down by explosive blasts and rain. Its paint was peeling off slowly, red intermingling with grey, and what was left of its metal tubes crudely bent and rusted brown. Repairs had yet to begin on the broken bridge even though the majority of the debris had been cleared away. Kusa was clearly biding their time to ensure that the war in their lands had truly ended.

Kara sat down at the edge, legs dangling cautiously. “It’s so ugly,” she said it out loud this time. It wasn’t a lie – but it wasn’t the exact truth either; she just hated the place because it had been the mission that took Obito away.

_And it was something you could have stopped,* her sub-consciousness hissed, shrill and pitched like a child betrayed.

As the nearby waterfall roared in the distance and the greenery around her was calm, she contemplated the bridge’s name; *Kannabi,* the place where Gods did not listen.

They certainly did not, or else fate would have been kinder to all of them.

“So you know,” Jiraiya commented, sitting down next to her.

Tiredly, she closed her eyes. “I know a lot of things, Ero-sennin,” she said, resigned, griping at the cracks in the structure. “Although I didn’t really want to believe at first, ‘ttebane. Obito dying? How could someone as bright as Obito die?”

She used to think that a lot as a Shinobi raised in the time of peace, but death had ruined her
optimism and she learnt that every man beneath the skies could be killed. Even those closest to immortal or the undead.

“But—” she struggled for words—"what else could give Minato-sensei enough motivation to slaughter Iwa-nin by the hundreds even in non-desperate straits other than Obito’s death?"

Her father was scarcely been a man of impulse, only cold and calculated intent. If Namikaze Minato had wanted to strike immense fear in the hearts of Iwa, he would have done it a long time ago. He wouldn’t wait until now, so he needed a catalyst; something to trigger his rise to infamy and this was it.

The Toad Sennin sighed. “I offer no justification for your teacher’s actions, Kara-chan. What he did… it was truly monstrous to say the least. Anguish and anger has always brought the worst out of people.” He pulled her closer, “But it must have been hard for you to deal with it alone.”

His heart twisted as he imagined a kunoichi on the brink of being a teen stuck in a foreign land, trying to hold back her tears in fear of breaking her cover. That she would find no comfort in the strangers around her because that was what they all were - strangers. It was quite ironic that one would feel the loneliest in a crowd.

But nothing has ever tested someone quite like war, and the death of most Shinobi would be self-restraint.

As if to exemplify that, she shook her head firmly. “I wasn't there for their deaths, Ero-sennin. I'm not the one who has to witness it like Kakashi—” she clamped her teeth shut with a click, in torment as she recalled how much her old Genin Sensei had blamed himself. And back then, he had years to come to terms with it - near decades - but it hadn't been enough to fully absolve his guilt.

“And what is with you and Mimi-chan’s tendency to discount your own pain?” Jiraiya bemoaned, flicking her forehead lightly with his other hand. “It’s okay to cry if you want to, gaki. No one is going to judge when you’ve lost just as much.”

But it’s not the same, she wanted to say. She compared the deaths she has seen and those she hadn’t; a brief sense of detachment for the latter rising like a delayed reaction that never came. If she closed her eyes, she could always see the death of her closest comrades – falling, impaled, crushed, murdered by – and if she tried to imagine those she hadn’t, they felt distorted and unreal, like a puzzle portrait incomplete.

“Do you think I could have changed something if I went on this mission as well?” She asked him the question that has been circling in her head for the longest of times. “Stopped Obito from dying… Rin-chan from being captured?”

“Then I must ask, what is the point in thinking of the ‘what if’, ‘should have’ and ‘could have’,” he wondered. “Try this for size. You could have been the one who died. Your presence might have made them bring stronger reinforcements and wiped all of you out. Things could have been worse, gaki. People have always been variables that ruin constants, and if something changed, no one is ever sure where it might spiral. Up or down, better or worse… they’re just variables in the end.

“You should just be grateful that you’re alive.”

Mutedly, the kunoichi stood up and shook off his hand, jumping towards a broken pillar. She spun once to get a hold of her equilibrium, going on her heels and studied the destruction that lay around her.
Then, the time-traveller abruptly recalled something. “You know, I once had a teacher who always said this: Things are often easier in theory and harder in practice.”

“He was wise,” Jiraiya commended.

As he said that, she gazed at him with a strange intensity. “He was,” she stated, not shirking away, her dark pupils staring into his soul. “He was brilliant, even though I would never tell him that, ‘ttebane.” Then, she turned to jump to a lower pillar. “He always had the right words or advice for anything and everything but he… he had many regrets. Even though he was wise, there would be times he wouldn’t follow what he said despite warning me the same – and I guess it makes me his student because I don’t follow them either.”

“You mean it makes you a terrible student,” the Sannin corrected.

She laughed mirthlessly. “I probably was—” she spun around on uneven footing—“But he never gave up on me, ‘ttebane. He didn’t fault me and he didn’t really reprimand me when I did the opposite of his words because more than anyone else, he realised all humans were all walking contradictions. That we bleed, cry and lie all the same, for different reasons and that’s why he liked to study them so he could understand what makes us so complicated.

“He wanted to solve it so that we could finally attain peace,” she whispered softly, such that Jiraiya only caught the movement of her lips.

“What did you say?” He yelled above the background noise.

“Nothing!” She exclaimed, grateful that he was a distance away.

Knowing that he wouldn’t be able to get her to repeat her words, he then inquired, “Is he still around? He sounds like a fine person to know.”

Her answering smile was rueful. “He doesn’t exist anymore.”

With a giant leap, she gripped onto the wall on the other side of the broken bridge with chakra on the palms and the soles of her shoes, scaling up like a spider. As she reached the top again, she yelled: “Ero-sennin, are you coming or not!!?”

The said Sennin blinked at the small figure, dark haired, tan skinned and crimson eyes, pondering why it seemed like she was becoming more mysterious with each day he spent with her. Why was it that she seemed so carefree and yet burdened, an open book but in a different language and somehow so sad despite the bright smile she plastered on her face?

How can someone be so complex when they were only eleven years in age?

Why did it feel like there was an insurmountable distance between both of them – a bridge burnt and non-existent – and that they were always on different wavelengths? If he was the river on the surface, she would be the water vein that ran deep; present within most pieces of land and somehow discerning more than he ever could.

Weird, he mused –

“Oi, are you suddenly struck with inspiration or something?”

Snapping back to his reverie thanks to her incessant complaints, he yelled, “Oh quiet, brat. I’m coming!”
Ah, whatever, he could worry about it later. Kara was staying for the long run and it wouldn’t be too late to deal with it if worse came to worse.

Thinking that, Jiraiya leaped.

…

Namikaze Minato had seen a lot of ugly in this world as a man of twenty two winters.

The Jōnin could still remember his first kill gurgling on his life’s blood as he silted his throat, the thick smell of blood and metal on the battlefield and the fields of dead bodies, the slur of blood and flesh as he used \textit{Hiraishin} endlessly –

The list could go on, starting from the most prominent to the least.

And despite being a prodigy, he has been unsure of many things as well.

For example, he had been troubled during the construction of his \textit{Hiraishin} after finding the initial concept which was formulated by the Niidaime or the time where he wondered how he should deal with another fellow albeit younger talent facing his father’s betrayal. Then there was also the question that plagued him for years: How was he going to confess? He faced questions almost every day and what varied was merely the response and the time it took.

But if there was one thing is he was certain of, ever since the faithful day he had set sights on her in the classroom, Uzumaki Kushina was the most beautiful of them all.

As she appreciated the view of Konoha from the top of the Hokage Monument, long red hair like wisps of flames in the breeze and ablaze under the sun, he was struck by her sheer beauty again. Surely he memorised her expression by now, imagining her violet eyes illuminated with wonder as she studied the life in the village, although a small glint of sadness would be present for what she had once lost. Her full lips would be parted – unconsciously – and she would slowly edge closer to the brink; fascination drawing her closer, to reach for what was beneath her to be involved.

If there was someone he definitely didn’t want to lose, she’d be the first on his list. In his heart, there was no place for another when she had claimed it whole without even trying; taken it without him knowing and he can’t find any fibre within himself to ask for it back.

He didn’t want it back.

All Namikaze Minato wanted was to be able to hold her and wake up with her for the rest of their lives and claim that she was his and his alone. If he could spend everyday hearing her laugh and obsess about her ramen and Fūinjutsu, he’d be content.

“Kushina.”

The woman turned at his call, head cocking to the side.

\textit{So beautiful}, he breathed, taking a step forward and begun:

“I have loved you for a very, very long time. From the first time I saw you, I thought you were the most amazing person I have ever seen in my life. You were headstrong and courageous… a little crazy too,” he laughed quietly at her widening eyes, “So sweet, heart-warming and you were the best thing that has ever happened to me.”

“I don’t have a family to offer you,” he brushed away the tendrils of her behind her shoulder, “I’m
not the richest or the most skilled. It still surprises me that out of all the men you could have chosen, you chose me. But I promise you…” he wiped his hands on his pants, “If you’re willing to have me, I will do everything in my power to make sure you are always happy and laughing. I will try to grant your wishes, I will always be there for you, I will protect you and cherish you until I breathe my last.”

“Uzumaki Kushina,” he knelt down, pulling out the box he had kept with him for so many months, “Will you do me the greatest honour by becoming my wife?”

The said lady was tearing up, her hand clasped to her mouth and her shoulders shaking.

“Yes,” she whispered hoarsely, her emotions overwhelming. “To the whirlpools of Uzushio and the fire of Konoha, yes.”

Before the man could stand up to slip the ring into her fourth finger, she jumped on him, arms wrapping around his neck and sending both of them to the ground.

The first kiss they shared as an engaged pair was sweet and long – tender and warm too, he hazily thought – neither willing to relent on the taste of their lips. It was desperate; not with lust but just the want and happiness of everything that had happened and they both wanted to etch this moment into eternity.

“You’re horrible, ’ttebane,” she sobbed into his ear breathlessly when they finally broke for air, “You said you were going to make me laugh and you’re already making me cry, ’ttebane.”

Minato comforted her with a foolishly large grin on his face. “Sorry about that.”

He proceeded to arrange her body in his lap as he sat up, taking her left hand and doing what he had been wanting to do for so long.

The ring, casted in gold with the ancient word of ‘partnership’ engraved on it sat neatly on her finger, and the sight of the visceral claim that Uzumaki Kushina was taken caused him to lift it up to brush his lips against it.

“Thank you for allowing me to become your husband,” he kissed her tears away and then her lips next, “You make me the happiest man alive.”

“Took you long enough to ask though,” she snorted, making her significant other laugh. Her violet eyes softened. “But you did well on the proposal. I give you an A plus.”

“Not an S grade?” He teased, pressing his forehead against hers. Kushina giggled.

“If you were a few years earlier, I might have.”

Minato sighed, “You’re going to hold me to that for the rest of our lives, aren’t you?”

“What do you think?” She kissed his nose, placating before flashing the ring, “It’s too late to have regrets now, Mimi-chan.”

“Regrets? I think I made the best decision in my entire life. Even if you tease me about it, you would still be my wife at the end of the day.”

The Uzumaki’s face became as red as her hair again.

“Goddamn charmer,” she muttered under her breath, “You’re lucky I love you.”
“Lucky I am,” he hummed while smiling. “I love you too.”

“You better, Mimi-chan.”

...

A timeline ago, Konoha was destroyed.

Four years ago when the time-traveller came running to Konoha, she never believed that she would make it back as her life would be the price of committing taboo.

Nearly two years ago, she had left the same borders to head off to Iwa, becoming someone else = to gather information.

Edging on twelve autumns, the kunoichi stopped to stare at the wide gates ahead, at those impractical structures spelling ‘hermitage’ and studied its individual green planks. Crafted from the finest Hashirama trees, they stood impervious no matter rain or shine, affecting an air of confidence and pride. Her eyes roved over them and up towards the plaque where her village’s symbol was engraved, imprinting the sight in her mind once more.

Subconsciously, her palm pressed against the metal on her forehead which branded her as Konohagakure no Sato’s, remembering the identity she was finally allowed to reclaim and the vows she once took before the Hokage. She pulled down her hitat-ate gently and weighed it in her hands before she brought it to close to her heart.

“Tadaima,” she said softly, drowned out by the rustling of the leaves.

*I’m home.*

(The Toad Sennin never doubted her loyalty after that.)

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Chapter End Notes

Beta'd by wecantgiggleitsacrimescene

9500 views - we're hittiing the five digits people *u*
Also 400 kudos WHAT THE HELL XD
Thank y'all so so much for all the kudos, subscribes???? (I can’t see this lmao)
bookmarks and comments. They make me extremely happy everyday.
Hope you are having a great day. (And this chapter makes your day)
The first thing that happened to her when she got back to the village was being whisked into the Torture and Intelligence.

Again, the time-traveller sighed, feeling like she was forming some sort of trend she didn't like. Except this time, she was conscious and aware of the procedure and she was shoved into a metal chair instead of a bed. She liked the latter more, if she had to be honest, but no one would offer such hospitality to a known and healthy Shinobi.

And the time-traveller had no way to escape it. She pursed her lips. She really should have thought it through before she picked infiltration as her specialization. But even that was a lost cause like her current situation; information on current affairs was vital to her agenda - and no information was truer or more trustworthy than that which she gathered herself. No one would understand why she looked into certain matters particularly, nor would they know how to suit her motives. They can gather all the puzzle pieces – all different edges of both sharp and round – but only in her mind would they come together to form the portrait; only she was aware of the long term game she plays.

Secrets, she had many.

Too many, considering the closets filled with unburied skeletons in her mind, the way it could stretch for miles to represent all the dog tags she used to collect.

Therefore, it doesn’t come as a surprise to her that she gradually came to dislike the T&I.

The idea of someone violating the sanctity of the graves she has preserved repulsed her. They were sacred even if the tombs were knives, even if they were mass graves in the midst of barren land and bloodied skies; no one should be allowed to tread upon them and she doesn’t matter if they were allies. The time-traveller would never treat intruders in her mind lightly and it was frustrating that the faculty expected her to lay it bare for their scrutiny. Her instincts were violently against it, but it seemed like she could never escape the bureaucracy and security of the village.

It was truthfully a pain to have to balance between duty and desire, especially when they started to conflict in the abundant grey areas and caveats she had created.

However, she had to make a choice, 'Don't kill the person who enters our mind, Kurama. We'll just restrict their movements okay?'

Her tenant huffed in annoyance, hating the idea of psychological inference more than his vessel. It was too close to Madara's methods and he didn't want to be anywhere near those tactics if he could help it.

'I will try,' he bared his teeth, showing off how sharp they were. 'But warn whichever Yamanaka it
is to tread lightly, or I will make an example of them as to why you should never mess with a Bijuu and his jinchūriki.'

'They don't know that,' she admonished him as she ran her hand through his fur in their mindscape, too confident of the Kyuubi's capabilities with destruction.

She has seen him rip illusions to shreds before they could take form and corrode away foreign substances within her body. If the Bijuu truly wished for it, he could destroy minds without batting an eyelid, just as he could level a village with his size alone. Nothing could compare to the Kyuubi's potency - not even Gyuuki who was only a tail short.

And it seemed like today’s trend of repetitions would continue because she sensed Yamanaka Inoichi's chakra again. Neutral and tranquil like a lake with jolts of electricity flashing in its midst, it reminded her of Ino's - except sharper; more dangerous, like a katana's Damascus steel rather than surgeon’s scalpel.

"Hello," she waved amicably when the grey door opened, revealing the man from the Yamanaka's lineage.

The signature platinum blonde hair piled on top of his head in a shaggy manner while the rest was tied in a ponytail, swaying slightly as he turned to close the door. Green eyes - pale and blankly scrutinizing - stared at her, never straying as he sat down in the chair and pushed the waiver to her.

"Hello, Kara-chan," he greeted back, a small smile gracing his face. "Are you ready for the evaluation?"

The said girl gave a scant look at the contents in contract before signing it. "It's not like I can escape it, Inoichi-san," she sighed dramatically and grinned, "Sometimes we just have to get it over and done with, right?"

Propping her arm on the table, she leaned her cheek on her upraised fist. "Although I must remind you, Inoichi-san, my threat from last time stands."

Imperceptibly, the man frowned. So it seems she really did know I was there. Interesting.

"Why is that so?" He asked curiously, counter-signing the waiver to prove that he was in charge of this evaluation.

"My mind... Is structured to dislike intruders," she put it mildly. "So don't go beyond the limits of where I guide you please?"

Her proceeding smile was sweet like any other kunoichi, except the problem was that kunoichi often used their smiles more for intimidation than charm. It reminded him distinctly of how the Akai Chishio no Habanero would grin before she summoned chains to strangle her victims alive and the sneer of bloodied lips and sharp teeth from the Inuzuka Alpha after she ripped throats apart. The girl’s smile was no less dangerous – it was one that promised as much pain as its threatening sharpness.

"Of course," he replied with utmost professionalism and unshaken. "According to protocol, I'll explain the procedure again. With your permission," he tapped the piece of paper, "I am allowed to walk through your mind under your influence. What you are required to do is recall your time in Iwa as far as your memory's capacity allows. Any and all information you provide through your experience will be recorded down and it will be subjected to study before we make a final report on your psyche and performance."
"I will be using the Mind Body Transmission Technique, and the full seals are Ram-Serpent-Rat-Hare." His hands slowly formed the said seals to prove his own credibility. "We shall begin the moment you close your eyes."

She did as he asked with some reluctance. Here we go.

Konoha was special and renowned for its intelligence sector due to the Yamanaka's infamous Hijutsu in mind techniques. Their methods often yielded better results than other villages because they did not use brute force for information - no - the better term was that they 'latched' onto brainwaves and 'walked' the path that had already been built by the person they were using it on. As long as the road existed, they could trek it; which meant that no memory was truly safe, especially for their enemies. Like any other clan, they guarded their secrets zealously and only revealed one technique to Konoha's ranks so it could be widely used for inspection and psych evaluations.

The Yamanaka had confidence that no one could replicate it despite giving out the hand seals of course; all Hijutsu needed specific training to be effective - and attempting the jutsu without it would turn anyone into an imbecile.

Immediately, Inoichi reached out Kara's brainwaves and gently tugged, diving into her mindscape.

'What in the world - ' he stopped, mind's eyes furrowing when he entered dark sewers. This is quite troubling,' he thought as he gazed at the endless ceiling that was dripping water, raising a hand to catch the droplets.

Mindscapes have always reflected their master’s psyche… Like how the Akimichi’s mind tend to be in kitchens and Nara’s in back porches during late evenings. The condition of said surroundings would determine how healthy their mind was and sewers of all things?

It screamed abandonment, of the unkempt, of darkness and with it, the unknown which could either hide monsters or treasure troves. And from how water droplets would echo in her space, it seemed to stretch wide, giving more opportunity for twists and turns; crevices and potholes to hide her veins of instability.

'Don't linger,' Kara whispered, snapping him out of his observation. An imaginary door at the side opened. 'Come inside.'

Inoichi didn’t let his surprise show as he shot another glance at the pitch-black darkness behind him. 'Curiouser and curiouser,' he thought before he entered.

'Are you sure this is safe, kit?' A large vermillion eye opened, gleaming as the door shut.

The jinchūriki who was perched on top of his back, shrugged. 'I trust you, Kurama,' uttered Kara. 'I would worry, but Inoichi-san isn't the one with a Bijuu having full control over her mind. Neither he is aware that his future daughter had taught me how the Hijutsu worked in theory, 'ttebane.'

The ancient beast laughed. The power of knowledge, he supposed.

Hence, under the pair's careful control, Inoichi’s experience in her memories was smooth-sailing. He saw everything through the girl's mind as she acted as Airi, from her small village's destruction to her entrance into Iwa. Even if the Head of Intelligence didn't want to admit it, the kunoichi in question was a good actress and a capable Shinobi; she carried out her tasks as she was ordered within the given time frame and the conditions she needed to meet.

Providing information about battle deployments and formations? She seemed to always know where
to search for the information and she was seldom tardy in reporting them.

Faking a food supplier's death as an accident? She managed to make the man trip down his house’s stairs like it was a casual prank gone wrong.

Destroying the metal warehouse? She had found and lured the next kunoichi on inspection by knocking into her like a child would in play before promptly placing a timed sleeping tag and carrying out her duties.

Destroying her remaining connections? Done impeccably, with her "Airi" persona being substituted with the girl who had died three streets down from a fever a few days ago as the apartment she lived in went up in flames.

But the Yamanaka couldn't shake off the impression that information was being filtered away because sometimes her mind was too quiet or some of her recollections were blurred out. Sure, it was common since no one could proclaim they remembered everything, but it was too specific at times. In all his experience, he has yet to meet a case where someone could block out their own thoughts.

He already knew that every infiltration specialist was a master at restraint but Kara took it to the next level. Where people would have impulsive feelings or anger at the Intel they were receiving, she was unnaturally calm. At least he thought that was the case until –

*To whom did she pray?*
To every name and to every grave,
All to the end of the dying day.

His skin prickled at the grief that was building. The voice that Kara recalled, despite being soft as silk was haunting; too close to comfort; and a sense of anguish pervaded every inch of it. Inoichi let out an involuntary gasp at the rush of emotion, forcefully stabilising his own chakra to allow the memory to continue but it stopped -

*Interrupted*, the poem halted in its tracks and cut short.

Everything jolted forward.

"*Citizens of Iwa, my soldiers,*" the Tsuchikage suddenly begun, heavy in its empowering, "*Through the years we have fought valiantly against the scoundrels of the South and the East, refusing to accept the false exceptionalism that Konoha put themselves to be and refused to bow to the tyranny of Kumo. A great many have sacrificed themselves for this honourable cause, giving their lives to protect our home.*

*Today, we commemorate and thank them for everything they have done. Every name inscribed and every drop of blood, sweat and tears they have shed, the Solidarity of the Stone accepts and praises. They are truly, truly the pride of Iwa and we would have them as nothing less.*"

But something came out stronger than before, refusing to be pushed down.

*Lie lie lie lie*, Kara's mind screeched, refusing to accept anything that was being said. It was a violent resistance and something was *breaking* in the girl and he could hear the starting of ominous rumbling.

*No one wins wars. Everyone loses.*

*What the *fuck* did she ever win?*
The Four-- It was cut again, and the Yamanaka was frustrated and aggrieved. Never had a case been this complicated so he reached--

Towards the last silver of strings of memories which were fading away, fingers coiling around them like he was catching light, and he yanked

Surfacing a chimera of faces – red eyes, sharp noses, heart-shaped face, pale, tan, in tears, smiling, facial markings, a blur of blood? The rumbling was getting louder and he hears waters pouring with the expressions twisted coming closer - *This was not what I wanted.*

But it was, it *is*, the answers to her mysteries and maturity were staring back at him but he couldn’t comprehend it. He can’t understand it because he doesn’t want to believe the macabre, doesn’t want to make sense of the million faces of agglomerated grief and pain and death and and—and—

Suddenly, something roared and he was ejected, head knocking back in reality and his nose and eyes bleeding from the backlash. The kunoichi was furious and aware, a snarl tearing from the back of her throat at the insult of her territory being invaded.

"I respected you," she growled. "I told you **not to interfere where you’re not allowed,**" her voice blended with her beast's, sharing his outrage. Her claws dented the metal table she was holding to stop herself from pouncing on her friend's father, snarls still issuing from her mouth intermittently.

Despite being in a sorry state and coming so close to losing his mind, Inoichi spoke hoarsely, blood eyed and pained, "Child, how do you act like you're still okay?"

How could she be functional - just a glimpse into her true psyche had nearly drove him into a *frenzy.* How could she possibly sit here and talk to him and *pretend* like everything was still fine when clearly nothing was for her? Where does that strength even come from?

Stumped at his question, any anger the time-traveller faded away, her eyes flickering to violet before it turned vermillion again. "I-" she gaped, "You saw-" she choked, "Did you really *see*?"

She was desperate now, sharpened nails digging into her palms and piercing skin.

"I'm so sorry," he apologised, clutching on his head, his pale green eyes filled with more distress. "I really shouldn't have done that. It was my mistake." Inoichi stood up abruptly and gave a deep bow. "If you would forgive me, I need to recollect myself."

Saying that, he left the room, the door slamming behind him as he stormed to find his superior.

…

The Hokage blinked when one frazzled looking Head of Intelligence came bursting into the room with his secretary cautioning him away.

“I request a private audience please, Hokage-sama,” he pleaded, the blood smears on his face telling of vexation and restraint.

“Granted,” the said leader hastily allowed, nodding to his secretary and flickering a chakra pattern to his operatives. Soon after, the walls of his office glowed, signalling that it was sealed tight. “What is it, Inoichi-kun?”

“How—” he raked his fingers through his blonde hair—“How could you allow a girl like Kara become a kunoichi, Hokage-sama? With all due respect, she is not fit for duty. She’s barely *sane.*"
Hearing his proclamation, Hiruzen’s expression became severe. “Jōnin Yamanaka, please tell me you didn’t do what I am presuming you did.”

“I saw what was in her mind, Hokage-sama,” he shook. It was penance enough that he had to witness it. “She… Kara is not fine. She’s damaged,” he whispered the word he wished he didn’t have to use but there was no conceivable explanation otherwise.

“I already know that,” the aged leader sighed, leaning back against his chair.

“Then why—”

“Because if I didn’t,” he cut in, “She would have driven herself insane by staying idle. The only thing I could do to help her was allow her to do what she wanted and live her life as she had known it.”

“But the Yamanaka could have helped her if you brought her to us,” he protested, hands crumpling the fabric of his pants. Even though he said that and being one of the brightest minds that the Yamanaka ever had in its history, he wasn’t fully certain that he could.

The Hokage’s lengthy pause only served to confirm it. Taking a long slow drag and feeling the burn of inhaled smoke in his lungs, he spoke, “It’s not that I don’t allow you to do so, Jōnin Yamanaka. You can’t.”

“But we haven’t tried,” whispered Inoichi.

He wanted to help the girl. She was too young to be plagued by such angst and too valuable to lose to her own plights. It might have stirred from his interest in solving puzzles but there was also sympathy – he didn’t want her to die by her own mind.

He has seen too many cases of that – in their ranks, in civilians, even his closest family members and friends. As someone who had viewed more than a thousand minds, he was all too clear of how often it happened, and how devastating it could be.

No one could escape from themselves – that, was the worst torture of them all.

“If you had the capability to save a girl who watched her whole world burn down in front of her eyes, I would have let you have her the day I met her, Inoichi-kun. But such a daunting task is one I dare not give. I’ve seen her memories. Nothing you can do can absolve her of her albatross but time and the achievement of her own resolution.”

“I do not understand what you mean, Hokage-sama,” he spoke slowly, trying to process his words as he said them.

Tired, the Hokage closed his eyes. “I trust that you won’t speak of this to any soul beyond these walls?”

“You already had my oath years ago, Hokage-sama,” he dutifully replied.

“Then, do you believe in the possibility of a soul remembering their past lives, Inoichi-kun?”

“That… That is not possible,” he replied, mystified.

“Well,” he cracked one lid open, his brown eye sorrowful and enhanced by the wrinkles at the sides. “You’re looking at a girl who survived it. Who has seen the world at the brink of destruction and wants to make sure it never happens again.
“I do not know the full happenings of her angst. But I do know that countless of her closest comrades fell before her whilst landscapes were destroyed in an instant as she stood by helplessly. She has so much guilt, promises and the hopes of others lying on her that what once drove her had now become her burden. Can you honestly tell me that you can fix that?”

“…No.”

It was a reply the warlord had already expected and was resigned to hear.

“Exactly, Inoichi-kun. Please do not pry into her mind ever again. Tell the rest to do the same.”

…

Afterwards, the young kunoichi got her wish in a way she didn’t foresee.

On her evaluation, it was stated in the remarks that she would be exempted from any usage of Yamanaka mind techniques and any future evaluation would be under Yamanaka Inoichi himself, even if he retired. It also cleared her from any suspicion of being a double spy – Kurama snorted at the impossibility of it – which confirmed her loyalties to Konohagakure no Sato once again.

Furthermore, she had received a standing invitation to seek the help of the Yamanaka clan anytime she wanted. An added boon was that this allowance of hospitality extended to the Nara and Akimichi as well, even though it was not explicitly stated.

Kara blinked. That… worked out better than expected.

‘Did it? I would not forgive that ingrate so easily if I were you.’

‘He didn’t mean ill and you already know it, Bijuwho-can-sense-emotions,’ she said, rolling her eyes. ‘And thank you for not killing him. It must have been tough for you, ‘ttebane.’

‘I only spared him because his offspring is essential to the victory over that madman,’ he sniffed. ‘It was a blessing she inherited more traits from her progenitress than her progenitor. However, it is quite a curse that he is necessary to complete half the equation.’

‘Quit holding a grudge, rabbit-ears. He already apologised.’ She waved the evaluation papers back and forth, imagining it was in front his snout. ‘He even showed his sincerity by making sure I never have to be put through it ever again.’

‘And that means the world to me,’ he retorted sarcastically. ‘I am not the one who has to face him after the missions you will have to undertake. I scarcely care for the good faith he shows in return for his previous impertinence.’

‘Yes, yes,’ the jinchūriki soothed. ‘It’s probably a good thing, ‘ttebane, you suck at talking to other people. Even your siblings.’

The Kyuubi glared at her for the slight.

‘Kit?’

‘Yeah?’

Suddenly, the fox grinned smugly in revenge. ‘Heads up.’

‘Kurama you teme—’
The girl choked the moment she stepped out of the T&I building as a red carriage slammed into her, the person’s chakra blaring like a light bulb dialled up in brightness nine times.

‘Kara-chan!’ Kushina screamed, hugging her fiercely. She swung her side to side as if she was a rag doll, ecstatic that the younger kunoichi was finally home.

“Kushi-Kushina-nee, p-please put me down,” Kara barely squeezed out, feeling her lungs constrict from the lack of space. “P-Put me d-down.”

It might have been vindication for the older woman to abuse the girl a little bit.

“Sorry about that, ‘ttebane,” her mother beamed, squeezing her for a moment longer before settling her down on her feet although her hands never left her shoulders. “I got overly excited, ‘ttebane! You’re finally home!”

“No… No kidding,” wheezed Kara, pressing her own hands on her ribs. Her hugs have always been too tight, she inhaled the surrounding air greedily before she spoke, “It’s good to be back.”

But as soon as the delight tided over, Kushina’s temperament switched. And it switched fast. From the wide smile she was sporting it became one of reproach; brows furrowing and shadowing violet eyes, speaking volumes of her dissatisfaction.

“Now, Kara-chan, it was really impolite of you to leave Konoha without even warning us ‘ttebane! Did you know how worried we were?” She scolded as she fixed her the girl’s jacket collar. “We had to hear the news from the mission board and that was not a nice way to start the day off. The desk Shinobi was a grouch and Mimi-chan started leaving holes in the walls and he bent the pan when it was his turn to cook. So please tell us in advance next time, or at the very least leave a note, and now you can’t say we didn’t tell you. We do worry about you, you understand that right?”

Worry about me? For? Kara stood there silently, shifting her feet.

Kushina tilted the kunoichi’s chin to look at her visage. “But,” the shade of her irises softened, “It’s a good thing you came back.” Her thumb caressed her cheek. “And you’re fine. Looking a little tired… But nothing some sleep can’t fix, ‘ttebane.”

She stepped back to view Kara in full. “You’ve even gain a little height. And you’re prettier too. Mimi-chan’s going to flip about that.”

The time-traveller guessed she had grown a little, considering how the top of her head was nearing Kushina’s shoulders but being better-looking on the other hand, well, she hadn’t cared about it back then, and she wasn’t about to now.

“So, Kara-chan… what haven’t you said to me?”

The said girl flushed at her mother’s expectant look. “Tadaima.”

Kushina smiled broadly again. “Okaeri.”

…

And awkwardly enough, her mother had followed her back home.

A home she hadn’t inhabited for nearly two years. Even if her stasis seals were effective, there was bound to be dust collecting on every surface and hopefully, she had thrown out all her food when she left.
Either way, clean up. *What fun.*

But then, hacks. Shadow clones and jutsu alike were meant to be utilised (read: abused).

“Kushina-nee… Don’t you have stuff to do…?” She asked hopefully as she stopped in front of her apartment door.

“How? No. I cleared out my schedule today in anticipation of you coming back home. It’s just you and me today.” Kushina scrunched her nose slightly when all the seals had been deactivated. “And you smell like you could use some help ‘ttebane.”

The jinchūriki cautiously sniffed the air. *Yeah, it definitely smells like ramen that has gone bad and some spoilt food.* “Brave yourself,” she mumbled, pushing open the door and holding her breath before sprinting towards her kitchen to clear out the ramen bowls in her sink.

And by clearing, she meant opening the window and setting the contents and the bowl on fire with a basic Katon jutsu before throwing it out, signing a ‘good riddance’ to the abomination she called rotten food.

Litter bugs, some might accuse. *But better ashes than the ramen itself,* she reasoned, because even cockroaches wouldn’t want to get close to it.

“I would reprimand you…” Kushina said in gasps – she was holding her breath too – but she gave her a thumbs up. “But that was pretty good.”

“Do you think the neighbours below will complain?”

Her mother imagined about a flaming pile of garbage bypassing her window before smiling mischievously. “They would, but I don’t think they are around. And it’s not everyday someone sees a streak of flame and smoke descending when they usually rise.”

Kara giggled before surveying her apartment’s condition again. Truthfully, it wasn’t as bad as she had expected; she’d need to wash the curtains and wipe down her furniture but they were matters she should do on a regular basis regardless. Her old medic teammate had seen to that – having ranted her ears off about cleanliness and the importance of it. Back then, Sakura couldn’t fathom how she had lived in her dingy old apartment with poor cuts of poultry, undone laundry and dishes all year round, but she had momentarily forgotten that Uzumaki Naruto never really had anyone to tell her what was right.

Past her was already grateful enough to have a roof over her head, showering facilities even if it was cold and just… a home. Somewhere she could retreat to at the end of the day, never mind its condition. And her grandfather figure hardly checked on her apartment because it was usually her visiting him in the breaks of his busy schedule. Now that the time-traveller thought about it, she hadn’t properly thanked the Hokage for giving her the apartment and paying for her rent until she was Tokubetsu Jōnin at least.

Mechanically, Kara dug out her cleaning supplies from below the cupboards and ran the rags through water at the sink. As she was doing so, she caught Kushina threading a ring through her dog tags’ chain and she paused.

“Minato-sensei proposed?” She asked. “When did he do that?”

Her mother blushed slightly, clipping the chain back together before a rag. “Two days ago, ‘ttebane. On top of the Hokage Monument.”
“Romantic,” commented Kara softly. She had heard stories about the proposal from her two teachers in the previous timeline. “It’s really beautiful up there.”

“Right?”

After the short exchange, Kara immediately summoned four clones. She sent one to help Kushina in the living room, two of them to the kitchen and bathroom respectively, and the last one to do the laundry while she cleared out her room.

They work in silence, save her clone’s grumbling and the shout for more supplies – another replica was summoned to get them – to which Kushina had to inquire incredulously, “How much chakra do you have, Kara-chan?”

“A lot!” She half-yelled back, cursing when she hit her head against the table.

“Have you ever measured!?”

“The scale couldn’t measure it in full! I was nearly chased out from the administrative office when I tried, ‘ttebane! I almost broke the measuring system!”

“Seriously? How old were you?”

“I think it was three years ago!” Kushina’s expression turned slightly monstrous although the girl couldn’t see it. Being an Uzumaki, she was naturally disposed to have higher chakra reserves than the average Shinobi. But even at nine summers and without the Kyuubi’s influence, she hadn’t hit the upper limit of the measuring system.

That had only happened when she was thirteen; having contained the Kyuubi and with the beast vastly boosting her reserves.

It wasn’t her fault that she didn’t know that the kunoichi came to this timeline with matured chakra coils and reserves, one that was still growing as a result of her body catching up again. Tacking on the fact that she had been harbouring the Kyuubi since she was a baby and the seal was created to make her get used to the corrosive ancient chakra, the strain of the purification process had imperceptibly increased her reserves without her actively trying.

Deciding there was no point trying to figure out how a small body can store so much chakra, Kushina started to wipe the walls again, careful not to touch the scriptures of security that were drawn.

“How did she even manage this?” She murmured, she laid down the rag to inspecting the array in lieu of cleaning.

It’s rather extensive and overly paranoid, the Uzumaki gave her verdict, truly appreciative of the effort that had gone into the sealing. It was always nice to see Fūinjutsu again; while they still lined Konoha’s outer walls and some older structures, the art was mostly lost. Practitioners remained mostly practitioners but little pursued the idea of taking apprentices or advancing themselves to step into the realm of masters.

Kara’s coming close though, she brushed the scriptures with gentle fingers, noting the sensory seals for intent, the barriers to repel physical or energy followed by the triggered consequences to shock and burn and the stasis seals that dripped below. The latter was a new addition, judging from the degree in which the ink was fading. But it is still unpolished, ‘ttebane, she tapped on some parts that were redundant. Perhaps she wrote them in for insurance? She hazarded a guess.
“But still, is she trying to fortify her home into a bunker?”

Clearly, the Fūinjutsu mistress had wondered out loud because her aid had replied: “Yeah. Boss said she wouldn’t be satisfied if it was anything less. She went all out on this one.”

The display of intelligence took her back by a few moments. “Did it take long?”

“… I don’t remember. But I know Boss adapted it from your works and the old ones she crafted. She spent a lot of time studying yours especially. She hasn’t seen anything like it and she was so excited she didn’t sleep for a few days. She was crazy, ‘ttebane.”

… Were clones even allowed to sell out their original?

Then something else caught her eye. No way, ‘ttebane. Her vision traced over the matrixes that were travelling down the hallway’s walls, following the lines closely. She stopped in front of the wooden door that was adjacent to Kara’s room, fingers hesitantly touching the doorknob before pulling back abruptly, scalded by the heat it was emitting.

Another physical barrier? She identified. Why is it specific to only this room? Is it the master to hide —?

There is no way... No way, Kara-chan figured out a chakra storage seal and its conversion. She looked fearfully at the protective layers in place. But while Kushina had no evidence to prove it, she had none to disapprove it either.

Barriers tend to come in two kinds: the temporary and the sustainable ones. Being an Fūinjutsu user who skewed towards barrier usage with her adamantine chains as conduit and anchor, she favoured the temporary since it was more viable for battle.

Temporary barriers were the type that could be quickly casted in a sense; usually one-dimensional to block several energy or physical attacks, with added features like the chakra bursting afterwards or having a feedback. Uzumaki Kushina had experimented with all the types and was feared for her proficiency in it; although part of it stemmed from the fact that only a small number knew how to deal with her speciality.

Sustainable ones on the other hand, needed a lot of more prep work and had an initial high sunk cost but they were comparatively more stable. Hence, there were more options and ramifications available; more layers could be added and it was more difficult to deconstruct them since the barrier wouldn’t necessarily fall with the removal of one anchor.

The two-layered sensory barrier at one and five kilometres out of Konoha was one of such examples, but the greatest of them all was definitely the barrier of Uzushiogakure no Sato— one that had repelled Iwagakure and Kumogakure’s combined assault for two weeks or more, even with the army of troops continuously pouring torrents of jutsu to weaken it.

The two villages had been right to fear the village’s Fūinjutsu prowess – no – the Elemental Nations feared Uzushiogakure no Sato all the same. Their ability towards area effects and defence were highly prized and they economised their chakra expenditure despite being naturally blessed with genetic vitality and huge chakra reserves.

But the greatest secret that laid behind Uzushiogakure’s barrier was the genius chakra storage seal; a work that constantly stored chakra underground over decades which sustained the barrier and prevent attacks. It was Uzushiogakure’s last stand, one that was heavily dependent on demoralising their enemies with the futility of an invasion to make them retreat. Back in the Warring Clans period,
it had been effective; numbers were smaller and coalitions were even more unlikely.

It was a behemoth of a structure that no one could overcome, until the destruction of the village proved otherwise.

Barriers could always be sustained through the gathering of chakra from the atmosphere. Whereas the complexity of chakra storage could not be sufficiently explained. Storing a Bijuu’s chakra in a container was easy enough (if the mental stability wasn’t taken into account) since its host would supply what was necessary to keep it in – so it worked like barriers in a sense that the ‘atmosphere’ was the host themselves. Furthermore, it meant that the seal was technically always ‘open’, circulating and in interaction between the medium and the stored content.

Which explained why the Bijuu would be released if the host died; there was nothing to keep it in.

But a standalone chakra storage was different. Energy in itself was a volatile thing. If it was allowed to run rampant, it could easily ruin the storage from inside and cause it to implode, and to say nothing of the problems that came with the stored chakra’s affinity with a certain elements. A proper chakra storage needed neutralisation of said elements in the chakra to refine it to its mildest form and a constant circulation to direct the flow of energy through the barrier. The conversion of the energy was already a hard task and yet there was more: like the infinite circulation of the energy and the failsafe of thicker ‘walls’ to contain and yet be able to expand. However, the rewards reaped from succeeding would be directly proportional; the user could dictate the concentration of chakra or the time that its linked seal array could last and neither was it constrained to just barriers.

So hypothetically, if she linked the storage to an exploding tag, the explosion would be several times larger than a tag that wasn’t, because the seal array had more energy to work with.

And if Kara could do it, it would be a small piece of history re-attained, and Kushina yearned for that. For too long, there had been a lack of Fūinjutsu work with its diminishing practitioners, and consequently the spark of madness needed for creation and it was a shame. Fūinjutsu, no matter how dangerous, should not be allowed to die out. It was the way of the spiral, the rhythm in the chaos, her blood boldly declared; where the monstrosity of an ancient language could bear miracles when interpreted correctly, bringing the greatest beauty of all.

One of the reasons why she dreamt of having a family was to ensure that the legacy of Fūinjutsu would continue and subsequently proliferate; she wanted to show those that destroyed her home that everything they had worked for had been useless because their art was eternal.

The people of Uzushiogakure no Sato would have wanted that.

“Kushina-nee..?” Kara carefully prodded her mother figure who was standing in the middle of the hallway and staring into space.

“Oh sorry, ‘ttebane. I was distracted,” she smiled sheepishly, ruffling the girl’s hair. Gazing into her wide vermillion eyes that were filled with honest curiosity, the Fūinjutsu mistress concluded, There was no way she could have done it. She's too young and Fūinjutsu in any branch is too vast to comprehend in such a short time.

(But she was wrong.)

“Distracted by what?” The girl sent a wary look to the locked door.

“Your security seals,” replied Kushina, offering the half-truth. “You’ve gotten pretty good at them, Kara-chan. Which is impressive considering the little help you had in the past, ‘ttebane.”
Kara preened under her praise.

“Say, how much do you know about matrimonial seals?”

Brows scrunched under the question. “Is it a field of study that I need to go into? I’ve… never really considered the possibility of it?”

Kushina smiled, but the upturn of her lips was small as if they were weighed down. *Ah, another thing that might be lost in history.* “It’s not really important per se… But I am getting married and they were part of the rites of matrimony back in my old village.”

The girl tilted her head to acknowledge that she was listening. Thus, the Uzumaki continued, “I’m short of a helper to draw it on for me, you see. Minato had Jiraiya-sensei so he was settled there... but I didn’t. I was resigned to using a clone… But it turns out I had one under my nose all along.”

Dumbstruck by the request, Kara blurted out, “What if I mess it up?”

“When you manage to make seals like these?” Kushina quirked an eyebrow, gesturing at all the sealing language that was lined the walls of the apartment. “I think you would have a harder time being wrong with how simple matrimonial seals are. Plus, you’re not starting from scratch,” she shrugged, “I have some reference material from the past.”

“Oh, um,” Kara scratched her cheek bashfully, “I would be happy to draw it for you then.”

“Good,” the older lady chirped. “I’ll bring over the designs tomorrow, ‘ttebane.”

…

Apparently, her encounter with Yamanaka Inoichi hadn’t been her last of her run-in with the village’s bureaucracy that week. Three days later, she was summoned to the Hokage’s office.

“A promotion?” Kara furrowed her brows as she brought down the scroll she was reading.

“One that was long overdue,” inserted the Hokage. “You have the skills and the experience for it, and you were technically eligible for it even before you left on your infiltration mission.”

He wrote something on the report he was reading before putting it aside. “And I’m sure you’ve heard rumours of the upcoming Hokage selection right?”

“It’s kind of hard to miss when that’s what most of the Shinobi in the village have been talking about for the past few days, Jiji.”

“Well your promotion has some political motivations as well. If Minato has a good track record as a teacher, it can carry forward and boost his credibility as a leader. And while Danzo has lesser influence at the Daimyo’s table, I would prefer if Minato’s election is solidified just as the Sannin’s success had done for my reign.”

Without much difficulty, the time-traveller understood his meaning. In the previous timeline, Team 7 had been dubbed the neo-Sannin of their generation and it eased the process of the Rokudaime Hokage’s ascension despite being in the midst of the perilous war.

“So I’m basically a bargaining chip?” She joked. *Although it’s not like I haven’t been one before.*

“Of sorts, but that does not mean your promotion is unmerited, Kara-chan.” Hiruzen said strictly as his eyes crinkled in affirmation for her. “It would not have been given to you if you did not meet the
requirements. I was hoping to give you more time to fit into your specialisation so you could make the full leap to Jōnin… But forging ahead in this manner isn’t necessarily bad either.”

“I’ll adapt, Jiji,” she assured, grinning. “It just feels weird though, to be promoted to Tokubetsu Jōnin.”

“Oh? And why is that so?”

The time-traveller laughed quietly albeit ruefully. “It’s weird to think that the last time I was twelve, I was just becoming a Genin. Yet now… I’m a Tokubetsu Jōnin. Times are really different, ‘ttebane.”

And war is still ugly, to force children into soldiers prematurely.

“The former does sound a lot more attractive,” the Hokage opined with steepled fingers. “… A time where children could be children, was it not? I think it is a blessing that it’s fast approaching.”

“And three wars?” said Kara, the volume of her speech dropping with each word. “Why didn’t we stop at the first?” Why did it take a fourth to realise what we could have accomplished together?

“Better late than never, I suppose,” he concluded reluctantly, returning to the stacks of paper on his table. “The rest of your paper work is still processing by the way. You should receive the notification of your induction soon.”

Vermillion eyes flashed cerulean for an instant. “Okay.”

Omake: Shinobi Mothers and Wedding Preparations

Kara loved her mother. Even if the world was destroyed and she ceased to exist, there was never a doubt in her mind that she loved her. And it was not a baseless declaration; the girl would willingly jump in front of a thousand weapons and a hail of jutsu if it meant that she could protect her.

However, as far as her affections for Uzumaki Kushina went, it was unable to dispel her absolute hatred for wedding preparations. (Any preparation honestly, they were troublesome.)

In hindsight, it suddenly made sense why Minato-sensei was out of the village. He clearly didn’t sit through all the catalogues Kushina had found and decided that compulsory missions were the way to get out of it. A crafty method, she had to admit, except Kara was leaning more towards cursing him rather than appreciating his schemes.

It should be him sitting here, she let out a short hiss under her breath, all the wedding designs on the page blurring into a blob of nonsensical colours as she stared at it for far too long. Or maybe it was just that she had massacred the two year old edition with her pen. She wasn’t really picky about her inability to see the details at this point.

Bring back Temari’s wedding, the time-traveller woefully lamented. Those were simpler times; the couple had just declared their engagement to the rest of the camp who were in attendance and the five Kage immediately administered the wedding with a few vows before they celebrated. It was short, simple and sweet, without the complexities of costumes and locations.

This was all superficial, thought the jinchūriki, for what most was most important was union in the end, was it not?

Also, the group of kunoichi that Kushina had gathered for her wedding was intimidating… Especially when all of them were her old comrades’ mothers: namely Uchiha Mikoto, Inuzuka Tsume, Nara Yoshino, Akimichi Momo and Yamanaka Mayuko. It was only short of the Hyūga,
Haruno and Aburame – but the Uchiha and Hyūga would never be caught alive together outside of a mission or the council room and the Aburame have always been disturbed by the Bijuu her mother was harbouring.

‘How times have changed,’ cackled Kurama as he watched her squirm. The jinchūriki chose to ignore him with the grace of a chicken hiding behind its wings.

But on the bright side of things though, Inuzuka Tsume was still sarcastic and kickass.

“What is this company trying to do? Create a canopy of flowers to poison the air?”

“I swear, that’s not a kimono. They’re trying to strangle someone with that fabric, Shina-chan.”

“Wow, is that a phoenix or picture of a monster trying to be a bird?”

“A theme for Kiri’s most popular drama?” Her nose scrunched. “Didn’t the characters die in that show? Hana-chan kept sobbing about it into my ears for hours. Didn’t think she could understand it, but what do y’know?”

As a result, the youngest kunoichi was part dying and part shoving her knuckles into the back of her throat to stop herself from laughing too hard. Alas, even as she was suffocating herself, the conversation continued.

“The protagonists did die,” the Akimichi confirmed kindly. “They both jumped off the ship together, if I recalled correctly.”

“Are they trying to advertise a failed marriage then? Isn’t it counterproductive to—” the Inuzuka flipped it to its cover, tearing it partly—“Perfect Weddings?” She snorted at the irony of it all. “This is why I never partook in this bullshit even though those elders wouldn’t stop barking down my throat.”

Perhaps it’s a ploy to make people marry several times,” Yoshino mused from the business standpoint. “Although they have chosen poorly in terms of who they are targeting. They would have better luck with the richer echelons of civilians.”

“The show is targeted towards civilians, and so do the magazines.” Mikoto informed them as she frowned at something in the catalogue. “The former already romanticises Shinobi into righteous and committed people who would die for a cause like love. Hypothetically, it could rile up discontent in unfulfilling marriages and partners would start seeking for they cannot have. While I applaud their strategy, they could use a bit more creativity.”

“They hardly need it when people already buy into their narrative and pursue a fleeting love that ends before the voyage reaches its destination. The fact that an entire section for it is enough proof.” Mayuko commented critically while Tsume cringed.

Kara hunched over, shoulders shaking. Oh Shodai, she bit into her laughter, If his mother was this great, is her son what’s left?

The other women shared secretive smiles with each other as the girl’s giggles reached their ears. Needless to say, all of them had noticed the awkwardness exuding from her and understood that it probably stemmed from their age disparity.

“You found a cute one,” Momo whispered to the Uzumaki who was seated next to her. “I just want to hug her and never let her go.”
Same, Kushina thought, gazing at the girl with dark hair and vermillion eyes. *I think so too.*

**Chapter End Notes**

Beta'd by wecantgiggleitsacrimescene  
To 10k views! Whoop!

Some Trivia:

I thought it was really cool that it ends up being Yamanaka Ino's poem that allows Yamanaka Inoichi to see through some of Kara's woes. Maybe it was destined. (Or a daughter's cry to help her friend? It wasn't intentional.)

Chakra Storage seals with the Time-Travel:

Kara didn't actually manage to recreate the Uzushiogakure's version. What she did was she made eighty individual and more fortified ones (she needed to contain Kurama's chakra, go figure), and upon activation, she 'connects' all of them together like they are eighty batteries placed together. Her chakra became the 'wire', in a sense.

I immensely dislike Naruto sometimes for not going deeper into Fūinjutsu theory. Much of my explanation is very 'circuit-like' due to the small electronics course I took in the past. I honestly think Fūinjutsu is more like computer language, but I didn't take it, so I had to substitute. So yes, it's an uphill battle to explain Fūinjutsu that is actually so important to the canon plot especially since YOU KNOW, YOU SEALED A BIJUU IN ONE OF THEM. Ah whatever.

I could rant about this crap for hours and never see the end of the plot holes.
Ten's Yoke

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Yoke

/ jʊək / · noun & verb
a thing whose name one cannot recall, does not know, or does not wish to specify.
cause (two people or things) to be joined in a close relationship.

Her window lock snapped open.

The jinchūriki's instincts immediately screamed. Even with her eyes closed, her fingers curled around cold steel and immediately she threw all of them in succession except for one.

Windows shattered and rained amidst the sound of tumbling and metal embedding into cement, the dull thud nothing compared to the screech of glass against the wooden floors. Wild and silted, crimson eyes shot open and the girl pounced.

Kara slammed the intruder against the wall, her throaty growl rumbling in her chest, kunai merciless as it pressed against the pumping vein, drawing beads of blood. A monster in her den was not to be provoked; and whoever the Hell it was, it had invoked her ire.

She was going to press further into flesh—

"Kara-chan," the man smiled, his crystalline blue eyes fearless and hopeful.

The time-traveller terminated her action.

Moonlight came in from her open window and billowing curtains, illuminating the dazzling shade of golden hair and the glinting protector on his head. The spiral and its pointed end only meant one affiliation and it was Konoha, causing her to blink owlishly again.

"Minato-sensei?" she queried, confused. "What are you doing in my house..." she checked the clock, "At 0400 hours?"

He visibly swallowed before he moved her hand away and hugged her fiercely.

What-

"Thank the Sage of Six Paths you're safe," he whispered into her ear quietly, voice quavering as if he couldn't believe it.

Her pupils widened in surprise to her warming heart. After she dropped her weapon, she patted his back gingerly. She could feel the anxiety loosening from his tense shoulders and the emotion that surged in his heart.

What am I supposed to say? She wondered frantically. What was right in this situation?

Namikaze Minato wasn't someone who showed his vulnerability easily even when he admitted to sealing the Bijuu in her. In her memories, he had always been calm and unfazed – taking everything in his stride no matter how absurd.
Yet, here he was, hunched over and hugging her so tightly as if he feared she would disappear. As if she was a lifeline, that she meant so much to him. *I don't think... anyone has...* Her head ached and she unconsciously tightened her hold on his flak vest.

"Minato-sensei," the girl couldn't help but ruin the moment. "You shouldn't break into other people's houses late at night. Kushina-nee might get the wrong idea."

The said teacher chuckled softly and moved away. "You're right," he ruffled her hair, "But I just wanted to make sure that you were really home. You've been gone for far too long. It's really good to have you back, Kara-chan."

She made a face. "Couldn't you have waited till morning? You look really tired, sensei. You should have gotten some rest first."

The irony of his student chiding at him made him want to laugh.

"It's fine. My students come before sleep."

"It's kind of creepy how easily you admit to that, sensei."

He shrugged lethargically although it does nothing to dim the brightness of his grin in the dark. "What can I say? I love my students like my own."

And perhaps it was the early morn that lowered her restraints because she scarcely ever allowed herself to show the happiness she felt from such lines. Her lips pull into a facsimile grin that nearly reached her ears like a cheshire cat, her contentedness showing through.

"But you are right," he conceded with a light chortle. "I'll see you at our usual training ground at 1200 hours then?" His student was definitely more than fine if her expression and jokes were anything to go by.

"Are you sure you don't need more time, 'ttebane?" He shook his head.

"Okay then," Kara nodded. "I'll see you then."

... High noon couldn't have come soon enough when Kara touched down on Training Ground 3 ten minutes early.

Unsurprisingly, her teacher was already present with a large red scroll balanced against his waist, smiling at her so warmly that she felt the need to look away.

*Stop looking at me like that,* her thoughts spoke in a haunted whisper, *I don't deserve it.* In spite of what she was thinking, the time-traveller had always failed at denying her heart's desires because it started to beat quickly like it was a babbling toddler.

*Still,* she tried to scold while she approached. "Good afternoon, Minato-sensei," she greeted him simply before glancing at the small forest in annoyance.

Making sure her back was facing the treelines, she said her next line in a low voice, "Is that Kakashi-teme going to keep hiding from me or is he deciding to be a squirrel from now on?"

It was ridiculous of him to even try hiding from her when she had the best chakra sensitivity out of everyone in Team Minato – one that they had all relied on. It hadn't failed them when they needed to
track down their comrades, and it certainly wasn't going to fail her now.

Minato shrugged uselessly. "Why don't you ask him that?"

"Like that would work," she replied bitterly. "When I approach him, he runs in the opposite direction or he stays holed in his apartment. I get it, he wants time alone, but this is getting ridiculous, 'ttebane."

"Give him more time, perhaps?"

"It's been nearly a week since I came back. A week, Minato-sensei!" Kara conveyed her frustrations in a strained voice. "And he hasn't even talked to me at all. It's not like he's out on a mission or anything because he's on the patrol list. I checked."

The Jōnin looked pained. "He's going through a tough time right now. Forgive him, will you?"

"Forgive him for what? I already know about Rin-chan and Obito and I'm not blaming him for it."

The kunoichi threw her arms up in exasperation. "I'm not that type of person. All of us are going through it. You don't see me trying to avoid you! It's just him. And I don't want him to avoid me, y'know? He doesn't need to be alone for this and I don't think he's ever understood that."

The very least the jinchūriki could do to repent for her sins was to help the boy who was the most affected by everything she'd done and failed to stop. There was a lot of guilt speaking, but it was also empathy because, well, she knew first-hand what it was like to lose and lose and lose until it was almost hopeless; where it was easier to try and stay away because you could only lose when you had something.

"He'll come around," said Minato despite being unsure. "But back to what I called you here for, Kara-chan. What do you think about Summoning scrolls?"

"They're amazing," replied Kara distractedly at the change of the subject, subconsciously rubbing her right thumb with her index finger. "No matter who you sign to… they become your partners for life. They'll fight for your cause and they'll protect you… they become irreplaceable like family, 'ttebane."

"Correct," her teacher affirmed, pleased by her answer. "But you're missing some technicalities. They also require a significant amount of chakra to summon – not that you need to worry about this – and they tend to come with conditions in exchange for their help. Have you ever been interested in them?"

"Once in a while." Lie. "They're part of Fūinjutsu and they're really useful."

"They mean more than that," her blood sang, and the time-traveller shadowed her own expression with her hair, attempting to suppress the emotions that was bubbling forth.

In this life or the next, the kunoichi already knew who she belonged to. She has experienced all the wonders of summoning with them and they were the only ones she would ever answer to. No matter who she was – Uzumaki-Namikaze Minato or Kara – she was the Gama's through and through.

Intangible threads between her and the Gama had been formed; from her previous signing and the legacy she had inherited from Jiraiya and her father, her loyalties had been promised to the Gama since before she was born. In her heart, there was no species stronger than the sublimity of the Toad, nor was there anyone wiser than the Ōgama Sennin.

They have ruined her for any other summon but she wouldn't want to change that fact.
"Well, I want to offer you a choice," the second living Toad Summoner said seriously. "No matter what you choose, I want you to have a summon by the end of the day so you can have a failsafe and method of quick communication for future missions. Call it selfish, but I prefer being able to hear from you rather than worrying months on end about your condition, Kara-chan."

Throat dry, she replied, "I understand."

"So, you can either sign on with the Gama like Jiraiya-sensei and I have, or you can choose to reverse-summon and let whichever summon that suits you best pull you towards their realm to initiate a contract."

"Why are you giving me this choice, Minato-sensei?" Kara blurted out, hands tugged on the edge of her jacket. "Shouldn't you save the Gama contract for your firstborn?"

The time-traveller didn't want to steal anything anymore. If it wasn't hers to have, she didn't take it. There was a reason why she stopped herself from reverse-summoning in advance because she knew the consequences of it. The name slot that next to Namikaze Minato was not hers to take – it was her future self which had yet to come to be. Back then, it had been Uzumaki Naruto's pride and privilege to be next to her father but that name was no longer hers.

Unperturbed by her question, he flicked her forehead lightly. "And are you not one my students as well?" He commented wryly. "My firstborn child might come in a year, or five depending on what Kushina wants, but you are here with me now, Kara-chan. You're my current priority. Kakashi has his Dogs and I have my Toads while you have none."

The gears that were once spinning in her head ceased. It quietened down into malfunction, leaving the girl to gape at her teacher.

"What is wrong with you?" muttered Minato as he shook his head. "Why do you always try to do things for others but never anything for yourself, Kara-chan?"

A long sigh escaped from his lips and the older man knelt down to her height to stare into her soulful vermillion eyes. 'I've noticed it happening a lot, Kara-chan-- don't try and deny it. Whenever we're training, you have always insisted on making me focus on Rin-chan and Obito-kun while you solve your problems on your own. When we are out on missions, you always take on the worst shifts and you carry heavier loads without complaint. Sometimes, you act so selflessly to the extent I start having the impression you think you're expendable."

"I don't care what others have said about you in the past, but I'm telling you that you're not. You aren't. You are worth something and even if your name implies that you're empty and I think you are filled with more kindness and love than anyone I've ever met. You deserve to have things and the happiness that people give you, okay?"

The jinchūriki felt like crying. Why are you saying this now, 'ttebane? How can she possibly repay him for all he had done for her if he kept giving?

He smiled at her, "So if you want something, say it, Kara-chan. There is no need to always be afraid."

Not wanting to seem ungrateful, she decided in a small and clogged voice, "I... I would like to sign on with the Gama contract then, Minato-sensei."

She said that because she didn't know what else to say. She can't tell him what she truly felt – I am expendable, I was never meant to be here. She wanted him to keep smiling and she didn't want him
to worry about her. Kara did not deserve –

"Good choice," his lips quirked further as he unfurled the scroll and tapped the spot next to his name. "Sign here with your blood."

Kara nodded timidly, albeit distracted.

Taking a deep breath, she knelt before the large summoning scroll and nicked her thumb, ready to bleed her name into the scroll. Just as she pressed her appendage against the wax paper, she gasped, watching as her old name – Uzumaki Naruto – bloomed like ink splatters, visible for an instant before the scroll snapped shut.

The girl hunched over with clenched eyes and her left hand wrapped around her right fist, her head tolling with the sound of bells and hurting like a connection made, like a piece that fit in its place, making her so whole that she let out a cry of relief. She was suddenly painfully hyperaware of everything – as if her lungs expanded and her pores had widened, feeling the transition of natural energy that was omnipresent and beckoning, so much in the grass she was kneeling on, in the air she breathed and all the essence that made sky, earth and sea. It was beautiful and daunting and it was everything she missed and she couldn't help but sob.

Her hand scrambled for the large scroll that smelled distinctly like the mountain it hailed from feeling the texture of the red cloth of the scroll sewn from harvested silkworms from the deepest crevices of the mountains, the wax paper laved with oil and the pulp from the monstrously large trees with spiralling vines, and the faint scent of the previous summoners as they carried it on their back– now her, her mark left once more on the scroll, as it should be until the ends of time. The time-traveller didn't even notice that she had been transported, neither does she hear the panic of her father, so wholly consumed by this experience, of being in touch with nature that she lost track of everything else.

Mt Myōboku trembled when she touched down on its land, its core shaken as the arable land sang for her return with its vibrant colour and its looseness. The time-traveller was gasping out short breaths as she dug her fingers into the same topsoil, breathing in its fertility and feeling the tremors of the earth, alive and pulsing and nurtured by its inhabitants. There was so much of everything that she struggled to take it in –

The natural energy which was tangible in the air; congregating in the lasting mist of the afternoon, keeping the miasma at bay. It was within the veins of the thick leaves that shielded her overhead, up and within the huge trees, their complex networks trailing up in intricate patterns, branching out to reach the heavens. She could sense nature's hand in the water that ran through the mountain, from the water veins to the larger waterways before they join at the main like an enormous gathering of water sprites; the soothing and pure liquid bubbling as it meandered, like excited children as they soared to the clear skies in evaporation, another concord formed before they rained back to the earth and perpetuated itself.

She cannot stop her tears just like no one can command nature's will and she lost all restraint when phalanges of toads pressed against her skin and lifted her, their leathery skins rough compared to her human smoothness, scarred unlike she who could never be marred. They come different sizes in their moistness like the scaling hills and shrubbery of their scenery, skins coloured in autumn leaves and meshing with the brilliant gold of their eyes. Their croaks formed a harmony that surrounded her, the sounds barely in sync; mixing octaves and some human language but it gave her sanity, matching the endless noise of the world that was in her head – constant, wondrous and the sweetest melody that she thought she would never hear again.

Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto didn't know how long it lasted but she didn't want it to end – didn't want
the scent of the thick oil to fade from her nose, not the murmur of croaks that spoke to her in assurance, or the sight of solid rock faces to be blinded from her eyes. She cannot repress her longing for this place and she cannot separate herself from it once more – it would kill her if she did, especially when she was so closely intertwined to the nexus of her summons no matter what time or arc. It finally felt like she was whole.

But suddenly, there was silence.

Her body was pressed against cold stone as she continued to cradle the scroll in her smaller arms, her ears still ringing from all the noise that once enshrouded her. The room was dim without the brightness of the sun and its impartial glow, and she barely managed to lift her head with teary eyes.

Her lips tremble as she took in the large figure, his skin a pale brown and wizened with age, the beads of the same affiliation hanging around his neck and a scholarly hat placed on his head. He looked at peace as he sat in the huge tub of water, his eyes crinkled closed and dozens of wrinkles telling stories of his age.

"Ōgama Sennin," she could barely greet, tears spilling faster from her own cerulean eyes.

She came to him laid bare for his scrutiny, wretched but true in appearances and the sins and untold stories that she bore. The time-traveller doesn't know how she should begin. Should she begin with an apology that she failed to protect her summons, his people, his family, or should she speak of their valance in the battlefield as they wielded their craft and herculean strength? Should she recount the story that he probably already knows but then - for what purpose?

She felt so undeserving and distraught and ashamed that she wanted this connection even though she had failed, and it made her want to scrape off her own name. Let be there be an ugly tear to remind her successors of what a failure she was – perhaps they would learn the lessons she suffered to gain too early rather than late.

But, he spoke: "Welcome home, Summoner of the Last. We have been waiting for you."

His smile was without judgement and with understanding.

Gamamaru understood.

That was all it took to make Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto crumble. From the shattered pieces she tried to maintain fell like a house of cards knocked over by wind, bringing down all her defences, and her disguises molten and shed. Laying out the scroll before her before she bowed, forehead pressed against the ground in reverence, apology and safety. Her wails were the only sound for a few moments as they echoed and bounced off the four walls of the chamber.

"I'm home," she broke. "I'm home." She healed.

...

He towered over her like a hill.

At the end of his evolution, he had a powerful form; larger than the average toad, his limbs akin to coiled springs with sheer strength trapped within. Gamabunta was glorious; so much so that he deprived her of the sun as he sat in front of her in his rust red hues, kiseru pipe lingering at his mouth as he took a long drag. He blew the smoke at her face and the time traveller forced back the reflex to blink.

"I do not remember you, and yet nature does," Gamabunta gave his verdict after much scrutiny.
"You committed a taboo, did you not?"

His question was more of a sharp accusation, heavy and severe like the tanto he wielded. He did not possess the kindness that Gamamaru had in his blight, neither did he have a need for it. He was not the Wise One who gave advice, no, he was the Hand that would do his kin's bidding. There was a reason why he was Chief; he shouldered the responsibility of ensuring that their summoner was trustworthy and did not threaten the lives of his younglings; he was destined to fall first if Mt. Myōboku came under an attack. No leader could take up the role with kindness – for mercy did not protect the weak. Despite his youth, he has already seen the decline of other summons due to irresponsible summoners and he will not let the Gama suffer from the same fate.

Naruto didn't flinch, her crystalline blue eyes determined. "Yes I did."

"Despite that, you dare to bare yourself before the Gama, knowing that such acts are not condoned?"

He was thunder but she was the steady calm of a breeze that would not be deterred. "I do not regret what I have done, Gamabunta-sama, and I understand if you wish to break the contract. While the Ōgama Sennin understands, I do not expect everyone to be the same. You are my equals, my partners and I have fought with all of you. I treasure your opinion like it was my own. But many of toads have died under my command due my inability. Such sins cannot be forgiven, 'ttebane. I do not forgive myself either.

She will never forget the toads that threw themselves in harm's way or the times where she wasn't fast enough to deflect attacks from injuring them. They stood beside her in the Fourth War as faithful companions but all the repayment she ever gave for their unconditional support was nothing; were dead corpses that had to return to nature and loyalty which would not bring back the dead.

"Did you regret their deaths?"

The Last Summoner sucked in a breath. "So much," she murmured, hands crumpling the fabric of her pants. Her golden hair fell down one of her shoulders as she tilted her head downwards, eyelids quivering to a close. "I am willing to repay any debt you wish to accrue on me."

"What were the conditions of your previous contract with us?"

"Whenever the Gama called, I had to answer, and I had to come to Mt. Myōboku once every two moon cycles to help out with any task of your choosing. To summon you, however, I had to drink with you afterwards."

The Chief gave a throaty croak at that. "Hopefully you will prove yourself to be less of a lightweight than Jiraiya should that come to pass."

"My alcohol capacity is not an issue," she replied.

Gamabunta turned trenchant again.

"You are an odd one. So certain on trivialities—" he blew another cloud of smoke at her—"and yet uncertain of truths and reality. Do you not find it peculiar that you come to seek forgiveness for something that has yet to be done?" Naruto's head snapped up in surprise.

"I do not remember what nature does. Nature, the mother who breathes life into everything, is impartial. She might show her wrath in disasters and calamity but She does smite a mortal that had little control over the schemes of others. You mistake my intent in asking these questions, Summoner of the Last. All I needed to affirm was your loyalty and your willingness to protect what is mine. You have shown that in spades with your regret – but Summoner, I have no use for emotions like
regrets. They do not feed my children. It does nothing to protect what is mine. If they still your actions like an ant caught in amber or water suspended within ice, you have no need for it either.

"Despite being Chief, I cannot separate a soul that has been bonded with the Gama for a second life, nor can I stop my toads from hearkening to your call. Even the *Nidaisengama* who feel the most intimate with nature would be honoured to answer. That is the influence you hold in your blood."

He rolled open the scroll that laid between them, spreading it out to its full length. "Your conditions remain the same although I would like to add another clause: do not allow hesitation to stop you from summoning us. Do not let the previous deaths blind your eyes from urgency as if you were a hawk who had lost its wings and claws. You seek a changed world and we would like to see the realm you wish to walk on and the fights you have to partake. Let us stand by your side as your partners once more.

"Your blood is our medium and it matters not if your name is by birth right or false. For the sake of your secrecy, I must ask: would you like to change your stated name or would you like to keep it?"

Her eyes were red with tears again and Naruto wiped it away with the back of her hand. She did not deserve their loyalty but maybe one day… One day, she could reach that height again.

"Smear it," she said. "I am neither."

"If that is what you wish." Gamabunta placed down his pipe to retrieve his weapon, slicing a clean laceration across his phalange before he pressed it on her name, smudging it into an incoherent mess of words.

The time-traveller admired his handiwork. Maybe this would be a proper representation of her existence; incomprehensible and with too long a description to make sense of. It was the closest to what she deserved and it would give her a measure of protection from the two important men in her life.

"Say," Gamabunta gave her a toad equivalent of a smirk, "Wouldn't Minato be worried that you were reverse-summoned for such a long period of time?" He cocked his head. "I think another toad might have been called by him for questioning."

"…Crap," was her only reply alongside widened eyes, fingers splayed out on her disguise seal as she reverted her appearance back to black hair and red eyes.

"Gamabunta-sama—"

"Bunta, you sound like you don't mean that address."

"—Bunta," she corrected, "You're really *mean*, 'ttebane. Couldn't you have told me that earlier?"

He croaked. "Who was the one in tears and took too long to recover herself? It was not me, child of Namikaze. You reap what you sow in worries and doubts."

"Whatever, 'ttebane," she scowled, going through the seals to reverse-summon herself. "I'll see you soon."

"Hm."

…

Namikaze Minato did not look pleased when she finally returned.
Glancing at the ground where he worked a track into, she decided to don her best sheepish grin before announcing: "I successfully signed a contract with the Gama? Yay?"

He raised an eyebrow with false amusement. "After three hours? Pray tell, what were you negotiating with them, Kara-chan?"

*Plan play it innocent failed. Move on to the next phase, Shinobi.*

So the girl let bullshit spew from her mouth. "The Gama decided to give me a tour of Mt. Myōboku after we were done talking, 'ttebane! It was really beautiful with all the plants and toads and rivers – and I saw the Ōgama Sennin too! He was huge! Like Gamabunta-sama! And psychic?" She pressed her fingers to the side of her head and squinted her eyes. "Yeah, I didn't get that part too."

Minato counted to nine in his head. He was aware his student sometimes made absolutely no sense but it was hard to get over the 'infuriating' part of it all. He has never heard of a summoner being called to the other realm the moment they signed the contract – it just didn't happen that way – so what made Kara so special?

If there came a day where he managed to solve the mystery, he reckoned he could tackle world peace.

After pondering the thought and coming up with nothing, Minato gave up. He could ask the Gama later. "So what were your established conditions with them?"

"Um… I have to answer their call no matter what, and I have to help them with any task of their choosing once every two moon cycles. They were pretty nice about it."

The second Toad Summoner nodded. "It's the same as Jiraiya-sensei's and mine, then. Although I do have an extra condition to help them find Jiraiya-sensei."

"It's not that hard," she snorted. "Just follow the smell of the onsen and listen out for incessant giggling near the fences. He's bound to be there."

As much as Minato wanted to salvage his teacher's reputation, it was sadly true. He shrugged. "He didn't do anything unscrupulous when he was around you… right?"

"I don't think he ever would," she said truthfully. If anything, Jiraiya always tried to be the better example. He never drank in front of her, he toned down his daylight research and gave her advice whenever she was training. "Ero-sennin might be a pervert but he would never stoop that low."

"Ero-sennin?" He burst out into laughter at her blatant disrespect, his thoughts going off on a tangent. He probably should have expected that – after all, he was speaking to the student that dared to taunt the Kumo squad that they were supposed to be fighting.

"It's pretty fitting right?" She puffed out her chest proudly. "I came up with it myself."

He was gasping for air.

"W-What was sensei's reaction?"

"Shocked," she smirked.

Despite being a tad bit proud, Minato still slapped the upside of her head. "You shouldn't disrespect Jiraiya-sensei, Kara-chan. He's still senior to you in rank and age."
"I do respect him," protested Kara, pouting as she rubbed the spot. "...I just don't show it as much. Never in front of him anyway," she muttered the last line under her breath.

"Why not?"

"Because he already has a huge head, and he might explode, 'ttebane."

"Kara-chan."

She smiled innocently through his disdain. "Yes, sensei?"

Sighing inaudibly, he shook his head, "Never mind."

"So... Where did Kakashi go this time?" asked Kara as she caught another whiff of dog and metal again. He had definitely entered the training grounds some time ago if the lingering scent was any indication. In fact, she sniffed, it's relatively new.

Not bothering to hide it, Minato replied, "He came out of the forest when you were teleported to Mt. Myōboku hours ago. After confirming that you were safe, he left to train."

"I see," she murmured, turning her heel east. "Well, I'm going to go find him, 'ttebane."

The seriousness in her vermilion eyes caught him off guard.

"Do you need help finding his whereabouts?"

"I'll search the entire village if I have to, Minato-sensei," she gave him a wan smile with some confidence hanging on the edge of her lips.

*I always know where to find him.*

There was no place in Konoha where this Hatake Kakashi could hide to get away from her. His future self might have been the master of disappearing after creating so many hiding spots around the village but he wasn't that person yet.

He wasn't the paranoid ninja broken further by ANBU, neither was he the boy who had lost everyone. There was still some hope of him being more stable and Kara would rather be damned than let him fall so deep again.

She never wanted to see the Rokudaime who woke up from nightmares with shrieks silenced behind his lips (because his time in black ops taught him never to scream) or the man who was so plagued with guilt that he worked himself to exhaustion. *One lifetime of it was enough,* she told herself, the recurring headache returning for the second time.

Either way, there were two places she was certain he would go now: either the memorial or Rin's grave.

After all, the only reason why he would come to Training Ground 3 was because the memorial was situated there, or he would have avoided it completely so he didn't have to meet her. Minato might have played a part in arranging the timing but his guilt was still the main factor.

Thus, with a plan in mind, Kara suppressed her presence and dashed towards the main graveyard.

…

Lightning.
Like an endless storm, his chakra was crepitating with energy; jolts that surged out from the wellspring of his power to the ends of his limbs. It was condensed and churning – far more than those his age – and if the time-traveller closed her eyes, she almost believed she could hear the sounds of a thousand birds chirping again.

But she also saw the chipping of his lightning blade and his attempts to make it straight again. How he once tried to shave off those parts of him, of how he tried to make those cracks his own, the accidental widening of others and glimpses of how he wanted to abandon the blade.

So human, her heart and mind ached.

As quietly as she could, she approached the boy who stood before the grave.

Hatake Kakashi made a sombre scene; his eye never straying from the tombstone before him, with hunched shoulders as if regret made him bend. He stood bowed, alone and silent, the image of the lonesome figure in the cemetery in the remains of the day.

If he was taller and in a standard Konoha uniform, he would be him again, her memories haunted, momentarily blurring two silver heads together.

They're not the same, she chanted to herself, cringing. They're not, they never will be. They won't. He will never be the Rokudaime Hokage I served and— she forcefully cut it off.

Present. She needed to focus on the present.

Kara gazed at the tombstone.

…

In loving memory of
NOHARA RIN
15 November 43 AKF – 21 June 55 AKF
A beloved daughter, kunoichi and friend.

…

"What was she like, sensei?"

"A good friend and teammate, Naruto. She was a talented medic like Sakura but gentler; one of the kindest people I knew."

She leans over to peer at his expression. "That's all?"

His grey eyes closes. "She was an unfulfilled promise."

…

"Kakashi."

His head jerked towards the familiar voice that called his name. A grey eye widened as he took in the kunoichi of dark hair and crimson eyes, finally registering who it was.

His last teammate. Kara.

A teammate that was still alive unlike the other two, someone he could not interact with lest he wanted to taint her life with his bloodied hands, someone precious, who needed to be safe and that was away from him –
Before he knew it, he was gone.

He pushed himself further out of the graveyard – a useless gesture since his ghosts hung over him – one foot in front of him one at a time, the only thing on his mind was distance, speed and away. Hatake Kakashi should be nowhere near her, shouldn't have been at the training ground to catch a glimpse, and should have been more observant to not let her get close.

All he could hear was his pulsing heart as he exerted himself and the blurring greenery –

Suddenly, there was an impact at his side and smaller hands were wrapping around his waist, he was going to go down – get off –

"For fuck's sake, Kakashi!" the girl hissed, torn between anger and grief as she tussled him to the ground. "Stop fucking running away – kami damn you – Fūin!"

With her outcry, every resistance he put up whether it was shoving or kicking, stopped. Every bodily control he had was snatched away with the black lines that instantly surfaced, freezing his movements mid-action as if it was a moment caught in a camera's flash.

And then she punched his face. "I told you to stop running away. Why do you keep running!??"

Now towering over him as he laid flat on his back, Kakashi could see her full visage: the colour of her irises akin to newly split blood as tears welled within them, the mauve on her cheeks, and her obsidian hair in utter disarray as it draped down her shoulders, back and some onto face.

She was supposed to be untouchable and away, not so close to him. She was supposed to live on her perfect life as a prodigious kunoichi because they didn't need broken people to fix. Kara should not belong in his life for her own sake.

He breathed in the scent of grass next to him. Felt for the chakra circulation within him, the heartbeat strong in her thighs which dug into the ground and his sides, unable to think of anything to say to her. He just wanted to get away—

So the only words that left his unparalysed lips was something inane: "Why did you use seals meant for criminals?"

Kara wiped her tears away furiously, snapping, "Well why the fuck are you running away from me like you are one, teme?"

There was so much hurt reflected in the tremble of her voice and her expression that he was speechless. She was seldom like this. Kara was always headstrong, better without him, a fierce fighter and never a crier.

Yet, she was because of him and it was his fault again.

*It was always my goddamn fault.*

It was a better decision to stay silent instead.

Knowing that he wouldn't be telling her anything, she spoke:

"What *good* does running ever bring?" She asked tiredly, clasping his face in her hands. They moved down to his collar to shake him, *so tired*, and exasperated and broken—"Why won't you ever come to me to *explain*?"
"I know, okay? I know about Rin-chan and Obito. I'm telling you I know what happened to them." She was breaking inside as she witnessed the torment spilling from his grey eye – I did this – but it doesn't stop her from continuing because she needed to tell him this. Needed to clear up the misconception, tell him—

"I don't blame you, okay? Ever since the day I knew, I have never blamed you. And I'm sorry that I wasn't there. I'm sorry. I should have been there and it had to happen. By the Shodai, it's not your fault so stop acting like it is, you're not a friend-killer, 'ttebane."

Her head was leaning against his chest now as her fingers sinking into his collar and she was gasping for air because it was taking so much out of her to say it. "Stop running away from me. Stop avoiding me and pretending I don't exist because I do and it hurts. Kami," she choked, "You won't kill me."

"I know you're afraid of losing, that you'll mess up and break things and lose again, but I'm telling you it is okay. Running won't solve anything, neither does avoidance and I won't lose anymore. I don't want to lose you."

Her hands were aching again; phantom pain from etching names into the obelisk re-surfacing, filling her muscles in her limb but there's more – it was in her shattered heart, persistent despite the torrent of woes and in the sins of her bones. The time-traveller was crying because she can do nothing else, soaking his shirt with her tears and snot.

All she can be honest about are her emotions, never the facts, so let her wail.

Slowly, the black calligraphy chains receded, returning back their caster like a millipede curling up in self-defence.

"I'm so sorry," he finally said.

Kakashi raised his arms to wrap around her.

"I'm so sorry."

…

"Will you show me?"

It was a question she asked after they had calmed down with clearer vermillion eyes. She tapped her left cheekbone inquisitively and slanting her head, neither demanding nor diffident.

The Hatake recoiled as he thought about the transplanted Sharingan buried under his hitat-ate. Why would you want to see something so ugly? He inquired that much, sans his own personal opinion about the entire matter.

"Because I want to, 'ttebane," Kara retorted like she had a way of simplifying wounds. "So can I?" It was more hesitant again; prodding for a sense of the degree of pain the exposure would inflict on him.

But Kara deserved to know. Deserved to be aware of what laid behind his scarred eyelid because insomuch as the gift was for him, it was meant to watch over her too. Painstakingly, he took his metal protector off.

Yet, despite his convictions, Kakashi couldn't find the will to inflict this on her. It was an accursed crimson with three spinning tomoes in its depths; a terrible reminder of what would forever remain a
visible sign of his failure. It was a leech – of what was stolen and irreplaceable, and he just can't let her see that. If there was one thing that eye – his eyes – didn't deserve, it was to gaze upon something as pure as Kara.

"Kakashi," she murmured, suddenly much closer to him. His vision darkened as she sank on both knees in front of him. Without another sound she caressed the vertical scar, the whispers of her touch leaving a trail of fire down the side of his face.

"Open them please," she was nearly pleading, voice tethering like a sliver of a thread desperate to make a connection.

Uncontrollably, his closed eyes snap open.

Her tears spilling anew were louder than any gasp she could have made. "I'm so sorry," she says, her apology distorted by her grief. "I'm so goddamn sorry."

"What are you sorry about?" He heard himself croak. "You've done nothing wrong."

Yet, the kunoichi refused to explain, repeating those words again and again. "I'm sorry," she kept saying like a fool. "I'm so sorry." Her fingers trembled as she outlined the shadow of his eye before it rested on his cheek.

The girl was smaller now as she sat on her legs – further too– the bridge of her arms quailing. She seemed to want to curl up into herself but she didn't dare, like she didn't want to break a connection and send the message that she was horrified—

And uncharacteristically, the Hatake raised his own hand to place over hers. Perhaps it was to tell her that he was here too, and maybe he understood where she was coming from when she regurgitated her regrets. He just thought he needed to be her brace; her support when she wasn't enough for herself, since that was what his teacher had always done for him and maybe just this once, he could do it too.

It was just one of the many other qualities he should have offered but he never had.

The gesture felt awkward and weird, like he wasn't doing it right but the Hatake swore he was trying. Trying to make things better for her, trying to stop ignoring whatever his emotions scream and maybe—

Everything he was mulling about halted when she moved her hand away to take his left. She doesn't stop as she laid it between both her palms, capturing his clammy coldness in her heat. Despite her weeping being reduced to mere sniffs, a lone tear still dripped, down her cheeks and onto her lap.

Maybe I'm hallucinating, he thought, for his own vision was blurry as well.

However, the slipping off of his glove staggered him.

One scar is enough – he cried out, resisting and drawing back. Two was one too many, and Kara didn't need to see his wretchedness in full or the indignity he dealt upon himself.

But she was insistent and firm in her hold, forging ahead without fear to face the monsters he didn't dare confront.

She trusted that he wouldn't hurt her, knowing he would never use force to remove her presence and he was left absolutely helpless against her demands. (But he trusted her in equal measure, understanding she would never abuse the trust he has begrudgingly given her.)
With almost brutal gentleness, she stripped him of his defences one by one, peeling the layers of dressing away to reveal another blemish in his soul. There was far more heartbreak on her visage, far worse than the time he tried to run away as she traced the cicatrix for what it was. Each edge and spike, dagger sharp and protruding pinkness, she left nothing untouched. She made it a labyrinth as if she was searching for something, yearning almost, and he couldn't stop himself from recording every moment of it.

When she finally lifts his hand to kiss it, it is a realisation that, like Kushina-nee, Kara wanted it to heal.

Like she saw the bigger picture, beyond the boundaries of strained skin and saw the damage he had buried deep. He wasn't certain if that was a blessing or a curse or if it was just her, but things could be okay.

He might be okay.

Even if he could never forgive himself.

Chapter End Notes

Beta'd by wecantgiggleitsacrimescene
ONTO 11K VIEWS, 150 BOOKMARKS AND 450 KUDOS WAPAAAAA
ScREAMMMMMmmMMMM
Also, I should have dedicated this story to my beta a long time ago but I'm stupid so I haven't so here.
Much love wecantgiggleitsacrimescene
Whenever the Hokage made a decision, he made it a point to not regret them.

If it was for the benefit of Konoha, he would willingly accept the consequences of his ethically damaging or morally wrong decisions. Everything was essentially for the sake of his village; taking the mantle of Hokage, sending his fellow Shinobi off on missions, and fighting in this perilous war.

When he was sworn in, he took an oath to protect the Hi no Ishi and the Great Tree no matter the cost, even if it meant raising monsters and creating organizations which were quickly slipping out of his control. Sarutobi Hiruzen has never declared that he was the best or the most perfect Hokage. He knew they had committed his fair of mistakes, some were merely worse than the others but the gist of it remains the same.

But now that he stared at the young girl clad in the standard ANBU attire – its dark and sombre colours clinging to her skin – he wondered if he had done the right thing.

It didn’t matter that she held more years of experience than her current physical age or the fact that she came from another time. He knew of the borderline suicidal and morally reprehensible missions that ANBU operatives were tasked to do; they were directly answerable to him and he was the person that gave out those same commands. He didn’t need a trip to the psychology division to know how damaging those jobs were to the psyche in the long run – he saw it in the men that reported to him, with their detached words, broken limbs and twisted minds. He knew the higher than average mortality rate in the papers he read and the mental instability that plagued even the best of the best.

It was a natural consequence; while normal Shinobi bathed in the sunlight and carried out a peaceful image, the ANBU lived in the darkness, dirting their hands for the sake of all.

And he was going to subject this girl to the same thing, to the grim horrors that came hand in hand with the red insignia, with the guilt that cannot be separated like the permanent tattoo that they will ink into her arm.

While he cannot read his ANBU Commander’s expression due to his porcelain mask and neutral countenance, years in his company had taught him a great deal of things. Sarutobi Hiruzen was the person that plucked him out of the midst of Shinobi and realized his potential, grooming him into the stalwart leader he was today. It was only natural that he could sense the disapproval simmering under his unspoken words and the slight twitching of fingers that he tried to hide beneath his white cloak. He did not agree to this entire arrangement where an eleven year old was allowed to become an ANBU operative.

Alas, his decision must stand.

There were benefits that came with the danger that the ANBU faced, and they were precisely the benefits that the time-traveller needed.
With the darkness that she would be inducted into, her identity would be the price to give her the metaphorical blank cheque to preserve future peace. The ANBU may be under the direct command of their Kage and there were stringent rules that come hand in hand with the role, but in reality, it also meant these Shinobi had more leeway and flexibility to complete their missions. Due to the iniquitous nature of said missions, paper trials were usually kept to the minimum and needed the highest level of clearance to be reviewed.

“Are you sure you want to go on with this, Hokage-sama?” he questioned.

Hiruzen steepled his fingers, peering at the girl kneeling in front him.

“Yes,” he said after a beat. “I have already taken your counsel and placed her under probation before, and she has proven her own mettle in spades with the missions she has successfully completed undercover. A talent like hers should be utilized for the betterment of the village. I see no reason why I should continue to deny Kara such a promotion.”

The ANBU commander shifted. Even with his shielded eyes, the Hokage could sense that he was staring, questioning almost. But the underling knew his rightful place in the chain of command and kept his criticism to the acceptable minimum.

“With all due respect, Hokage-sama, isn’t she too young for such a profession?”

Kara snuffed her laughter. The said superior looked faintly amused. *If only you knew, old friend, if only you knew.*

“In the eyes of the Shinobi system, she is already a legal adult. She is a capable soldier with a specialization that little are willing to uptake or have considered and Konoha is fortunate to have such a talent in our ranks. There is a reason why age has never been a criteria for admittance into ANBU when we were creating the organization. We have never had such a thing, and I don’t see why we should start now.”

Disapproval was still thick in the room but the Sandaime Hokage ignored it.

“Let’s just get on with it, shall we?”

There was no point in attempting to persuade his commander that this was the right thing to do. Perhaps, Hiruzen even felt a little gratitude that he could entrust her to someone who would be pulling the strings to ensure that she would be safer. Biased, yes, but they didn’t need to make themselves uglier when their children were already professional killers and some with bounties on their heads.

The white-cloaked ANBU stepped forward silently while removing one of his gloves. On the now exposed bare arm he revealed an entire sleeve of black ink – lines upon lines of curls and symbols – and they start glowing with each hand seal he made.

“Kara of Konohagakure no Sato,” the Hokage intoned gravely. “You have heard the directives of the ANBU. It asks of you to protect everything under the *Hi no Ishi*, be it the nation, village or its people, and this command supersedes all else. Are you willing to commit to these directives for the rest of your life?”

“Yes.”

“For the village, absolute obedience will be expected of you. As an operative, you will have to take morally reprehensible missions. You are never to speak of your time in the black ops and you are expected to give up your life if needed. Despite all this, are you still willing to join the ANBU?”
She gazed into his brown eyes, unwavering in her will. “Yes, Hokage-sama.”

The ANBU Commander reached forward and grabbed the side of her arm, and the insignia seared deep into her muscles and bones. It stung as it latched onto her but she held still, refusing to react. ANBU didn’t show emotions – they were their porcelain masks; and she would have to embody what her duties required of her.

“Then, with the authority vested in me by the Hokage seat, I, Sarutobi Hiruzen, officially induct Kara into the Ansatsu Senjutsu Tokushu Butai.” He activated the seal on his end and the black tattoo bled red. A pulse of chakra surged through her, one that was not her own, and her beast almost destroyed it had it not been for her restraint.

“Your codename will be ‘Blank’,” he continued to utter, placing her mask on the table. Devoid of any markings or eye holes, it was an empty slate. While it was representative of her false name, the kunoichi was once intimate with this mask because it once hung on her teacher’s wall. It had been a fleeting glimpse, but it was difficult not to notice something that gleamed in a room furnished in matte colours.

The operative who had stood up looked at her cover with hidden alarm.

“It is an inheritance,” the Hokage acknowledged her silent query as well as the bristling of his commander. “She has asked that you were the one she passed it down to.”

“Hai,” she obeyed. Respectfully, she slid the mask on her face.

“Report to the ANBU headquarters, operative,” his commander told her. She nodded and left through the compartment in the ceiling.

Hiruzen held back a sigh as he watched her leave.

Inducting Kara would be one of his last acts as a Hokage. It was something he was sure his successor would never grant to the time-traveller and thus, the responsibility had to fall upon him. But actually seeing her, a girl who he was gradually treating as his granddaughter, kilted out in the uniform and officially branded caused displeasure to flood his mind.

Minato’s wrath would not be light when he finds out about her induction but it was probably well-deserved on his part for agreeing to it.

Because for all the pretences she has to put up, this would be the worst.

Emotionless did not suit her, neither did blind obedience. Her returning was the very defiance of the concept she had to be in the ANBU. Her actions were bold and reckless; a gamble which was the epitome of all or nothing, and these were things a black ops was not. Everything about them was calculated: threats needed to be eliminated before they were actualised, shifts were concentrated at places or persons holding the most information—perhaps, he suddenly realised, it might not be that different when my operatives gamble with their lives with every mission they take, although duty partly forces them to make the bet.

But he digressed. Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto was not made for the darkness. She belonged in the light in her blazing golds and blues even if she was convinced her place was in the shadows, for she was already a hero; a symbol; she was not meant to be an artefact buried by dust. There was something distinctly wrong about this decision but it was one he could no longer withdraw. No operative ever left ANBU – their official resignation was death.

His commander felt the need to comment that much: “It is cruel to make someone so young inherit
“A difficult task,” he answered honestly, expression hardening. “But not impossible. She might just surprise you with what she can accomplish. If not, why would her teacher allow her to take her mask?”

“It is not the question of her capabilities. I yield that her reports have confirmed that much. However, it is rather cruel to make her live up to an eidolon whilst she is hidden under its shadows, Hokage-sama. The reputation of ‘Blank’ and ‘Konoha’s Deceit’ is still one that strikes fear in the hearts of others, even after so many years.”

“And it would be gratifying if she could. I have high expectations for her. After all, we could use a few more monsters to fight against those we create, Commander.”

“Monsters?” he chuckled, not quite amused. “What do you intend, Hokage-sama?”

The Hokage sparked his tobacco pipe. “To clean up my messes,” he stated simply. “It is about due time I started. Some matters cannot go on festering and infecting the Great Tree.”

“Then I am yours to command.”

“You have always been,” he asserted thankfully. “But a new wind is coming, my friend. I have a hunch it will be a good one that can finally sweep away the leaves that have piled to expose any festering roots.”

“Come,” the leader then beckoned, rising from his seat in a flourish of formal robes. “We have a meeting to attend.”

His days in power were set to diminish like the steady slow creep of winter’s approaching chill, and his last emprise would be seeing the Kiiroi Senko into his seat.

…

The Daimyo frowned at the agenda brought to table. “A new Hokage? The Third has been doing fine, has he not? He has allowed the village to prosper since his reign and ended two wars. Where does the discontent lie?”

Danzo seized the initiative first to set the conversation in the direction he wished. “Truth to be told, the Sandaime has been too soft with his actions and has allowed Konoha to be pushed to the corner. What the other villages perceive us to be now is weak – and we hope that a new Hokage can rectify it. Whoever we choose needs to be strong in his iron hand and properly enforce the laws of the Shinobi and inspire our village into new heights.”

“A good approach,” he approved with the flutter of his fan. “And who is this person who suits the criteria you bring forth, Danzo?”

_Here it comes_, Hiruzen briefly closed his eyes.

“I recommend Orochimaru from the Sannin.”

Whispers broke forth from the councillors while the side of Konoha remained mostly silent. None of them were caught unawares that Danzo and Orochimaru were in cahoots with one another. It would be more surprising if they weren’t.

But, _he is a fool to think that he can control a snake from the shadows like how he puppeteers his_
own men, Hiruzen’s lips involuntarily curl. Orochimaru has and always will serve his own motivations first – having been his teacher, how could he not have understood that?

“And what is your opinion on this nomination, Sandaime?”

Allowing the room to quieten first, the said leader spoke:

“Orochimaru is indeed a genius in this age of war. An excellent Shinobi.” he acknowledged the point with an incline of his head. “However, the same cannot be said for his aptitude as a Hokage. A sinister will and greed lurks behind his eyes and it makes him unsuitable to take on the mantle.”

“Sandaime!” Danzo called out sharply.

The Hokage did not spare as much as a glance to the war hawk. Not at the craggy scars on his chin that was contorting into greater disapproval nor the betrayal in his beady eyes. Shimura Danzo would quickly learn that he held no influence over the Daimyo’s council – and no council soon, for he would lose the ears of the warlord with the next election.

“Therefore, I must recommend Namikaze Minato.”

“A pupil of Jiraiya, who is another Sannin with arguably better principles,” Koharu tacked on supportively. “In other words, it is a disciple of your disciple, is it not?”

“And it is a wiser alternative too. Like Orochimaru, he is a genius himself and his moniker as the Kiiroi Senko becomes of him. Certainly the tales of Namikaze Minato’s reputation has reached your esteemed ears, Daimyo-dono.”

“His reputation does precede him,” the ruler smiled coyly at Homura. “He does Hi no Kuni well.”

And with a few sentences, Danzo could almost see the reins he once held slipping from his fingers. It was snatched away again like the time by the campfire, where he had once hoped the hat would be his. Outraged by the loss, he stood up abruptly. “I must oppose this, Daimyo-dono. While Minato is undoubtedly a good choice, he is still too young.”

“Age does not determine aptitude.” The Hokage interjected, his stand far calmer as he defused his rebuttal. “During the Battle of the Kannabi Bridge, he has distinguished himself to be a great commander, one that is worthy of the village’s respect. It can even be said that he paved the way for Konoha’s victory. I see no reason why his age should be used against him.”

“What do the rest of you think?” The Daimyo hummed and asked his council.

“I am for Namikaze Minato.” Shikaku spoke up in the silence. “Having worked with him before, I vouch for his abilities.”

“The people revere him a hero, Daimyo-dono,” offered the ANBU Commander quietly. Despite his muffled voice, his convictions were strong; akin to a knife that chopped at the haze of indecision.

It was like a fuse – from one councillor, the next was influenced to murmur their acceptance for such a candidate. Within a minute the resolution was reached.

“Very well,” the Daimyo snapped his fan shut. “Namikaze Minato will be the next Hokage. Sandaime, make the necessary preparations for his succession. I will look forward to meeting him.”
“Yes,” the Hokage bowed before gazing at Danzo meaningfully.

With the demeanour of a leader, he warned his rival. *Do not attempt to wrest power away from me in the arena I have lived and fought in.*

The old war hawk might be an established commander with the way he maneuvered his Shinobi under the shadows, but politics was still ultimately Sarutobi Hiruzen’s space. Where Danzo believed he would win, he had failed, for the pieces were never his to begin with. From the moment the hawk perceived the Great Tree to be his after having tended to it for so long, he had already lost.

Homura and Koharu were Konoha’s, not his pawns – and while Hiruzen might disagree with old friends on some matters, it did not mean they would not have his back. Danzo was wrong to assume they would follow him blindly. They had wizened eyes that has seen so much and they would use them to support those would benefit the village.

It just so happened Namikaze Minato was the better deal.

*Soon,* the Hokage schemed as he strode out of the room with his followers flanking him, *I will bereft the hawk of its wings.*

And he knew exactly who would help him.

…

*So this is what it’s like to be under the brush.*

Uzumaki Kushina looked into her charge’s vermilion eyes, taking note of the sheer intensity present within. It was like watching a girl possessed; how Kara saw her as nothing but as a canvas; a mouldable structure; tilting her head for better angles and her apparatus sure as it glided across her skin and left tingles.

There was no hesitation in her artistry the moment she started, and for the life of her, she could not remember the last time the younger Fūinjutsu mistress actually glanced at the reference material despite her previous fears.

She exuded the rare elegance of a virtuoso in her confidence. Like she truly believed in every line she drew, vested her soul into her piece and Kushina felt flattered by the perfection the girl striving to achieve. Said practitioner moved strands of her red hair aside and continued to sweep her brush down her neck, finally moving to the main portion of her back.

As Kara did that, it revealed the Uchiha matriarch with her Sharingan active to her view.

“What are you staring at,” Kushina teased, careful not to giggle too much.

Mikoto blinked her kekkei genkai out of existence, slightly sheepish she was caught. “She’s very talented,” she gestured to the youngest kunoichi who was absorbed in her work. “You look rather stunning with the seals on you, Kushina.”

While Mikoto spoke the truth, the Uzumaki could easily decipher there was more to her words. They have been friends for more than a decade after all. Stoic as the Uchiha tried to be, she could read the twitches of their expressions like an open book.

“You’re still trying to figure out how Fūinjutsu works, aren’t you?”

“Good luck with that,” snorted Tsume from the other end of the room.
“It is rather different from jutsu,” murmured the Uchiha in acquiescence. She peered back at the mirror, half-lidded, lining her eyes with kohl and trying for a wing-tip. “I can read the activation sequences for both but mimicking brings vastly different results.”

“Fūjinjutsu is not just about the conversion or flow of chakra,” Kushina shrugged. “It’s about the construction and understanding of how each part works to get to the final product, not the final product itself. I did offer to teach you when we were younger and you refused.”

“One of my greatest regrets,” Mikoto lamented. “But I was being a good friend. If I said yes, you would have lost some personal bonding time with Minato and this wedding would not be happening. I was raised better than to be a third wheel and the success of your love life proves my point.”

The Uzumaki flushed red at the comment. “Shut up, ‘ttebane.”

“Ah, her verbal tic is back,” laughed Mayuko who had crept over to listen in on the conversation.

“Quiet you!” Kushina shushed, the tomato colour reaching the tip of ears.

Her abrupt movement caused the girl to frown and rub at the spot that was ruined. “Kushina-nee, please stop moving,” she chided subconsciously, somewhat annoyed. She had been nearing the last strokes of the matrimonial seals and the thought of having to backtrack was irksome.

“Yes, listen to her.”

Finally done, Kara moved away to observe her handiwork in satisfaction. From the middle of the Uzumaki’s forehead, lines and symbols paralleled one another and hugged the curvatures of her face, down her cheeks to the slope of her collarbones. They form intricate patterns as they merged at her nape, the brush strokes intertwining like a braid before they branched out again. They were like vines as they gracefully trickled down her arms and back, some of the ancient language akin to blooming flowers with their delicate and soft-ended streaks.

If I ever get married... Would I be like this? Kara absentmindedly wondered, tentatively touching the ink to test the dryness. But she tossed the idea away as soon as it appeared, for it would never happen in this life. She was no longer declared an Uzumaki, and the seals she once saw on the shrines of Uzushiogakure’s ruins were not meant to stain her skin.

“It’s done, Kushina-nee,” she said, moving away to allow her mother to see herself in the tall mirror. A huge grin illuminated her face as she inspected the matrimonial seals with a slow spin. “You did well, ‘ttebane.” However, sadness still lingered in her violet depths. “The other Uzumaki would have been so jealous that I hired such a talented artist.”

Shaking her head furiously, she said, “How could I compare?” To the seals they carved into brick and stone, and the multiple ways they could decorate limbs? By far, her design was the most basic; the time-traveller knew where she was lacking in terms of such a complicated art.

“You don’t need to compare,” Kushina told her, leisurely spinning to showcase her work once more. “It means more to me that someone precious had been the one to draw it – it’s the intent and well-wishes you had while you drawing that matters most, ‘ttebane. That was how the Uzumaki tradition has always been; someone close to the couple had to be responsible.”

What she said left the time-traveller a little loss at how to react.
“Now, go and prepare,” she scolded lightly, signalling for Mikoto and Momo to help her put on her unique kimono.

Unlike the traditional ones, hers was sleeveless to expose the seals wrapping around her back and arms, its patterns blending seamlessly with the brocade of spiralling flowers on the formal garment. Lighter than the white that the ensemble mostly comprised of, the designs gained prominence and it swirled into the darker gradient of blue that lined the edge, the shifting colours similar to the sky’s palette. Another piece of sheer fabric overlaid its main, draping over her shoulders and breasts loosely, and the scantiness of the material proved airy and billowy with her slight movements. Just as it gave the lines of her skin a sensual haze of mystery, it paled the colours of azure into that of sea foam lapping onto shore, soft and meandering, yet erosive all the same. It was completed by a white obi which fastened the pieces together, embroidered with the Uzumaki spiral, its crimson outstanding against the ivory.

Looking at her full get-up, Kara felt severely underdressed in her maroon kimono. A single silver-white fox climbed up to her chest in the midst of the plainness, its seven tails dangling below the portion of her obi and spreading out sparsely to cover her skirt.

But she thought she looked fine. Her hair was neatly combed and braided in the way the future Hyūga heiress would have approved and she had made sure to bath thoroughly for the wedding.

Thus, she stared at her mother in confusion.

“Prepare what?”

Kushina gave her a look of exasperation before flinching at how tight the obi was. “Kami, Mikoto, I need to breathe, ‘ttebane. Mayuko, help her please?”

“I don’t understand,” Kara protested as she was shoved into a chair. Her lips parted in fear as she saw the familiar glint of evil in the Yamanaka’s eyes – those pale green eyes and flat brush too close for comfort –

And in her mind she began screaming a continuous whyyyyyyy at the bride.

…

Safe to say, when Kushina had finally taken pity on her and asked her for a favour, she was the first to bolt out of the doors and away from the make-up. (She didn’t need it, damn it, the Kyuubi blessed her with a great complexion and she was proud of it.)

Kara stopped as she opened the door, eyes wide and staring at the ink staining his entire back and neck. Although the kunoichi was the one responsible for drawing the female side of the Uzumaki matrimonial seals, its counterpart was raggedly beautiful as well – the brush strokes fierce and thick unlike the mellowness and soft edges she had drafted.

It was the sort of beauty that could never be done justice unless it was painted on skin; the alive chakra flowing through its medium and adding both life and colour to it. The Namikaze’s was bright in blues and tinged with gold; the flare of pigmentation almost dazzling to her eyes.

“Kara?” Minato questioned as he pulled the upper half of his kimono back up. “What are you doing here?”

“Kushina-nee told me to check on your designs, just in case,” she heard herself saying, albeit breathlessly, her blood aching to inspect those lines again. “But it looks fine.”
“Jiraiya-sensei did a good job,” he smiled brilliantly, making the lines curving around his forehead and cheekbones crinkle. “He even tested it out on a dummy the day before to ensure it was functional.”

“I see,” the kunoichi returned a smile, her crimson eyes softening. “You look good in that kimono, sensei. And you’re really lucky too. Kushina-nee was really beautiful in her kimono and seals. Tsume-san almost tripped on herself when she was exiting the room.”

The mention of his wife-to-be made caused excitement and nervousness to well within his cerulean eyes. “I am very lucky,” he murmured self-consciously before looking up. “And should I be jealous you got to see my fiancée first?” Minato teased.

“What is there to be jealous of?” She said innocently, tucking her hands behind her back. “You’re the one who’s marrying her and having her for the rest of your life. It’s not like I can run away with her now.”

“Hm… True,” he said, luminescent.

“Oh, Kushina-chan hasn’t run from the altar yet?” Jiraiya chimed in belatedly after he carefully capped the bottle of chakra-spiked ink. His half-tamed hair flopped with the suggestive tilt of his head, causing Kara to giggle more at his appearance than the joke he made. Even Kakashi snickered at that.

“What are you trying to imply, Jiraiya-sensei?”

“Nothing, kid. I’m just saying I’m proud of you for finding a good woman with such great tenacity to marry the likes of you.” Jiraiya defused, the large grin on his face telling of his happiness for his pseudo son.

“The likes of me, sensei?” He raised an eyebrow, a little affronted.

“Yes,” Jiraiya assessed and started listing. “The type that holds back… Fears hurting another by getting rough, is too panicky and anxious when things go wrong… the likes of that.”

The Ino-Shika-Cho who were trying to make themselves inconspicuous choked. Dark cerulean eyes glinted dangerously. “Sensei, we have children in our midst.”

The said teacher cringed a little. He went a little too far with his jokes there.

And that’s my cue to leave. Awkwardly, Kara shifted out of the door. “Um, sensei, I’ll be getting back to Kushina-nee then. See you later.”


“Hm?”

“You look beautiful too.”

The said girl blushed to the tip of her ears and escaped with the door closing behind her.

“Win some boys over! Maybe it’ll be your turn next!”

“Shut up, Ero-sennin!” She yelled through the wood, in tandem with the sharp glare Minato shot at the offender.
“What? Why not make use of her good looks?”

... For a wedding meant for the Kiiroi Senko and the Akai Chishio no Habanero, the event was surprisingly low-strung.

'Simplistic' would be the way the time-traveller would describe it - for the procession had taken place in one of the more private and smaller backrooms of the shrine, with only their close acquaintances as witnesses and attendees. The reception was held in a similar fashion; the couple had decided upon a regular bar more centralised in the civilian districts out of the eyes of most Shinobi, and the only décor were some streamers hung on walls and the flowers placed on the tables.

But then again, Kara droll as she spun the liquid in her cup, I am talking about a union of two paranoid Shinobi.

The secrecy of the wedding was most definitely designed to protect them both since they weren't exactly short of enemies. Minato had Iwa constantly trying to assassinate him every other month while Kushina had faced it her whole life. If there was something that the other villages could agree on, it was finishing what they started back in the assault of Uzushiogakure no Sato.

(Although there was a certain irony now that all of the mentioned villages similarly sought out the hiding Uzumaki to exploit their Fūinjutsu capabilities or their vitality; they were the very ones who destroyed the resource, and yet they lament about the lack of it.)

And if they caught wind of an Uzumaki procreating with an infamous Shinobi no less, they would spare no effort in preventing the union. None of them wanted to face the behemoth of a village full of Fūinjutsu masters again, one war had proven how terrible the prospect was. While they had succeeded in wiping Uzushio off the map, the destruction of their own manpower had similarly set their villages back. A cornered rat baring its fangs was the most vicious - some veterans still scream as they recalled the techniques that the Uzushio Shinobi had raised and the villages hardly ever mentioned the war in their schools due to how pyrrhic it was.

Witnessing her teacher whisper something into his wife’s ear to make her giggle, the girl smiled. They truly suited one another like the yin and yang of their clothes, and she wished she could seal this moment into eternity and let it remain suspended in its beauty, to let them live out the moment for all its worth. It might not be the most fanciful or extravagant place but it was plain to see that happiness could come from simple things too.

"Why are you standing here all alone during such a happy occasion?" Jiraiya asked as he slid up next to her.

"Can you blame me?" She chortled, taking another sip of her drink before covering the top with her other hand. "Out of the entire party, I'm the youngest. I don't know a lot of them, and those that I do are people who have given me orders—Kami, I'm actually surprised Minato-sensei didn't impose a curfew on me."

"He has no right to do so when he's not sleeping tonight," the pervert immediately retorted.

Kara cringed. The last thing she wanted to think was her parents... No. Just no. She did not want to go down that gutter. "Please don't ever say that again."

Internally, Jiraiya groaned as well. Jokes were one thing but they weren't so funny anymore when you were thinking about your own child doing said deflowering. "Yeah, I probably shouldn't have.
Let’s just imagine I didn’t say that.”

"I'll do that if you buy me a bottle of bleach to pour it into my brain," she offered because the images of the war really wasn't doing anything to dispel the other kinds of debauchery.

He looked at her, then at the sake bottle in his hand, and then back at her again. "Does alcohol count?" asked the older man, his jaw set into a serious line.

"Sure," she raised her cup for him to pour it inside. It wasn't like she hadn't already snagged a bottle from the counter with a disguise but he didn't need to know that.

“It tastes pretty good.” Her eyes widened, gazing appreciatively at the bottle he was holding after she had savoured the taste of the drink on her tongue. His chest puffed out in pride at her comment.

“Of course. This sweet present came straight from Yu no Kuni’s best brewery and it cost a damn fortune to procure it. It better damn well taste good.”

“… Isn’t that supposed to be for Minato-sensei and Kushina-nee then Ero-sennin?”

Giving her what she can only describe as a toad getting caught for sticking a worm into the Ōgama Sennin’s tub, the man proclaimed: “Sharing is caring, and I’m his teacher.”

“That defeats the point of being a present.”

“Neither of them drink much.”

“You only say that because Kushina-nee always drinks you under.”

“Just shut up and appreciate the drink, brat.”

She smirked into her cup. “Then give me more then.”

Despite his petulance, Jiraiya graciously poured more for her before taking a swig for himself—

Only to pause and gulp when he felt someone stare holes into his back. "Well, I'm going to mingle with someone else.” He said quickly before tactically retreated to the more crowded area of the bar as a familiar silver head approached her.

Decked out in dark blue kimono with his clan insignia lining its hem in black embroidery, he looked uncomfortable as he crossed the room amidst taller figures and light chatter, reminiscent of an ant skittering around larger obstacles.

She greeted him with a nod, and allowed him a place in the shadows of the corner of the room.

Coughing, he took a deep inhale to confirm the contents in her cup. "Did he actually feed you sake?"

"His penalty," said Kara, not bothering to elaborate further on the conversation. "And if I'm old enough to kill, you'd think I'm old enough to drink." she swallowed another large gulp of the acidic beverage to place emphasis on her words, "Plus, I have high metabolism. I'll be okay."

"The legal age is still sixteen," the conformist told her tartly while attempting to pry the drink from her fingers.

But I'm not sixteen, her mind buzzed. I'm technically twenty-five.

Yeah, but you can't say that, can you? Her more rational part of her self-admonished. ... Good point,
me. She saluted.

"Lighten up, Kakashi," she sighed dramatically. "Just this once please?"

He tossed her cup into the nearby vase. "No."

There was a small crash which caused the jinchūriki to squint her eyes. "Kakashi, I don't mean to alarm you but I'm pretty sure that vase is expensive..." Was that an Uzumaki spiral at the bottom with a signature? "And it might also be a family heirloom from Kushina-nee's side."

"No harm, no foul," he inserted monotonously. "The vase is in one piece. Plus, the alcohol might do something about the vomit in it."

"Who vomited?" She parroted.

"One of Minato-sensei's older friends if I recall correctly. He left a while ago."

Kara giggled. "Kushina-nee is going to be so mad-" she spluttered out before sobering, her mouth set into a sudden grimace-"Do you think Kushina-nee would make us clean it up for her using her marriage bliss as an excuse?"

Kakashi genuinely considered the possibility. "...I'm going to get a mission tomorrow," he said to himself. "One that will last for more than a week."

Company and discrimination be damned, it was better than sitting around and witnessing the bliss of the married life and the demands of his sister figure. She hadn't been above taking advantage of his help, and she certainly wasn't going to stop now.

Kara scowled. Damn those Jōnin privileges that allowed them to pick whatever mission that suited them best. She'd be lucky if she managed to pick a mission from ANBU – which might not actually be difficult, if she considered how there was always an endless supply of dirty work to do.

Well, she could think about it tomorrow.

"Say, you want to get out of here?" She gestured at the door that was a few feet away.

The scarecrow turned to study the happy couple who were preoccupied by their guests. They were content and beautiful as they were surrounded by their friends; donned in their wedding garbs and grinning so wide it seemed to hurt, positively glowing from the aftereffects of their union like the lines that were painted onto their faces. He had already given them their congratulations and they were in better company, so they should be fine without him.

Nodding his head in assent, they casually slipped out of the bar, but not before Kara retrieved something from the sign next to the door.

"Seriously?" His grey eye rebuked her.

She popped open the half-empty bottle of alcohol. "What? I borrowed it from the counter."

An eyebrow raised. "Indefinitely?"

"Smart man," she praised, taking a sip.

…

Definitely another toad, Minato decided while his eyes followed the said creature perched on the
head of his youngest student five days after his matrimony.

It seemed like a common occurrence ever since she signed on with the Gama; she was hardly ever parted with one of its kind. Where ever she was, there was always a summon, as if they shared an unbearable closeness of kindred spirits having made a connection at long last. Even during the wedding where he briefly summoned the Chief for his blessing, they had conversed, which was odd because Gamabunta hadn't taken an interest in him until much later into his own teenage years.

"Do you have another clause in your contract that I'm not aware about?" He asked the girl who was making herself at home on his office couch with one of his Fūinjutsu books in hand. Perhaps she would have to pay more for being the third living name on the scroll, for most summons limited themselves to the maximum of two.

Kara sniggered. Sharing her amusement, the toad croaked, its elastic skin membrane pushing onto her hair. "No, Minato-sensei," she replied, "I have the same obligations as you."

Then she brought the small toad into the palm of her hands, holding it gently to her stomach. "What I'm doing isn't a condition," said the third summoner fondly, "I just wanted to get acquainted with all of them."

"All?"

He had been a toad summoner for years – and he was pretty sure he still hadn’t met all the citizens of Mt Myōboku yet. (But he was certain that some of them couldn’t even be summoned and yet his student somehow managed to find the most fascinating shades of toads of different vocations.)

"All of them," she confirmed, giving a look with the toad who croaked in reply.

He swore he was missing something there...

"Oh right," she snapped her fingers as she deposited her summon on her lap. She fumbled around her pockets for something, first searching her jacket before reaching for the pouch on her right leg.

"Here," was his only warning before she tossed him a slender, rectangular box typically used to store accessories.

"This is?"

"A belated wedding gift," she filled in with a boneless shrug, sinking back into his couch. "I couldn't get it ready in time before the wedding, so here it is."

"Having you draw the matrimonial seals on Kushina and attend the wedding was enough of a gift, Kara-chan," replied the man dryly. The felt velvet of the box already hinted at how expensive the contents inside were, and he couldn't in good conscience accept such an expensive present from his student.

"Just accept it," she rolled her eyes after noticing his dilemma. "It's already been made anyway, and you'd ruin my effort and Kakashi's if you didn't accept." Her lips drooped into a sad pout. "You're not going to reject a gift your two beloved students made for you, would you, sensei?"

... *Now that was just pure guilt-tripping*, he protested, helpless against her doe eyes. He spun the box in his hands.

"Just open it, sensei. I think you'll like it."
Minato sighed in return, doing as she bid reluctantly. Within the box laid couple rings tucked in its cushions, each individual one a weave of gold and silver. Despite the resulted bevelling, its interior was smoothened out to affix a thin band of dark titanium with etched scriptures on it, only noticeable under the right lighting.

_Fūinjutsu_, he quickly discerned.

"Do you like it?" She asked shyly with a scratch of her head. "It took a lot of practice, but I managed to etch compressed long distance sensory seals so you and Kushina-nee could always be in contact with one another. Kakashi found the pure metals and twisted and soldered them together with the help of a smithy."

It was true - when he tried on the ring, he could feel the small carving indentations against his skin and his senses picked up on the lingering chakra of the Hatake. In their own small ways, they left their marks on the piece, claiming the workmanship for their own. Experimentally, he pushed his own energy into the seals and both of them immediately glowed white, as heated and bright like a candlelight. Small, but enough to serve as a warning.

"I do like it," he confessed at last. "But why another ring?"

Vermillion eyes danced with excitement, ready to share. "They have this tradition in Iwa, you see. Whenever a couple got married, they would have two rings: one for marriage and the other to complete eternity. Since most Shinobi strung their rings on their dog tags, they believed that the two rings could form an infinity to bless the couple forever. I thought it was cool, 'ttebane! So I decided to add my touch to it and Kakashi helped by chipping in."

"Thank you. I'll treasure it always," he promised, sincere. "I'm sure Kushina would love it as much as I do."

The girl beamed. "That's good."

...

Time seemed to have a way of passing by extremely fast.

Because before the time-traveller knew it, she was eleven autumns old and Minato was announced to be the next Hokage come winter.

(And it also meant that in less than twelve months - a mere three hundred and sixty-five days and less - her future self would be born and the thought terrifies her like no other. What if their souls conflict and she disappears? What if her presence disrupts her own birth? Will she fade away because she never existed in the first place?)

The reminder of her father's election made her wince.

He had been... less than pleased when he had learnt about her joining the ranks of ANBU. The operative couldn't hide it either, since she was under the Hokage's commands due to its directives, and it was short of a miracle that he hadn't lambasted her the moment he saw her decked out in her uniform.

"Really, Kara?" He asks when he meets her again outside of her mask. "Of all the divisions you had to join, it had to be the ANBU?"

Disappointment was a frost that chills his tone, and each word was a pelt of ice. Of all the professions she could aspire to be with her talent, she chose the most damaging. It was not
unexpected but it was saddening - the black ops was technically an honour that came hand in hand with disaster. The Namikaze needed trusted eyes within the organization - he had some, but it was not enough with the roots that laid beneath the shadow's feet - and never would he have imagined Kara was his answer.

"I was training for it," she quietly tells him that much. "My teacher was the original possessor of the mask I wear."

"Blank?" He sounds out incredulously. He has heard tales of the thirteenth founder of the ANBU outside of the original zodiac twelve, of the infamy she was to both ally and foe. To finally know that she was the monster who shadows his youngest was a difficult fact to swallow.

Part of him understands the secrecy but it doesn’t mean he likes it.

"Were you ever going to tell me?"

She averts her eyes, volume low. "I didn't need to. I knew you were going to become the Yondaime Hokage, sensei. You would have found out eventually."

And that, only made the Namikaze angrier. Justifiably so, because while he placed so much trust in her, she hardly divulged important details about her own life. She hid her origins, she never told him about the infiltration to Iwa and he had to hear about her promotion in such an abrupt manner.

But how could she tell him about the first and the second?

How could she say that 'I'm your daughter from another time' and tell him that he died? That he had left his only biological child an orphan without talking about the childhood she had? If she started, where would it end? The point where she knew about Obito and Rin, or perhaps when the world was sucked dry and burning?

It was not that Kara doesn't want to but it is more that she can't and she won't because no one needed to know. No one needed to hear about a story that wouldn’t repeat itself. That particular possibility will die with her. Those stories must remain as mad fables; the nightmares of a haunted girl, nothing in reality and a mere cautionary tale.

The time-traveller came back to make sure it was that way. Steely blue eyes gazed at her sadly. "Is it that difficult to trust me?"

"It's not," Kara wants to declare. She wants it so badly to be the truth but she knows it never will be. She hasn't trusted anyone beyond the Sandaime because his help was vital, and the Toads since they have already known. (Neither of them were by choice but she pushes it further back into her mind.)

"I do trust you," she rasps instead.

"Do you?" asks Minato. "You have always been an enclosed box, Kara-chan. No matter how much I poke and prod, or allow you space... I don't think you've ever come closer."

Then he exhales, shaking his head. "Never mind. I shouldn't have said that." He ruffles her hair. Don't make that expression, the girl pleads. But it was her fault that he seems so resigned.

Kara sighed and gazed at the Hokage Tower.
She heard the deafening cheers of the crowd all around her, felt the heat of the bodies jostling too close and the fever of anticipation in the air.

In world dominating strides, he stepped forward, his white cloak blowing in the wind and revealing the streak of flames at its hem. The pointed hat shadowed his features but he owned it, radiating charisma with every inch as his chakra expanded across the village square.

Tension ran high as he took off the hat and shook out his hair.

"From this day forth, I swear I will protect Konoha." His voice rang loud and heavy. Awe-inspiring, it shook the crowds, the volume climbing higher.

"I am the Yondaime Hokage!"

"I am the Godaime Hokage!"

"I am the Rokudaime Hokage."

_They are all the same_, she realised with closed eyes as those declarations repeated in her head. They were always dazzling as they dared proclaim, whether it was in confidence, heritage or humility. And she had loved them all - their shine, their will and everything that was them which they put on the line.

More than just power, there was cogency in their voices like they were the strength of a thousand men. They were the symbols of the _Hi no Ishi_, formidable and proud, the ones who protected and carried the flame of the village.

_This is what it takes to be Hokage_, she thought, internally shaken.

How could she ever compare?

"He's amazing,” she confessed.

Hatake Kakashi heard her despite all the noise. Looking up, he replied:

"No, he’s more than that."

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Chapter End Notes

Beta'd by wecantgiggleitsacrimescene

Giving credit where its due: the ANBU induction scene/process was inspired by Shezza's Life in Konoha's ANBU. It's a great read, do check it out.

HOLY SHIT WE'RE NEARING 500 KUDOS *breathes heavily* Thank you for all the support - subscribes, kudos, bookmarks and comments - you have been giving thus far. It's been nearly a year since I started this and it makes me so happy that people actually read this and are continuing to read it. It's goddamn surreal honestly.

NOTE: This will be my last update in the next... month and a half. I have major examinations coming up and I want to focus on them, so please forgive me. I'll still be
writing snippets and planning for the next arc incoming, so once it ends, I'll be back with updates full force. Thank you for your understanding.
Eleven's Pawn

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Pawn

/ pɔːn / · noun

a chess piece of the smallest size and value.

one that can be used to further the purposes of another.

One flip through her old journals had told her what she was forgetting.

With the small dots trickling down the lines of the circled date and piling below, it was like sand trapped in the hourglass of her calendar. Drawn on a whim in the time of youth and boredom, it had portrayed him perfectly.

Her finger hovered over the fading pencil marks and yellow-stained page.

Gaara.

Of those she was closest to in her generation, he was the firstborn in a new year, having stepped into the world in a crying and screaming fashion on January 19th, 17 years before the formation of the Shinobi Alliance. Born a little too soon, premature; the smallness and fragility of his life did nothing to encapsulate the greatness he would become or the ancient so much larger than he.

The jinchūriki admitted that she was fretting too much about her own birth these days such that her craziness descending to the point in time where she was crafting the time-travel seal. Seal work laid all around her apartment's living room and stretched into the hallways, to the extent where she crawled on walls to avoid stepping on paper. By the Shodai, she couldn't remember the last time she emptied her waste paper basket or had guests over. It was that bad, but the only differentiation from her past self was that the ramen and spoilt milk was replaced with an abundance of paper and spilt ink.

She digressed.

The gist of it was that there were more dates to be concerned about beyond October 10 – like those of the unborn, those who were nearly one and some who were already fighting for their lives.

They are coming, she whispered to herself, recalling the pregnant figures of the Shinobi mothers whom she had met. Uchiha Mikoto with Itachi in tow, Hana who clambered all over Inuzuka Tsume's frame, Chouza escorting Akimichi Momo around… the list went on. She had noticed them all – it was hard not to when she had patrol duty around the village.

But the time-traveller knew it was not time for her to act. She already waited so many years – I can wait more, she hoped and prayed as she held onto her journal with tighter hands.

Patience, she can almost hear her beast reiterate. She must be patient or else all the sacrifices would be for naught. She needed something to justify the means, and she wasn't about to ruin it.

Eventually, she would be able to get close to her fellow jinchūriki again.

A knock on her door snapped her out of her reverie, and she quickly placed her journal in the drawer.
before answering the door.

Her eyes widened at the person standing in front of her.

"What?"

…

When it came to dealing with obstinate and emotionally-stunted people, Kara had always lacked the subtlety her medic teammates had.

Where they would push and prod, she was a battering ram, bulldozing her way through to get her message across. If she had to beat it into them, she would and she could, as she has done it before. She would carve those messages into them with her own blunt hands and show her seriousness with it.

Also, someone fetch her a drill because their skulls were thicker than a Bijuu's hide.

It was going to take some time.

So when the girl first entered through the open window, she threw the largest rock she could find at him after circling the hospital compound. *He should be counting his blessings,* she thinks with satisfaction as the object landed on his book and face, because he was lucky that she couldn't wrench out the stone markers from the ground since it was nailed too deep.

Nonetheless, the crunching sound still gave her a sick satisfaction that she was causing him pain. Asshole deserved it anyway. *How a Shinobi should die?* Well, if he was curious enough to read a book about it, she'd show him a fate worse than death.

"Insomnia and spacing out? Really, Hatake-teme?" She deadpanned with crossed arms. "Do you have a death wish or are you testing the limits of your sleep deprivation?"

Glaring at her as he sat up, he muttered, "Neither. And you don't want me to die, so why are you injuring me in hospital?" Judging from the blood she smelled, she had thrown it a bit too hard.

"Because you're an idiot and you deserve it, 'ttebane," she retorted back easily. "Who makes a run for home without stopping way beyond their limits? Apparently you, because you could have died." Her voice was louder, affronted even, uncaring if the next door inhabitants could hear her.

"Also, no thanks to you, a little green beast now knows where I live since Minato-sensei told him to pass the message that you were in the hospital. *Maito Gai knows where I live,* Hatake."

There was some hysteria in her last line, and it dawned him that it was the reason why he had been on the receiving end of a rock that probably came from the banks of the hospital's koi pond.

She was standing at his bedside now, grabbing his arm almost painfully with fearful vermillion eyes. "He knows where I live."

"…I'm sorry?" he offered sheepishly.

"I liked my apartment, Kakashi," she despaired. "I swear to the Sage of Six Paths, if your eternal rival comes to my door at 0400 hours at dawn to ask me to train with him, I will skin you alive and your dogs will be picking at your bones."

… And if he comes crying to her with that weird sunset Genjutsu of his, his dogs won't be finding a
skeleton at all. It would simply never see the sun again after she was done with him. Bless Maito Gai's youthful soul and his enthusiasm for Taijutsu, but there was a limit. Kurama couldn't remove the Genjutsu he casted. Kurama. The Bijuu. She was not dealing with that that early in the morning when she had fostered the tendency to commit accidental homicide.

On Kakashi's part though, the past tense in her admittance was actually kind of funny. Masterfully, he covered his amusement up with the help of his faithful mask, lest he wanted another rock in his face. (He was still trying to confirm where it came from because it was the size of his entire hand.)

She plopped on the edge of his bed. "But seriously though, take care of yourself and stop landing in the hospital."

"You make it sound as if I wanted to land in a hospital."

"Then don't," she quipped as if it was the simplest thing in the world. Maybe for her, it was that way, since the number of people that could truly put her down was well under the double digits. "I hate hospitals and I hate having to visit people."

"True," he murmured. "Trying to drag you to the hospital after you were injured was harder than getting a cow down the stairs."

"On both accounts, no, I wasn't injured anymore when we were back in Konoha so there was no reason why we had to go, and I wasn't the one who led the cow up the stairs even though we did manage to get the cow down in the end."

"And I recall having to knock out a person and cow out to accomplish that. Person was found running a fever afterwards and I did the heavy-lifting to get the cow down while said person laughed so hard she nearly fell out of the window."

"I did not have a fever, 'ttebane." she protested for the first. "My body temperature is usually a few degrees hotter than an average person."

"Why is that so?"

"Reasons!" She said unhelpfully. "And why are we even talking about my medical records? Yours are by far the worst. Way worse than mine – teme who over-trains and exhausts himself."

Kakashi raised an eyebrow at her. "The only reason why mine seems bad in comparison is only because yours go unrecorded."

A snicker broke out. "Why don't both of you just stay out the hospital, yeah?"

Both heads snapped towards the open window. "Minato-sensei," they greeted, one placid and the other cheerfully annoyed.

"And I don't know what you mean, sensei. My track record with the hospital is so pristine that the staff doubts if I'm a kunoichi or a liar," pouted Kara, shifting herself onto the end of the bed to hang off the back railing like a monkey.

The said teacher smiled with crinkled eyes. "Kara-chan, out of the all the students I have, you were the one whom I found passed out on your own apartment floor the most."

She flushed at that, causing the boy in the bed to chortle.

"Kakashi-kun, you shouldn't be laughing either. You pass out on the training grounds a lot more
often than the average Shinobi."

"Pfft."

In this round, Minato stood at two points while his students had none – except the Hatake might be in the negative since the rock he threw missed the giggling mess of a girl.

"So why are you here, Minato-sensei? Don't you have Hokage-y matters to attend to?" asked the kunoichi when she finally calmed down.

"I am here for Hokage matters. Specifically for Kakashi-kun."

Mouth forming an 'o' as she regarded the furrow of his brows, Kara took it as her cue to leave. However, her leader gestured for her to stay seated. "It's okay for you to stay, Kara-chan. Technically, it involves you too."

His cerulean eyes hardened and his two underlings straightened up as if they were given a silent command. "It might not be apparent but there are still people in the village who think I am unsuitable for the role of Hokage. This is a natural part of the position of course… but I would prefer to know my opposition where ever or whoever they are. I came here today to assign you to the ANBU and under my direct control Kakashi-kun."

The Jōnin jolted. "Why me?" was his instantaneous reply.

"I need Shinobi who I can trust to be my eyes, and you're one of them," said Minato. Walking forward, he patted the boy's shoulder. "I think you'll fit just fine."

He turned to face his female student. "Blank."

Kara's expression face betrayed no emotion about what she thought of this arrangement as she knelt down on the ground. "Yes, Hokage-sama?"

"You will be familiarising the new operative with the functioning of ANBU and its headquarters before reporting with him to my office for his induction."

"Hai."

…

After finding out the division his last teammate had been inducted to, Kakashi supposed he should have felt deceived. Except, she never had, instead avoiding questions completely. It was a lie by omission, yes, but it would be hypocritical if he got angry. Neither did the Hatake blame her, considering the shakiness of their friendship.

They were still skirting the lines of awkward or surface conversations, the kind that was sufficient to show that they cared. They would have some meals together, share some theories, lament about some Shinobi (well, she would mostly lament about the Shinobi) but those meet-ups were far and few in between. Their specializations were different with his lack thereof, at least, so their missions and downtime hardly coincided. He accepted that they could no longer go back to the time of fixed teams when they were missing their other halves, but it seemed like fate (or Minato-sensei pulling the strings) chose to bring them back together again.

In the shadows and behind masks, though increased chances were better than less.

Kara was… comfort. Someone who was more than a stranger and acquaintance, but a friend.
And while his teacher would disagree, ANBU suited the kunoichi. She had always been unreadable like a blank mask and it seemed like she was saturated with so many different influences that the only acceptable end result was the black uniform she now wore. She was in her element in the shadows – unpredictable, mysterious and unseen and it was what made her deadly.

Even the way she moved was different too, he discerned with a grey eye as he trailed behind her.

Outside of her ANBU persona, she was cheery with a skip in her step; almost impatient to get to places as if the world needed to spin faster to suit her. In it, there was no wasted movement, utilitarian at its core, each step was taken completely soundlessly and evenly spaced. There was direction, an invisible force which she stepped upon in glides, skating across linoleum ice. It was what was expected from the black ops, he quickly realised, noting the eerie silence of the halls.

She stopped in front of the glowing sign that read inventory. "Collect your gear and proceed to your locker room four doors down and on your left," she told him in a lower, monotonous voice. "The Hokage expects you in his office in fifteen minutes."

Perhaps he should begin too.

He signed his affirmative in normal coding. She signed back another, supposedly in one of the standards the ANBU had.

More things to learn, he supposed.

Hound stepped through the steel door.

…

The ANBU ranking, as much as Hound understood (or didn't), was a complicated system which made sense for a division that thrived in the shadows of the village. There were no formalities like promotional papers or Jōnin jackets; an operative attained a higher rank by living longer or their accumulated skill.

—The latter was the brutal shortcut to recognition, typically comprising of rising above their station in suicidal missions or beating other operatives up in friendly spars.

And neither of them were appealing options. Hound was a soldier. His hands knew how to obey orders, his mind knew his own limitations and his entire being was a blade for the Hokage to wield as he wished. Hound was in no hurry to attain a higher rank when he already had the validation and trust of his superior.

Obeying rather than leading was something he was used to. It took the pressure off his hands and it made things simpler.

There were caveats to the ranking system of course.

And Blank, Kara, seemed to like to defy all of them.

First it was her Chūnin promotion, which was surprising because it came late. It was clear from the first training session that she was more than qualified and she had no deficiency in technique or instincts. Yet, her promotion was withheld until she joined a team – another unit she did not have to venture into considering how her specialization made her a soloist.

Now, it was her mask. The blank slate that revealed neither eyes nor mouth, just a clear porcelain without markings, so different from everyone else. Kara called it an inheritance diffidently but the
whispers of the ANBU said something else.

*Konoha's Deceit* – they call her. The protégé of an operative who had long become a legend since their retirement. They were the ghost who left their mark on the Elemental Nations with their subterfuge, and they were known to transcend appearance. They were said be ageless. Faceless. Known as many names and yet none at all.

And for the ANBU who strived to never be seen and to complete the dirty work without a trail leading back to Konoha, the old Konoha's Deceit was the one of the best role models they could have.

With every generation, a new infamy was bound to arise. ("Monsters," he often heard his enemies hiss because of the propensity of gifted ninja his village churned out.) In this age there was the Yellow Flash and the Ino-Shika-Cho. In the previous, it was the White Fang, the Sannin and before them their teacher, The Professor with the war hawk and their shadow.

The fact that Kara wore her teacher's mask gifted her respect which was seldom given to junior operatives because she resurrected a piece of history. It was not unfounded either; Hound knew that Blank was more talented than him in other aspects, but just like him, she was limited by her undeveloped body. He wondered how terrifying she would be when she peaked.

His unnaturally heterochromia eyes flickered to the said operative who was in another disguise. Braided auburn hair fell over one of her yukata-clad shoulders to create the silhouette of a teenager stuck between that of nobility and proletariat. It framed dainty features and deep-set blue eyes, and complemented the grey she wore. In soft steps, her wooden sandals clacked on peddle stone streets before she entered the targeted fabric shop.

Despite knowing that a civilian merchant who had a penchant for corruption did not pose a threat to the kunoichi, Hound could not remove the irritable itch that crawled along his skin. He was used to being able to react immediately and the distance between the alleyway and the shop meant precious seconds of reaction time lost.

Wrapping his hand around the grip of his tanto, he breathed lowly into his mask. Waited. Watched as she conversed with the shop owner with a false smile before he came over to her – standing too close – and slumped.

*It is done.*

Blank lowered the man to lean against one of the shelves, and a look-alike of the merchant briskly closed the curtains to the shop. Hound let out a breath he didn't know he was holding and body flickered into and through the closing door.

When his partner saw him standing above her, she rolled her disturbingly different eyes.

'*Completed,' she signed for his comfort. 'No injuries.*'

Hound doesn't say anything and allowed his superiors to take charge.

'*Roger. Five minutes to clear. ETA to village. 1500 hours.*'

…

Namikaze Minato liked to plan.

From inventing a new jutsu to charting his students' progress and the endless pile of paperwork he
needed to clear, he liked to plan. It was of assurance to him that he knew what he was going to do rather than fumble around for an agenda, and he made it a point to follow the phases he conjured like soldiers would for regulations. It was safety; knowing the pieces he had, both those he could gain and those who were on the opposite side of the board.

He wanted to leave nothing to the fickle concepts of luck or fate; no, the Yondaime learnt as a Shinobi that he must take the reins of destiny into his own hands and make it his own – he had to make sure that everything would proceed as he commanded.

And now, with a hat resting above his brows, material stuffy and causing perspiration (no one ever said leadership was comfortable), he thought even less of gambling Her people.

Not when they were still on the brink of collapsing.

Not when they were finally exiting the theatres of war. With all the papers and reports laid out on his table, Minato was more than aware at how badly it had affected them. On the outside, things didn't seem so bad: Konoha had reclaimed much of their territory against Kumo and Iwa, allowing for the reestablishment of their trade routes and bare bones of security. The Daimyo hadn't been pleased with Tsuchi and Kaminari no Kuni's blatant disrespect of his nation's sovereignty either and supported them in kind, subsidising and supplying Konoha with needed supplies which kept their treasury from breaking under the strain of. War was both parts fire power and sustainability… And every chip and gold piece was necessary for Her economy and survival.

The Daimyo took a gamble that his ninja village would mete out sufficient vengeance, and it was one that paid off. However, the Hokage knew the overlord was quickly tiring of these wars, and this kindness would stop. Having three wars in his tenure – enough was enough.

Minato doesn't doubt that in the next war, should it come to be, that Konoha would be standing alone. He would make sure that it wouldn't come to pass.

And for the people he loves and hold dear to his heart, it meant even more in totality that he succeeded. Rather, his success was not a choice; it was necessity above all else. As a person who commanded the field and seen the carnage it wrought, he wished for a peaceful world where his precious people could roam free. It was not a task to undertake lightly, but this he would do for them. (A lot of things he ever does was for them.)

But just because he had an aversion to gambling did not mean the same could be said for the Shinobi he surrounded himself with.

While the Namikaze trusted his teacher to be strong and discreet like a toad hidden in a marsh, part of him still feared that the old spymaster's gamble would attract the attention of an even greater predator hidden inside the swamps he traversed. After all, monsters who take no pity on intruders. Densetsu no Sannin or not, Jiraiya was still irrevocably human, and the nights where he returned bleeding and wounded were the twilights he would never forget as a teen. Too close, he used to think as he patched his teacher up, gazing at the crimson which seeped into cloth and declared him mortal.

Then there was his youngest student – sweet, headstrong Kara – who was the current leading cause for his early grave. She had absolutely no qualms in becoming a sacrifice when one was needed and the sight of her taking her comrades' place with the confidence that she could heal from the damage is one which haunted him awake. (“That is not the point, Kara-chan,” he had told her time and time again, but it was a message she never fully registered.) Her induction into ANBU had been the same – she was one of the last people he would resort to use even if he was in desperate need of eyes.

It will take him years to cycle through the old agents he barely knew to those he appointed himself –
and time was a price he would willingly pay to have certitude of the identities behind the masks. He will have it, war hawks and their despicable talons be damned. Minato wouldn't be sleeping easy till then – especially when his wife was great with his child – and his lack of sleep was the last thing he should worry about when it came to the pervasive threat that Shimura Danzo was.

However disgruntled the newly elected Hokage might be at the kunoichi, he was aware she felt the same about him. She hardly ever told him her worries or about any unhappiness – always choosing to bottle it up and smile like nothing's wrong – but he has had a hand in raising her, and it was enough to assume her displeasure.

But neither of their grudges are unjustified; where he is dissatisfied by her new status, she was petulant about Kakashi's induction into the field he proclaimed to disdain. *Hypocritical*, she would accuse with narrowed fox-like eyes but neither of them can ward off each other's charges.

With or without her joining the ANBU… Minato admitted it was an inevitability that Kakashi would be sworn into its ranks. He trusted his longest standing student to be his eyes where he needed them most and was confident that the silver-haired prodigy would survive. Kara being in the same division only provided more incentive – it gave the teacher a peace of mind that they would have each other's backs.

If there was something the teacher could count on, it was that they would drag each other back kicking and screaming if it came down to dire straits. They were *survivors, veterans* of war, and the lessons from the battlefield had already been engraved in their bones. Perhaps even deeper than most, for they had to bury the death of two teammates deep into the marrows; to feel the vulnerability that comes with younger age, to tell themselves *never again*.

They were taught that retreat was not a shame but an opportunity, learnt that stealth was their sharpest weapon and remembered that with each shallow breath and the touch beneath the pads of their fingers, that their actions was information that could be given away or gained. Kakashi and Kara were prodigies in their own right and Namikaze Minato tried desperately to believe that they would survive after every mission he gave them.

Missions were more dangerous than the ranks brand them to be (because one could never be sure of what lurks in the darkness) and he prayed that it would temper rather than break them. He prayed that the strength of their natural coordination was enough to give them an extra edge, hoped they were complementary like fire and wind or lightning and water, not earth and water that crumbled and evaporated.

(He already has two who have perished; crushed and dried out, and he never wants to remember the sensation of soil in his hands and dirt too close to his nose as he kneels to weep. He's tired and he has had enough – the war was going to end whether by the force of thunder or a typhoon. The Kiiroi Senko once grinded Iwa to dust, and he doesn't mind offering a repeat, and by the hands of his fellow comrades.)

It was relieving that it had worked out the way he hoped it would – or well, somewhat, if he ignored the reports of a Hound's recklessness and the Blank's following exasperation (this was a new change), although the latter had the equal propensity, if not more, to leave out any injuries she had sustained over the course of her missions.

*But they're adapting*, he repeated to himself since it was the only assurance his ANBU Commander has given him. They're still mouldable structures and they will eventually become the best; and with their improvements, they would become one of the new epicentres of control the ANBU sorely lacked with their mortality rates.
Minato snapped his head up when two familiar chakra signatures touched down in front of his desk. They rose simultaneously like marionettes, the boy taller than the girl, their movements stiff as if strings were attached to them. They saluted.

"Your commands, Hokage-sama?" They both said and it irked him that they were in a constant monotony.

"At ease. Take off your masks."

_I don't think I'll ever get used to seeing this_, he thought, hiding his flinch behind his usual smile. Two sets of heterochromia and red eyes stared out at him, their expressions as blank as a Hyūga's stoicism and he found himself searching for either irritation or amusement.

There was none to be found, of course, but that was to be expected.

"Kakashi. Kara." Minato started seriously, "I would like for you to leave your current work and be part of a special mission."

However, its effect was ruined with the smile that illuminated his face next. "You see, Kushina's pregnant."

A toothy grin instantaneously broke out and the girl nearly dropped her mask. She almost pounced on her teacher upon hearing the news and it was the ceramic armour near the joint of her shoulders that deterred her. "Congratulations, Minato-sensei!"

Kakashi's reaction was low-key in comparison, his shoulders jerking once before he mumbled his congratulations as well. Accepting their words gratefully, he continued with what he wanted to say.

"As you both have already been told, Kushina is the current host for the Kyuubi. But what we don't say is that as a female jinchūriki... there are complications that arise with her pregnancy. Part of the energy she uses to keep the seal in place will be transferred to the foetus, and this slowly weakens the seal. And so... Extra protection is necessary. For the next nine months, I want both of you to guard her against any incidents."

Leaning back into his chair, he openly admitted to them his worries. "Not many are informed of this, but it is likely that complications will arise during the birthing process. Three years ago, her Shishō Fūin acted up suddenly and part of the Bijuu escaped. The Sandaime did search for how and why it happened but their investigation provided little answers. The seal may have been strengthened, but the fact remains that it has broken once and it can break again. And it's not a chance I'm willing to take."

"Jiraiya and Kushina have appraised your skills in Fūinjutsu, Kara, and they have commented that you are skilled. Therefore, I want you to stay by Kushina's side for the entire duration of her pregnancy and make sure nothing happens. Kakashi, you will follow them, effectively immediately. Understood?"

"Hai, Hokage-sama."

"I will brief both of you on the details of Kushina's Shishō Fūin later. And Kakashi, stall the operation for now. This mission takes precedence. But if they're stirring, report it."

His youngest student's eyes narrowed for a moment before smoothing out after the jargon flew over her head. "Is there anything about this mission we should be briefed on, Hokage-sama?"

"Kakashi will be taking care of it from the shadows," Minato deflected. "It is nothing for you to be
worried about. Your main role is to protect Kushina first."

"Hai," accepted Kara quietly although the crimson of her eyes was exhibiting defiance and the will to get to the bottom of the code. Out of the three who were in the room, neither of them took to unknown information well and they only differed on who hid it best.

As if it was to appease her, his cerulean eyes swept over both of them earnestly. "I'll be counting on both of you for this," he spoke sincerely, gaze lingering on her. "I trust that Kushina will come to no harm under your guard."

Expressive vermillion lightened to a violet. "Of course," she replied softly. "I won't let anyone hurt my precious people. They will have to go over my dead body, 'ttebane."

"No speaking of your death," he said sternly albeit wryly. "I would like my child to have a brother and sister alive, if possible."

Minato swallowed the lump rising up his throat as he perceived the flash of confoundedness. *They are family, they do realise that, right?* He probably needed to do more if they hadn't because he was never letting them go.

"Onto the next agenda. I would like to formally announce that you're both part of the Hokage Guard Platoon."

"Hokage Guard Platoon?" echoed Kakashi.

"Yes. It's my variation of the Sandaime's Sigma squad," Minato said as he tugged on his cloak's collar. "I'm still gathering up a few more members before I officialise it, and your duties for it will commence after you are done guarding Kushina. Do expect an order to meet the rest of the platoon in Training Ground 44 though."

"A trial?"

Supressing a smile at Kara's question, he replied, "It gives the Sigma squad a peace of mind that their successors are competent in the finer details of security. It was one of the things they refused to relent on, and I don't see how a trial could hurt anyone."

"It could hurt feelings," she offered cheekily.

"Yours in particular?"

Hearing the words Kakashi muttered under his breath, Kara jabbed his side immediately. He glared at her half-heartedly, and she smiled back. Minato looked on with amusement.

"If you're done courting each other with your eyes, you are dismissed."

Spluttering had never sound so sweet.

…”

'Does he think I'm stupid enough to not figure out what that code means, 'ttebane?'

'No, he is just unaware of what you are, kit.'

…”

Feeling some guilt as the Sandaime jinchūriki was a by-product of time-travelling. Kara had already
assumed that she had used Kurama as a medium to time-travel because he lived through all the ages. Compared to her short lifespan, the Bijuu had more – and the further they went back, the more she could attempt to fix.

That was the consensus they made but learning that she nearly jeopardised her mother's life was one of the first real consequences she had to accept and it was difficult to move on from it. It was her mother, for the Sage's sake, and Uzumaki Kushina was someone she never wanted to hurt.

The time-traveller was so grateful that they landed in their parent's generation. If she had accidentally ripped out the only existing half of Kurama out of her future self and killed her, she would never forgive herself. For ruining a future, for changing the timeline irrevocably, for depriving the future Naruto of the life she should have had—

Yes, *I would never have forgave myself.*

So yes, Kara would make sure that her future self was born safe and hopefully with her parents alive. Everyone deserved a family, whether biological or constructed… And that was still something she fiercely believed in.

Which was really the reason why she was now seated on the couch of her parents' house and watching Kushina's restless movements like a hawk. Even if Minato hadn't asked her to do it, she would have. It wasn't a *duty*, she *wanted* to.

But Kushina must have thought otherwise as she looked at her with furrowed brows. "Mimi-chan set you up for this, didn't he? To be my bodyguard?"

"Was I being that obvious?"

The mother-to-be rolled her eyes as she plopped herself down next to the snickering girl. "I know the man I married, Kara-chan. And if there's one thing I'm absolutely sure of, it is that he worries too much. That's right Kakashi-kun and Koichi," she said loudly, "I know you're on my roof and part of my security detail."

Kara snickered harder when she heard some trip on a roof tile and curse in chakra Morse.

Rubbing her abdomen with her left hand subconsciously, Kushina thought out loud, "Plus, it makes sense you're my onsite bodyguard, 'ttebane. There are only so many proficient Fūinjutsu users and not many are suited for such a task." Her words linger in the air as she tossed a wary look her way.

"I'm not afraid of you, Kushina-nee," said Kara. *It would be like fearing myself.* "I know how to differentiate a scroll from a kunai – unless you're telling me he affects your mind too."

Said jinchūriki shook her head. "It has no such hold over me, rest assured. I would never let it."

"I see," Kara murmured, subdued. She closed her eyes briefly to picture her tenant: all reddish orange hues, nine tails, majestic and wise. Unchained and without a cage. Vermillion stared back at her in the darkness, as if he could read all the contemplated prejudices they tend to attach to darkness and power.

She returned back to reality.

"...Minato briefed you about my seal yet? The reinforcements put in place above the layers?"

"A bit too thoroughly, 'ttebane. We stayed in his office for hours." the younger Fūinjutsu mistress groaned as she recalled his reiteration on the most important parts. Although her sensei cancelling on
his next few appointments and leaving his secretary frazzled was pretty funny, she would like to think she had sufficient knowledge on Fūinjutsu to understand the seal that was also on her.

"Only hours?" Kushina muttered, mildly impressed. "I thought he would take days."

Crushing a cushion to her chest, Kara whimpered, "Don't put ideas in his head."

"I won't," she reassured. "It's my turn to monopolise you now, 'ttebane. He's had enough time when he was your sensei. You're mine to have for the next nine months."

She blushed slightly at her admission, covering her cheeks with a cushion. It was a flimsy shield and disguise, but it'll have to do.

Kushina glomped her. "So? What do you want to do something to kill time?"

Crimson eyes brightened and the ominous rustling of paper begun.

…

And when Minato teleported home after a tiring day of paperwork while puzzling about why there weren't any reports about his wife's restless shenanigans around the village, he immediately understood why there was a lack of it.

After all, the maelstrom was centred in his own house.

To be more specific – his dining room had become the epicentre of countless sheets of paper, ink and brushes, with the two origins still discussing animatedly about their chosen subject as if he wasn't even there. Empty takeaway ramen bowls laid at their feet, having become temporary waste paper bins in their haste, and their glasses of water have become brush washing stations.

Minato liked to plan.

But like all plans, he doesn't fully recognize the repercussions behind his actions until they were executed. And his grand plan of keeping Kara safe as Kushina's bodyguard – well, it was somewhat of a mistake.

*Why did I put them two together indefinitely?* He asked himself, horrified. Two Fūinjutsu fanatics always got along like a house on fire (let it not be literal), and even his own sessions with Jiraiya tend to lead to destruction two out of five times. He clearly hadn't learnt from those experiences, because he just created a situation where two natural masters at the art were always together with way too much time on their hands.

*I should have split her duties with Kakashi.* He dreaded. *Kakashi.* Now he understood why his traitorous student had fled the moment he told him to come into his house. The silver-head was usually tempted by the food that Kushina made – it should have been the first warning. He was almost offended that his student didn't even give try to drop him a hint at the extent of his mistake, except the poor boy would probably be the one putting out the fires that the pair started.

*Should I change my decision?*

But his mulling was cut short when he viewed two pairs of violet and crimson eyes glittering with excitement at a fanatical intensity. They were happy. Crazy too, but happy. Like festivities had arrived early and the time of chaos was behind them, wholly content in this home and safety. How could he rip such a happiness away from them?
His house might not be standing by the end of the nine months, but there were some consequences worth going through.

Minato leaned against the doorway, and chuckled.

"What are the both of you up to?"

---

**OMAKE**

"What exactly is this?" asked Minato tentatively as he scrutinized the sprawl of papers – sketches and actual alike – on the table that was recently added to the mix.

The two females beamed, with the older woman speaking up first. "This is the latest protection layer that we are intending to add to our rape prevention seal to stop anyone who intend to dismantle the seal without the user's permission."

"We adapted it from one of the famous Uzumaki barriers that counteracted force of any kind and from the suppression seals from the Torture and Investigative Force that amplified the damage. To deactivate it, a specific sequence has to be keyed in and it will be randomized with each user. If it is keyed wrongly, the backlash will become even worse, ranging from lightning shocks, ruptured veins or even death."

Kara sighed dreamily, stroking the edge of the papers. "Isn't the array beautiful, 'ttebane?"

The teacher and student pair gaped at their fanaticism, although such an expression could only be perceived through the wide heterochromia eyes of the masked individual. They were aware that the Uzumaki linage always had a huge obsession for seals, considering how Uzushiogakure no Sato majored in it, but they didn't expected it to be that bad. The two fanatics were literally drooling over their creations and elaborate schemes, reaching the extent of horrifying.

*This is a huge mistake,* Minato gulped, paling as he saw the explosive matrixes – *and is that electrocution?* His face became chalk white as he imagined all the effects amplified.

His student attempt's to walk out of the door was quickly deterred, as a hand grabbed his shoulders and steely blue eyes transmitted an unsaid message: *If I'm suffering through this, you're suffering with me as well.*

The victim nearly growled as he forced to sit in the chair and suffer through a topic he was not well-versed enough to understand. With all sorts of jargon about Fūinjutsu being tossed around constantly, he gave up trying to understand a couple sessions ago. Even as a proclaimed prodigy, he wasn't capable of reaching the mastery of the Namikaze and Uzumaki just yet.

*This is their field of expertise;* he grated out with displeasure, *so why am I always being dragged into this?*

For the nth time of his shortening life, he regretted associating himself with the bat shit crazy people that sat around him. His Sharingan eye twitched uncontrollably as their debate begun.

"We don't need these extra layers Kara-chan! You are over-complicating things!"

"Hokage-sama has no right to say that when he has over forty layers on his Hiraishin seal when it doesn't have that many processes —"

"Don't bring my Hiraishin into this matter—"
"—and we are talking about the exact same concept—"

"—when you are adding sixteen extra layers for something so simple,"

"—of PROTECTING kunoichi from having their seals dismantled so easily!"

"Hokage-sama!" Kushina and Kara implored with exasperated eyes.

"It is husband and Minato-sensei to both of you!" snapped the said person childishly. His silver-haired student slammed his head on the table.

"I swear it doesn't overcomplicate it for the user, 'ttebane." Kara tried to convince. "Ask Kushina-nee to try it out!"

"I'm not letting my wife use an incomplete product with seals that destruct outwardly when meddled wrongly!"

"It's precisely why it is so effective!" yelled the kunoichi as she slammed the table to stand. "You're just scared because you do Kushina-nee roughly!"

The couple had the grace to flush. "I don't want to hear that from a thirteen year old."

"I'm an adult—" she stressed hotly—"who is a qualified Fūinjutsu mistress and I'm telling you that the additional protection is fine!"

He scowled. "Don't use your recently acquired title against me."

"Moot point," deferred Kara smugly as she sat back down.

"Minato, trust the Uzumaki when we say it is necessary. If it is easy to force your way through the seal or deactivate it, it defeats the whole point of the anti-rape seal. Uzumaki seals always have a higher success rate by default compared to yours. Jiraiya-sensei would agree as well."

The blonde man nearly cried out in outrage when they kept using his greatest creation against him, "This isn't fair, this is a blatant collusion against me!"

"Who's the child now?" muttered Kakashi under his breath, hissing when a tanned hand slapped him at the back of his head.

"You're supposed to back me up, Kakashi-kun."

"I don't even understand why I am here when I'm not even remotely interested in the seal you are creating," the boy deadpanned, his grey eye menacing. "And the last time I backed you up, Kushina-nee ended up being the one to confess."

Minato choked while the females burst into similar peals of laughter, their heads bent towards the table and their shoulders shaking.

"You have to tell me that story," Kara said between giggles.

"When we were seventeen, Minato dragged along his team with him to my house for dinner," Kushina began, a sly grin dancing on the edge of her lips. "His nervous look that day on his girly face—"

"Kushina!"
"—was a dead give-away that he was *dying* to say something, 'ttebane." Her husband reached over
the table and clamped her mouth, pleading her to keep quiet.

But Kakashi continued the story for her, reciting the next line quickly before he could silence him. "Minato-sensei tried to get us to slip his four page long confession letter to Kushina-nee at the dinner table with the necklace he prepared. But Kushina-nee got tired of his cowardice and—"

The said kunoichi who made her husband release her mouth promptly yanked his vest forward and
planted a deep kiss on his lips. It didn't help that Minato reacted enthusiastically to his lover's
initiative, his wide cerulean blue eyes immediately closing as he cupped her face.

Kara and Kakashi shielded their eyes from the scene, wishing and wanting to bleach their eyes and
mind. "You have children in your midst," the former winced while the latter chanted something
positively demonic.

The couple broke away with Kushina looking extremely smug and she took to twirling locks of red
hair to tease her husband further. His face was a bright crimson and it contrasted nicely against his
tanned complexion, and her actions—a romantic reminder of the *red string of fate*—made him
whimper as he sank deeper into his seat. The Yellow Flash would always be undone by his fiery
wife, even if he was one of the strongest Shinobi that had graced the Elemental Nations.

Their pseudo older sister glanced at them meaningfully. "Kara-chan, Kakashi-kun, I hope you're
taking notes." Her genuine sincerity crepted both of them out.

The pair looked at each other. In mutual agreement, they nodded.

*We're never speaking about this again.*

Chapter End Notes

Beta'd by wecantgiggleitsacrimescene

*And we’re back in business, people!* ^^
Omake was something that I wrote a long time ago, and I couldn't bear to throw away.
Also, forgive me for the shaky (read: terrible) quality of writing. I'm trying to get back
into the groove of writing and all the perspectives I have to incorporate, so this chapter is
just.. bleeееееeeh.

*Thank you again for staying, despite all that. And thank you for the one year :))
"Say, Kushina-nee, isn't being pregnant dangerous?" Kara wondered out loud as she walked next to Kushina, idly watching her mother figure rub her increasingly obvious baby bump.

Said jinchūriki paused to contemplate her question. "It depends on who the kunoichi is," she answered with furrowed brows, clearly alluding to something more. "If she's a close ranged fighter, there's bound to be damage dealt to her over the course of her kunoichi career. If she specialises in long distance techniques or has chosen to pursue the likes of intelligence and paperwork, she should be significantly safer. Why?"

"Just an observation," Kara murmured. Her vision shifted to the side stalls to inspect them warily as Kushina greeted its owners. "I just realised that there are less Shinobi mothers compared to fathers. And mothers… Mothers are important too."

It was true – in her generation alone, there was Hyūga Hinami, Hyūga Sayuri, Kaura no Saabaku, Ten Jura and Yamanaka Mayuko who had lost their lives to childbirth. Six out of thirteen mothers was a number to worry about.

The time-traveller wasn't sure if Hyūga Sayuri was still alive, considering how Team Nine's Hyūga was already born, and it wasn't a topic she managed to breech with him. She knew Konoha Twelve scarcely talked about family with her for many reasons; one, she was an orphan who never knew her parents, and two, all of them had lost one of their parents either during the war or prior to it.

Most of them grew up with deaths as a permanent fixture of their lives. From their own parents to their own comrades, all Shinobi knew just how fragile life was. And if there was somewhere to start, it would be giving her precious people the family deserved by preserving their lives. Even if it meant turning what they held themselves to as kunoichi on its own head, the time-traveller was determined to do it.

And who better to execute her plan then a kunoichi who was pregnant, and wielded influence?

"Of course, they are," said Kushina as she ruffled her hair fondly. "We all need kickass mothers to put the frazzled father and naughty children in their place."

There was a reason that many of her friends grew up without mothers, and a reason that seeing a pregnant kunoichi was a rare sight in Konoha. They pushed themselves to their limits, fought with cunning viciousness which was oftentimes at the expense of their own bodies. War had only worsened the situation. Their battle-hardened lives had forced them to be as strong and resilient as any other shinobi, and damn it all, even if they could clench their teeth and bear the pain of the process without a scream, their ability to withstand it would be their undoing. Hell, some even saw giving birth the natural way as the only option, despite the chance that a healer's assistance would save their lives.
And sometimes, it was a deadly mistake.

However, as much as it pained shinobi, particularly clan Shinobi to admit, it was a point of pride: to give life amid blood, scream and tears; the only beautiful thing that has come out of such elements.

A birth was celebrated.

A following death should not mar it.

Therefore, the time-traveller pushed her intentions. "If mothers are important, shouldn't there be more done to ensure the mother's safety? Like say… more persuasive power for the medics so that they can get the kunoichi to go for safer alternatives of childbirth? It would ensure lesser deaths, right?"

Kushina thought about it, and grinned. "I'll see what I can do, Kara-chan."

... Slowly but surely, with her influence akin to golden threads, the Uzumaki latched onto and reeled the pregnant clan matriarchs into her narrative. She made personal house visits, clan by clan and size disregarded, standing outside their compound patiently until she was ushered in to make her case.

She made herself impossible to turn away as she armed herself with sincerity and bright smiles, and any Clan Head would be insane to turn away the First Lady of Konoha who was also pregnant in the village's chilly spring. And once she entered, there was no turning her away. She made convincing arguments to promote the med-nin's power in maternity care and with the backing of the hospital and the previous First Lady, she had quickly won them over. The medical staff in each clan had only made her life easier, though the Akimichi clan was by the far the funniest; they had flanked her the moment she entered and glared any person down if they dared protest. It was adorable to watch her flustered maternal figure insisting it was "fine, 'ttebane!" and she didn't mind having to explain to persuade dissenters.

Perhaps it was something Uzumaki Kushina would never come to understand but she had a terrifying hold over her generation, at par with her husband. With the generous and exuberant nature she freely shared, as well her as her good intentions, she had easily ensnared them all.

Peeking up from the notebook she was scribbling in – she wasn't making any progress if the nonsensical equations of Fūinjutsu meant anything – Kara watched as Kushina did it once more. "Mayuko, why not?" Kushina whined. Inoichi's head darted to his wife expectantly at the insistent question.

"You worry too much, Kushina," the Yamanaka replied as she caressed her ballooning abdomen. "I'll be fine."

"That's not true and you know it, 'ttebane! I heard that there might be complications."

Mayuko glared at her husband, and then at Yoshino who suddenly look disinterested. Sell outs, her eyes seemed to accuse, but they met her gaze without remorse, clear-eyed, not above exposing her to get what they wanted.

They were ninja: willing to use anyone and anything, even if it was a stubborn redhead that would hound them for the rest of their days and give them a new definition of 'persistence'.

Forcing a smile, Mayuko said evenly, "There's also a possibility that the complications won't arise. It isn't definite."
"It isn’t a definite answer either," the First Lady of Konoha retorted. "Mayuko," she emphasised, placing a hand on hers. "I don't want to lose you, 'ttebane. Your child needs you to be there to guide them, to put them back into their place and tie cute ponytails in her hair."

"And someone needs to stop Inoichi's workaholic tendencies," she added as an afterthought, a smug grin blooming at the betrayal that came over the Yamanaka's face.

Against her, how do you win?

The answer was simple: you didn't.

You give in, you relent and you smile with fond exasperation.

"Fine, I'll listen to what my med-nin has to say," Mayuko raised her hands in surrender. Kushina's expression lit up immediately.

"You should, 'ttebane."

…

And before the time-traveller knew it, summer was approaching.

(The pages of her calendar were ticking down slowly, day by day, month by month, the changing seasons denoting how close it was.)

As the nights grew shorter, days were inversely longer; granting more daylight and heat to the land. Kara stared out into the open porch and the densely green forest outside, and at the lurid shadows which curl like waves of beckoning fingers. An occasional deer would peek out of the forest's fringes, ears and eyes flicking to the house and its inhabitants.

The Nara's main house was packed again today, having become the gathering place for many pregnant clan matriarchs. They enthroned themselves around the table in the wide living room and on comfortable cushions, chattering about their children's future plans. They were glowing with maternity, contented with the lives growing in them.

It's difficult for the Kara to keep looking. Or more specifically, at baby Aburame who had already graced the world, now pillowed on his mother and sleeping soundly. A butterfly lay at rest on his chubby cheek, blue wings flapping in a slow, languid manner, reminiscent of the steady lull lullabies possess.

She won't.

The moment Kara caught sight of him, she had pressed herself to the walls of the house, whimpering, hoping she could blend in with the wood to avoid notice. She didn't touch him even when Aburame Shiya quietly insisted that it was fine to do so. She didn't go near him.

Couldn't.

Kara knew his birthday by heart (it meant so much to Team Ten's Aburame that she did because it told him that he wasn't forgettable) and yet couldn't even open her mouth to congratulate his second month into the world.

Disassociating the new and old life of the Aburame was painful.

Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto still remembered the Inuzuka carrying his Aburame teammate away
from the battlefield and towards the medic camps. She never understood why the kikaichu users covered themselves so thoroughly till then – it wasn't just because their bodies were the hives of chakra pathways and its living space, and their skins the exits, but also for the way they died.

Their parasitic insects devoured their hosts.

It wasn't really their fault either. It was a way of life. The kikaichu required chakra to survive but a dead body held none. They worked from the inside, consuming every last drop of chakra their hosts had to offer before sinking their mandibles into organs and flesh. Once their carriers were hollow, all that remains is a translucent membrane such that one could see the kikaichu crawl. They were ebony like his hair and glasses, alive, skittering and bulging underneath, threatening to break free.

Parasites they were, yes, but loyal; their last meal was what kept them alive. They burst forth from clothes, hood and skin, dark wings aflutter, their chrysalis now broken and unleashing a storming swarm. Their carapaces glow and they hover in mourning like dark clouds before they go, back to their place of origin.

Back home.

No one truly knew where it was except the Aburame, but one of the clan members told her it was in some untouched plains, where all of them lay to rest. Their parasites live out their remaining lifespan starving before they die, forming a hive of husks that become the Aburame's grave.

The time-traveller never found his tomb – kikaichu never liked her tenant – but she had seen the anguish on the Inuzuka's expression. How he crumpled like the clothes in his hands, how he howled alongside his loyal beast, facial markings drawing out as if they were streaks of bloodied tears.

Like him, she could not find beauty in his destruction, even if the act of being devoured is an honour in Aburame terms. It was a sign of worthiness of being the kikaichu's host, of his pedigree and breeds but he was dead. Even if he left a single kikaichu for each of them, one that nestled behind her ear faithfully for a year before it went away, it was not enough.

The stridulating of a single pair of wings to produce a hum will never be as loud as the thousands he commanded, nor could it expand or swarm. It was a lonely existence. It was a fragment of what was gone, and a reminder of what she hadn't done.

Naruto couldn't sustain the kikachu's lifespan. Not with her innately corrosive chakra which oftentimes burns them, where she's too much while they're too little. She could only cradle its dead corpse in her palm when it ceased to make sounds, caressing what was the last of her friend.

Kara shuddered in reality, pulling her knees towards her chest. Instead of thinking, she scrutinized the wood grain and its cracks. Her eyes drifted towards the thin papers of the sliding doors which allowed reddish-purple light to stream in, and emphasise on the small tears in the pulp.

She wondered if there would come a day where she could stand in front of her former generation and be okay. That she would no longer feel the urge to run when she saw them, and she could stop imaging their death at every instance when she gazed into their eyes. Then, finally, she might be able to hold them in her arms without feeling she would burn them.

(That they won't become bones and ashes and leave her alone, that they can stand by her side again, fully whole.)

As she saw Shikaku approach her from the corner of her eye, she forced herself to relax. Relax, she breathed quickly but shallowly, quietening her broken heart. He settled beside her and leant against
the door, one leg propped up while his arm braced itself on top of his knee. For a moment, Kara imagined him rubbing a shogi piece between his fingers like his son would.

_It's hard to look at him too_, the time-traveller realised, suddenly acutely aware of the similarities between parent and child.

It was not the first time the time-traveller met Nara Shikaku. He was the commander who had briefed her on the backline infiltration of Iwa with the smell of alcohol hanging on his breath, and her father consulted him frequently before missions.

But there was something about him today… and it was a feeling the time-traveller couldn't shake off. Maybe it was because the shadow beneath his feet was darker; too still; not moving in tandem with the light of the room or the setting sun. He was dangerous the way every Nara was – always theorising and scheming and she wasn't certain of what to expect.

"Good evening," she greeted nonetheless. Her teammates had beaten better manners into her even with her paranoia.

"Evening," echoed Shikaku. "Not going on a patrol any time soon?"

Confusion flickered across her visage. "Why would I need to? There's an army of security detail here."

"And you trust them?"

"Why wouldn't I trust my own comrades?" She gave back with a close-eyed smile. "And even if I didn't, I don't think enemies can make it here in the first place, Shikaku-san."

His dark eyes glinted as he leaned closer. "You hold a great deal of faith beyond logic, Kara-chan."

"And who said both can't come hand in hand?" She pointed out. "I know what Shinobi can do and be, and I trust in their abilities. I trust that there's no place safer when it's dark."

"But there are also Shinobi who believe that no one has hold over what's dark and night."

"They don't know the dark well enough then," answered Kara, shrugging. "Shadows and darkness come hand in hand."

She won't forget the sight of the Naras wielding their shadow-craft and making everything and anything their domain. She will never forget their expressions of concentration, the way they seem to fade into their element and encompass everything in their territory. They were dark, deep and endless; shadows crawling up their skins and blending seamlessly with their thorny hair, until there was no difference between shades; a mere singularity of vigilance and omnipresence. His son took the helm of the night time operations; in the centre of it all, and in some mornings he returned to his fiancé listless and detached. Sometimes it took the wind wielder hours to remind him there was dawn with touches akin to pockets of sunlight, and they exist like how the ground beneath him was not an endless darkness.

It's hard, the way the dark clings, and the time-traveller learnt that they should beware of the monsters they fought with, lest they become one.

Shikaku hummed as he pried open a floorboard compartment. "Since you aren't going for patrol—" he withdrew the shogi board—"Do you care for a game?"

_It's not like you're giving me a choice_, she grumbled internally, realising that she had played right into
the palm of his hands.

A conversation with a Nara was a shogi game itself. They always had a point to get across when they initiated one, and she was now a piece cornered by his intentions. Resigned, she nodded, shifting her position to face him instead. Better a game than the wasteland of her own mind.

"I'm presuming you know the rules of shogi and need no introduction?"

"Yes," she murmured, setting the pieces on her side. *Your son knocked it into me when he was teaching me strategy.*

"Well then, you can start first," Shikaku gestured at the board.

She complied reluctantly, moving the pawn forward. The Nara Clan Head mirrored her and the game begun properly.

And it was then, Shikaku learnt that her moves were as incomprehensible as her personality. There was no logical strategy behind what she was doing and she seemed to move them because she had to. Sometimes she would walk into his traps, and in others she would quickly turn the tables to claim more pieces in the trade.

Pausing to observe the board, Shikaku said, "You are a puzzle, Kara-chan."

She laughed a little, but he swore he heard the sound breaking. "Someone once told me that."

"Someone close?"

She moved her Gold General to counter his Rook stepping forward. "Very," replied Kara, giving him a faint smile. "And he always laments that it was too bothersome to try."

"Understandable. I've heard that you're not the easiest person to crack, Kara-chan. While most puzzles have hints, you seem to prefer playing a one-man game where no one can get close. All the hints you give often lead to dead ends."

"One man game?" She chuckled listlessly. "We all play the same game as Shinobi, Shikaku-san. We hide who we are, who we hold our grudges against and our habits. We give hints and yet we hope no one figures them out. We're all pieces of the game itself. I'm no different."

"Yes, but we also accept that there are pieces on the same side of the board and depend on them. Relenting does not mean that you're losing," he muttered, claiming her Bishop as she took his Silver General.

"That's true," she agreed, voice sinking to a lower volume. "We will always have our comrades to trust. But wouldn't it be nice if we could be the player who moves and oversees all the pieces rather than a simple piece who can only see what's around? Things would have been much simpler if we could see all our enemies and the winning objective. There would be lesser casualties in the process."

"But life doesn't run on constants like shogi. There are no rules that bind, there's no stage that is a flat plain of a board, no number of allies or foes are ever the same and some pieces are not what they seem. Shifting variables. To say nothing of an omniscient who can see everything."

"Don't you wish you could be all-seeing though?" She insisted lightly, crimson eyes never straying from the board.

"I don't need to be," Shikaku replied. "If your opponent doesn't have perfect information either, you
should take better advantage of it. The equality in all playing fields—"he took the initiative to move a piece—"is that you are never too sure of the future, and its one you can make your own."

The kunoichi laughed again. "And it seems like I've lost this round, Shikaku-san," she politely surrendered, having seen the death of her King a few moves away.

Said tactician frowned at the board as she said that. Oddly enough, he couldn't shake off the feeling that he had lost even though he won - as if the kunoichi functioned on a different paradigm than he.

Kara had crippled most of his higher ranking pieces.

He raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "Another?"

In hindsight, body guarding was a boring task.

And body guarding the First Lady who lived in the middle of Konoha was the epitome of boring. Any assassin would have to be suicidal or insane to attempt to kill such an important figure when security was still in the reds – by the Pure World, it was basically walking into a field full of explosive notes and expecting them not to blow up in their face.

Kara understood it was a formality, a precaution just in case the worst-case scenario happened, and it was probably Minato-sensei's plan to keep her and Kakashi out of trouble. Being in the village meant lesser missions outside their borders which was a dangerous place to go to now that they were re-settling their boundaries.

It was also a good time for her to realise that not all guarding missions ended up in metal and flames; not every mission would have a requisite of saving the village, meeting a high-ranking criminal or having to take down a ragtag group of mercenaries, in that order. She was used to the chaos her terrific luck tended towards… But such tranquillity wasn't bad either.

She sighed, leaning back against the balcony's railing to bask in the summer's heat. Sunlight branded her vision behind her eyelids a bright red and the temperature licked at the sweat of her skin. How many years had she been experiencing war now? Eight? Nine?

Do the numbers even matter? Kara pondered tiredly. War is still war... longer or shorter, there's always death and hatred in a vicious cycle and welling deeper, 'ttebane.

"You're supposed to be inside guarding the First Lady, not outside."

She opened a clouded vermillion eye to glance at the Kakashi who was perched on the tiled roof above her. "And you're supposed to be out of sight," she retorted. "Guess we're both terrible at being bodyguards then, aren't we?"

The operative bristled at her comment.

Kara sighed. "Just come down here, will you? Kushina-nee's sleeping and safe, while your eggplants are getting cold."

Conflicted, he stayed in his position for a few moments. But reluctantly, the operative jumped and landed soundlessly next to her, his actions catalysed by his impending hunger and his weariness of rations. He hadn't had the fortune to taste Kushina-nee's cooking frequently with his ongoing mission and he had missed her cooking.
Upon seeing him dig in, she closed her eye again to give him the privacy he needed. She had seen Kakashi's face a few times due to mishaps in missions and him being too tired to care, but she knew he still preferred her not staring. He was more cautious these days – maybe it was due to his acquired Sharingan – and she respected his choices.

The time-traveller was already luckier in this timeline than the previous; she didn't even get a peek in the latter. By his late twenties, her Genin sensei had already mastered the art of coverage, and it was a honed instinct for him to always have a mask.

"It's nice, isn't it?" she idly said to the faint rustle of the tree leaves and the muted sounds of conversation below. It's a calm day. Her fingers itched. "That we can just stand here and enjoy the peace. Not be at war."

It causes him to react with a questionable noise mid-swallow, and he cleared his throat before replying quietly: "It is."

The thought was a strange thing to consider. His life – their existence, he corrected himself – had always revolved around war. His late father was one of the catalysts of war. Before that he had teethed on kunai, the first few words he had learnt were there Shinobi terminology floating into his nursery and everything he had done up to this moment was in pursuit of being a capable soldier. Kara, who was next-to-nothing on the streets, was brought into the village to train into a weapon to slip into the backlines of war. It felt abstract that they were suddenly devoid of it, now merely weapons lying listlessly around.

But he doesn't hate it. Less deaths all around was always good news.

"Contemplative?"

"Is it that obvious?" Kara nudged him with a bump of her hips. "I mean, we're standing here, y'know. Alive, goes unsaid, but he got her meaning well enough.

They survived the odds. They lived to tell the tale where others failed – they were part of the small percentage in their cohort who had made it. His heart twisted a little and the eggplant he just ate felt lodged his throat.

"Do you think it'll last?" She asked, then paused right after she said it. It felt wrong that such a question would come out of her mouth. She knew what she came back to. 'Has pessimism infected you?"

"No," she answered in both sound and mind. "We'll make it last."

Her eyes were crimson, brilliantly so, full of resolve which stemmed deep from wells of ill-begotten blood. Her lips curled into a faint, vicious grin, baring her white teeth. "This is our world, 'ttebane. We'll make it what we want it to be."

It was moments like these where Kakashi was stunned into painful awareness that Kara wasn't an ordinary person. Not in a prodigal sense—but how she thought of the world around her and what she saw through her eyes. She always seemed so far ahead of him – on multiple levels – and he felt that he couldn't reach her.

The kunoichi was untouchable; too close to the heat of the sun where he could not reach, at a place which both burned and illuminated her. She was warmth as much as she was the fire, existence incomprehensible and he found himself blinded by her. But that's not the worst part. He's fine with what she was now since he's had time to normalize the aberration, but his realizations are only
painful because if she was hurrying herself to her own end, he wouldn't be there as she made it off the brink.

She'd fall tragically while he stared off the edge and no matter how hard he'd stretch - *I need to be taller and faster and more observant and bigger and better so it won't happen again please don't let it happen again so train TRAIN train why aren't you moving yet* - and Kakashi swallowed the thought, fist clenching and carefully trimmed nails biting into his scarred palm.

"We'll make it our own," he repeated, words sounding like an oath.

They stared at each other a moment longer, letting the words sink in. A small groan coming from the house snapped them out of their trance.

Awake, Kushina twisted uncomfortably under the sheets, now aware of the summer's temperature causing the perspiration across her skin. Her spine was aching from the weight she carried and whatever position she had found sleep in was lost. She rubbed her eyes.

"Kara-chan?" She asked softly, using an arm to block out the light coming from her open balcony.

Kakashi disappeared back onto the roof on cue as Kara moved to resolve the First Lady's discomfort.

"Yes?" She drew the first layer of sheer curtains together to sieve out some light. Hurriedly, she increased the speed of the ceiling fan, allowing more cool air to move around the room to soothe the heat.

"Was… Was that Kakashi?"

Kara hummed her reply.

"Did he eat?"

"Yeah."

"That's good, Was worried he'd starve… Think you can get him some water later?"

"I'll leave a glass out for him," said Kara, shuffling into the kitchen to wash the empty dish in the sink. Drying her hands, she filled up two glasses of water, placing one at the nearest window before giving Kushina the other.

Gratefully, the expectant mother guzzled it down, pleased by the cool trickle down her throat. The liquid was soothing and her stomach – as well as her baby – seemed to calm. Once she was done with her second glass, she placed the cup next to her nightstand.

"C'mere."

The girl complied, shifting herself to sit closer to Kushina's bed.

"You look tired," she murmured, violet eyes still drowsy from her nap. Gingerly, she moved her fingers downwards to smooth out the scrunch between Kara's brows before she started to stroke her dark hair in a repeated, gentle motion. "You should sleep too."

"Kushina-nee…"

"No protests," she murmured, trying to be stern. "You've done a lot these past few months. You haven't been sleeping much either. I'm safe, m'kay?"
"But—"

"Sleep," she hushed, both to the babe growing in her womb and to the girl she was growing to regard as her daughter.

*This is nice,* Kara thought as her eyelids grew heavier by the minute. "Mm."

Leaning against the bed frame, the young kunoichi fell asleep.

...

Every Hokage came with their own set of opponents.

Whether it was the opposing Shinobi Villages and countries, or the different motivations in the inner political sphere, every leader would have their own fair share of opponents in the pursuit of their own agendas. Unanimous decisions were hard to reach, but *Shimura Danzo* was his own special brand of a pain in the ass because he was a constant obstacle; standing obtrusively in his vainglory of bandages and walking cane - symptoms of the sacrifices he made for Konoha.

He plagued every Hokage as long as he lived. It was either he got his way or he got his way in secret, and the obvious lack of consultation on the aftereffects sometimes brought more trouble upon their heads. That was not withstanding the countless human experimentations it took to create a Mokuton user, turning the peace-loving Akatsuki into one driven by Pain, the massacre of a clan fundamental to the village's security-

Yes, the time-traveller was hopelessly cognizant of the eventual influence he had on the village. Having to clean up his messes after unearthing his mistakes was something she would rather not have to deal with again, although there were small mercies in being able to stop him earlier.

From what she had heard from Jiji, apparently he hadn't been pleased with the Yondaime's decision to make a Hokage Platoon squad. Danzo had called the plan "a waste of resources" since there was a functioning ANBU to pick the guards from but Namikaze Minato frankly didn't care what the war hawk thought.

(It was rather ironic that he called it that—his entire ROOT ideology *crippled* much of the potential of the Shinobi he raised.)

In his overwhelming charisma, he had merely smiled, lips as sharp as knives and said that his own security detail was his own business. If it wasn't harsh enough of a blow, he started listing: the Shodai and Niidaiime had their own Senju guards, and the Sandaime's was a unit separate from the black ops itself. Choosing his own security detail was following a trend, unless he wanted to slander the actions of his mentor and friends.

Honestly, after hearing that, Kara would have *paid* to watch Shimura no-face Danzo get shut down.

*Ah, missed opportunities,* she sighed internally, keeping her face blank as a Sigma Squad operative strode past her.

But she supposed her teacher did make a compromise. The first generation of the Hokage Guard Platoon - no different from the previous timeline - mostly came from ANBU, with Namiashi Raidō, Shiranui Genma and Hatake Kakashi charging in the lead, and an odd T&I staff by the name of Tatami Iwashi.

*Well he certainly is thorough about his choices,* Kara mused about both past and present, mentally ticking off the different walks of profession they came from.
An assassin, a bodyguard, an interrogator, a tracker and an infiltrator...

They could make their own ANBU team for covert missions if need be... although she suspected the set-up was to gain an edgewise in finding the angles of threat. They were all Shinobi, but different professions had differing mindsets. A scout's first instinct is to always to look for escapes and shortcuts, an infiltrator the best lie, a tracker a mark. There were matters each of them deemed more important than the others. The best way to predict their enemies was to be in their shoes and Minato had determined that his security detail would be a gathering of talents, where age played a lesser role and achievements took the forefront.

(And the younger they were, more malleable and compliant. He would mould them into future leaders of their respective areas and leave no sector untouched. Loyalty could be earned and the Hokage will reel them into his plans.)

And on further consideration, his choices and compromises made sense. The black ops and intelligence sectors both came with innately high clearances and it meant lesser time spent having to vouch for them; time in which the newly elected warlord did not have with the post-war circumstances he had inherited.

His student did not doubt that he would expand his reach to the other divisions when he had the capacity to. The time-traveller, however, could not shake off the feeling she was missing something crucial.

Sighing again, Kara looked between the familiar tower which stood in the middle of Training Ground 44 and the blindfold in her hands.

Built higher than the Hashirama trees of unknown and grotesque growth, its recently renewed paint and white roofs constructed in a manmade perfection of measured tiles and layered cement were vastly different from the coiling vines and large disfigured barks that made up the surrounding scenery. The tower would be consumed if the trees were left unchecked; for nature and evolution ruled supreme on this piece of land.

Suddenly, her paranoid senses rang mid-thought, causing the girl to back away reflexively. She pinned the offender and his raised hand with a dark stare. A mimic of a crane drawn on a porcelain mask stared right back at her.

"Climb, soldier. This is your last warning."

She signed her affirmative stiffly before she put on her blindfold.

In the end... What separated the likes of ANBU and the normal Shinobi was mostly the time invested. Yes, there was the volatility of the missions issued, the extreme lengths they would go to fulfil their goals and a mountain of bodies to their masks - all horror stories had some bearings of truth - but war had reduced the gap between the two groups immensely.

However, there were some undeniable facts: Most ANBU invested the majority of their time when they weren't on missions to hone their skills into the finest precision possible. They gave up their lives, hid their talents and buried the most damning secrets to preserve the sovereignty of the village. If they could not finish missions outside of Hi no Kuni, they were asked to die to stop anything from being traced back to the nation. ANBU died without names. Their deaths, when announced to anyone outside of the organization were usually lies, falsified to hide the brutal nature of the work.

In a way, the Hokage Guard Platoon and Sigma Squad were no different from ANBU.
They would stand in front of danger for their leader. They would give their time to tirelessly protect him, be it rain or shine. They would be the hand that carried out the tasks he needed completed, locking all information behind cordial expressions whilst having their weapons pressed against the throats of those who dared to betray. Such was their law. They could die before the person they had to shield but the Hokage cannot go before them. If they did, beyond natural causes, it would be the greatest crime they could commit.

Blindly, Kara felt for the wall and its indents and small footholds before she started to climb.

The only way to combat against their assailants was by being better. They had to maximise their terrain advantage: knowing every entrance and exit to the buildings, every vantage point and tunnel which laid beneath. They would know every nook and cranny blind, if need be.

*No chakra,* she reminded herself, fighting down the instinct to channel the energy. *Overdependence is weakness,* the warning of Sigma Squad repeated in her head. *Focus.*

Kara continued to climb.

"Not fast enough."

She hissed when she was shoved back down, barely managing to use her chakra to cling on the wall. On her left and right, the sound of friction generated from someone else sliding down was echoed.

"Again."

She went up as commanded. When the third time came, she shifted aside to dodge the feet pushing her down. But her avoidance was not enough as a blunt projectile came flying at her thighs right after, disrupting the spot she was channelling her chakra to. It was merciless, such that she fell straight to the ground, back first.

Kurama growled involuntarily. Fighting back the shiver of power that ran up her spine, she told her tenant to *still,* lest they wanted to expose themselves.

'I can handle this. We aren't in any danger, 'ttebane. You're overreacting.'

Unsettled, the Bijuu bared his fangs but acquiesced nonetheless.

"If you want to avoid the punishment, you need to expect the backlash. If you don't want the punishment, be better."

Standing up, she glared at the person who made the statement beneath her blinds.

"And if you are down," someone spoke from the trees behind her, "Then your only way is up."

The kunoichi placed her hands on the tower again.
I don't really have a sufficient excuse for not uploading for this long >.<
I can only apologise, and tell you that I was stuck in a bit of a rut over my results, I was working a lot and I also had drama to deal with at work, work is tiring and... Warframe. I'm terrible, I apologise >.<
"How much are you willing to sacrifice to make this reality?"

"Everything."

…

People – ninja, civilians, monarchs and the religious – were ruled by limits. Whether it was moral, physical, spiritual or financial, there were lines one wouldn’t cross, or didn't have the means to cross.

But they had to break those glass limits to be strong. Some did it by attempting to transcend to immortality. Others by debauchery, their cunning or chakra. And if all of them sought to overcome, if they desperately wanted to reach the peaks of what they aspired to be—

"Why won’t you join me in my plans?"

Kara almost laughed at how odd it was to suddenly think of the words of her enemy – a madman who, despite being so keen on rushing the world to its end, seemed to love wasting time delivering monologues and lectures – as she was on her all fours and breathing heavily through her mouth and nose. Her lungs greedily absorbed the air she was taking in, trying to make up for the oxygen debt she had incurred.

The time-traveller should have let that Uchiha bastard distract himself so that she could make her clones his impassioned audience. It would have bought them more time.

But honestly, 'ttebane, Kara groused as she centred herself back into reality, this is not a fucking test.

A test did not last five days long. A test did not require such strenuous training. A test should not be reminiscent of the spartan training boot camp the ANBU put her through to officialise her induction into the shadow corps, inspired by the thought that "you may have chosen us, but now it is our turn to choose you."

She could see that much of it was a ploy to weed out the weaker minds and to hammer the ideals of coordinated stealth they held themselves to. The camp sought to break them. Mind body and soul, morphing them from corporal beings to ghosts where they silenced themselves and faded into the peripheries unseen. Their hauntings were a practiced scare; bringing terror in controlled shocks, almost illusionary as they struck and left. It was an art form to succeed as an ANBU, and the camp answered to the requisites with intensity. The current camp lacked in that aspect, but it was probably inspired by it.

Blank must have said her observations out loud because her fellow operatives echoed their agreement.

"Again, I would like to remind you that there is one person who doesn't really understand what is
going on here," commented Tatami, thumping on his own mud-stained and singed grey uniform. It hadn't taken the interrogator a long time to figure out the nature of their real professions when one too many unfamiliar hand signs flashed over his head, and he might have gotten a peek at Raidō's tattoo due to the tear on his left sleeve.

"Be grateful you don't." Genma groaned through dry lips, collapsing against one of the trees behind her. Having lost his bandana somewhere between running from a giant centipede and having fellow ANBU bombarding them with a diverse number of jutsu and projectiles, his brown hair caught onto a wood chip, causing him to wince as he slid down the bark.

"Are you sure you want to rest like that, Kara?"

"If they want to complain about my posture tell them that I'm observing the ground for their chakra signatures," Kara snarked at Raidō who was lying next to her. "How's the sky?"

"Clear of enemies," replied Raidō dryly.

"See, we have each other's backs."

"You're both idiots," deadpanned Kakashi, plopping down on her right.

"Remind me to insult you when I have the energy to, teme."

"I'll dutifully remember not to."

"Ass."

"Amazing, she remembered."

Instead of deigning him another response, Kara sighed woefully at her situation. I should have slept before the test. Should 'ave turned down the damn offer to join. Her vision blurred, and she blinked groggily to clear it. I think I just want ramen, 'ttebane.

"M' tired."

The others, sans the Hatake who was still too much of a stiffy to talk about his own shortcomings, verbalised their agreements with a series of croaks.

"Want ramen."

"You ate a cup just yesterday," Raidō reminded unhelpfully, earning a disgruntled glare.

"Yeah, but it got knocked away by a jutsu because someone wasn't watching the trees properly." On cue, Tatami looked away guiltily. "My last ramen," she sighed sadly for the noodles and three minutes she lost.

"You're speaking like it's your lover you lost, Kara. It's honestly getting a little creepy."

"Are you trying to pick a fight, Raidō? Cus' I will send you flying into the river like my ramen if you want one."

"A fight in the river?" He raised his eyebrow suggestively. "I don't mind getting wet."

"That's gross," Kara wrinkled her nose. "Like expired ration bars." She paused. "Why 'aven't the Akimichi made ration bars taste less like cardboard?"
("Is she usually this odd or is it exclusive to when she's tired?" asked a bewildered Genma.

"Yes.")

Tatami was the only one who took her question seriously. Fixing his bent glasses up his nose, he replied, "I heard one of them is in the works, and apparently what we have now is the improved version."

"S'not easy to make a bunch of stuff shoved together taste good," she nodded self-importantly, "Unless it is ramen of course."

Kakashi's head suddenly jerked up. "People are coming."

"Ramen-sama?"

"No," he said incredulously, resisting the urge to slap his forehead at her insomnia-induced stupidity. She was one of the best chakra sensors he knew, by the Shodai. She shouldn't be reduced to this.

Grumbling, she stood up, using him as support while Genma utilised the tree as a backing to rise. Despite their lethargy, they got into the standard pentagon formation within seconds, notably with the sole kunoichi standing closer to the middle, hand primed on her Fūinjutsu-inscribed arm sleeve.

"I thought this was over," Raidō bemoaned lowly.

"It is over," Minato informed them warmly, being the first to arrive in his entourage. "Congratulations on passing- though that was never in doubt."

"Hokage-sama," sounded the Hokage Guard Platoon, with a drowsy chirp of "Ramen-sama!" added to its midst. Subtlety, the Sigma Squad who encircled current Hokage glared at her.

Kara nudged her silver-haired partner. "Told you Ramen-sama was coming."

"Kara, shut up."

Ignoring his students' antics, the Yondaime nodded to the Sigma Squad, who took it as their command to leap up into the trees to set up a perimeter.

"At ease," he then addressed the first generation of his burgeoning security detail. "I'm not here to test you, but merely here to deliver exposition of what is to come, and what you should expect as a part of my guard."

He gestured for them to come closer and take a seat. No point in making them stand, and the Namikaze was honestly still uncomfortable with the natural authority which the hat accrued to him. He probably won't ever get used to it – not when those closest to him promised to keep him on his toes (his wife mostly) – but he was certain he would get better at not showing it.

"You must be wondering why out of all the candidates, I have chosen only five of you, and five of you specifically."

Slowly, he met their eyes, one by one, to ensure he had their attention. Satisfied, he continued his speech: "I do not intend for my security detail to be… orthodox," he admitted. "When you review the configuration I have created, there is no doubt that you will realise quickly that some of you are better utilised in your own niche routes which I have extracted you from. In others, you are perhaps incredulous that someone more qualified didn't take your place. You are neither right nor wrong in your assumptions."
"My reasons are simple," he declared, raising his fingers as he started listing. "One, I want a security detail who I can trust, two, you are my Shinobi and students as much as you are my guards and I intend to train you. Thus, I sought for younger candidates. And fourthly... In each of you, at some point in your career, you have expressed an interest in Fūinjutsu, and it is an interest which I intend to cultivate and later spread."

With his confession, the pieces in Kara's mind clicked. Now that she reflected upon it, the old Hokage Guard Platoon had been relatively proficient in the basics. Her old Genin-sensei was one of the better users in his generation; a proficient Jack of all trades but a master of none. Raidō didn't expand upon his interests as far as his peers did, but Genma made explosive seals an art which would have made Deidara cry.

His explosive senbon were genius.

"Therefore, in addition to your duties, I will be taking the opportunity to hone you in the basics of Fūinjutsu. It is not an easy discipline to master by any means," he said dryly, thinking back about the struggles he faced, "but it can be extremely rewarding if you are willing to venture into it. In exchange for your investment, I will willingly teach you what I know, with some help from my wife and Kara-chan."

Said kunoichi blinked. "What?"

"Yes, you," said Minato with fond exasperation. "You didn't acquire official qualifications to practice and create Fūinjutsu without reason."

"So you had an ulterior motive in giving me the position?"

In her muddled mind, the sentence did not sound as accusing as it did.

"You deserved the position, Kara-chan, and you would have gotten it earlier if you didn't stall the testing. And personally, I prefer to not leave your talents lying around unused, lest you decided to channel your creative energy to more destructive and insanity-inducing endeavours."

The girl sulked at his hinting. She knew he wouldn't have let her off easily after the small stunt she pulled on the Hokage Monument, and she was just carrying out orders from her sister figure.

"I expected that," Raidō muttered. "No offence, Kara, but you were saturated in the smell of ink and some blood when I first met you. It was a no-brainer that you dabbled in Fūinjutsu."

Using the word "dabbling" would be doing her skill an injustice though, Genma thought critically upon reviewing the chain of events that occurred during the test.

The girl hadn't made a show of her Fūinjutsu prowess; she wasn't Uzumaki Kushina who fought in with an oppressive flurry of chains and layered barriers for both offensive and defensive use (or so the stories go) or Namikaze Minato who wielded his Hiraishin with such cutting speed that forced Iwa's hand at surrender.

But Kara was successful in her own timely applications, no matter how shaky she was. In the Shiranui's moment of crisis, she had swooped in with a speed befitting of the Yellow Flash's student and erected a hasty barrier to fend off the barrage of attacks, buying him precious seconds to reposition and counter unscathed. With her ingenious timing (and a penchant for pranking), she had similarly slowed down the Sigma's Squad chase and gave them breathing space. As to how she did it, she remained silent, although the mischievous glint in her eye and the paint splattered uniforms of their mentors was telling enough of her tactics.
"And ultimately," Minato concluded as he unfurled a large scroll in front of them, "I want you to be able to use this."

_Hello history_, Kara sobered up upon seeing the seal, lips unconsciously tilting upward as she traced over the calligraphy: the purposeful cacography of his own sealing language, the thick and thinning brushstrokes; forming words which birthed pocket dimensions to marked coordinates and was circularly protected and linked to security layers.

"This is...?" asked Tatami.

"Hiraishin," she murmured, vermilion eyes softening with tenderness as she recalled all the good memories associated with it.

The attempts to understand the Formation Hiraishin to revive the original seal work was what kick started her official studies in Fūinjutsu with the Hokage Guard Platoon as her teachers. Having seen what the undead Yondaime Hokage could do with his own created technique had opened their eyes, and they decided that Shushin variant was too powerful to not utilise.

The time-traveller remembered the countless hours they spent bickering about Fūinjutsu theory and the necessity of certain layers of the seal work into the night, or the times where unravelling the security layers had nearly lost them a limb. Her father had been a protective bastard over his magnum opus, and even if he had given them information, it was not on a silver platter; dissecting his work had taken more time than comprehension of it.

At the end of their experimentation, they had all agreed they would never recover the Hiraishin in full – theirs was too chakra-expensive for successive casts and the landings were not as precise. Only Naruto, with her ocean-deep reserves and a tailed beast to make up for the margin of error, could use it on a whim. But the imperfections didn’t matter as much as the fact that the redux version was in her hands. With their collective hard work, she became the second coming of the Yellow Flash (though some called her gold in secret) and allowed her to regain her inheritance as his daughter.

"Not exactly," Minato chuckled, mistaking her adoration for mere curiosity. "I call it the Formation Hiraishin: a variant of my original work that allows for group teleportation, with the Hokage as the determined coordinate."

Kakashi’s eyebrows furrowed, partly concerned and confused. "Aren’t you afraid that we might steal your work, Hokage-sama?"

The _Kiiroi Senko_ smiled wryly. "If you can manage to re-adapt it back for individual use, consider the technique yours." His lips became sharp like a kunai’s point, almost daring them. "That is, if you can, of course."

After saying that, his fingers lingered on the edge of the paper. "I did think about patenting my Hiraishin prior to this—" he gestured at the scroll carelessly before shrugging—"but then I decided some things are better to be passed on than lost. In teaching you how to utilise this piece, all of you have officially become candidates to inherit the Hiraishin. If you can decipher it, it really is yours to have, and I will take it as my cue to bow out and retire."

"Although I do hope you take some creative liberties to officially make it your own," he added as an afterthought, internally grimacing about the idea of outright plagiarism.

"What do you mean by 'individual use', Hokage-sama?" Genma inquired, homing in on his choice of words.
"Good question," Minato praised. "My Hiraishin, as you know it, only requires me to activate my tri-pronged kunai to teleport to another marked location. Formation Hiraishin, however, in order to account for the higher demands of chakra needed to teleport a group and perhaps to greater distances, requires three people to activate the seal to execute the teleport."

"To simplify terms… think of it like your chakra pathways and tenketsu points. Your chakra pathways already exist like the lines I have already drafted, but it is the trigger - your tenketsu points - that allow chakra to spread and connect. And in this scenario, you need to go through three tenketsu points to get chakra from your main source to say, your toes."

The three who were new to the discipline nodded in understanding.

"But we'll delve into the parts and parcel of Fūinjutsu and how to construct a seal later. We'll be here for hours if I started now. Your first order of business will be learning to activate the seal correctly, so focus on that first. Since we're on the topic, let me ask: Raidō-kun, what's the benefit of Fūinjutsu?"

He pondered the question in his mind for a few beats. Frowning, he replied with uncertainty, "You don't have to necessarily know the specifics to use it, I guess?"

The Fūinjutsu master hummed in satisfaction. "Right on the mark. Explosive and storage seals are the most frequently used types in Konoha, and I'm sure T&I uses their fair share of paralysis seals and chakra repressors. The discipline is infinitely versatile and capable of adapting to suit different needs if you have the know-how."

Tapping three almost identical-looking points on his scroll, he told them: "In terms of activation, the Formation Hiraishin is not dissimilar to those you have been exposed to. Fundamentally, it requires the simultaneous infusion of chakra from the three participants at their given points. The difficulty comes about when ensuring that everyone contributes equal portions of chakra at the same rate so that the seal isn't overloaded."

"And for full disclosure…" He said at length, sheepish, "I don't know the exact chakra cost needed to power the seal. It can differ due to the distance you need to travel and I'm still in the process of hashing out the safety precautions, how to further decrease the overall expenditure, and make the collaboration easier, not to mention the possible conflicting affinities-"

"Minato-sensei, you're rambling," Kakashi cut in politely, keenly aware of the incoming rant. If his time with three, sometimes four, Fūinjutsu obsessed Shinobi had taught him anything, it was to derail them before they could start.

Catching himself, the embarrassed Hokage scratched his head. "Thanks, Kakashi-kun."

From the looks of it, only his youngest student was keeping up, while the rest looked like they were getting overwhelmed with the variables involved with his favourite discipline.

He cleared his throat. "Therefore, the only solution you have is to practice until you get it right. I am certain with the talents I have here, it is only a matter of time before you find the correct distribution. But do try to do it with supervision… It would be best if there was someone who can judge if a seal is going to explode before it actually does."

Kara coughed, trying to mask her laughter against the alarm on their faces. "Don't worry, it takes a lot of chakra for that to happen, 'ttebane," she tried to say as sincerely as possible.

She should know. Where most people tried to economise the chakra intake of their works, she
disregarded it. Why should she care with ever-expanding reserves? If normal people were sink faucets linked to a barrel, the jinchūriki was her own factory; her output was that of an industrial hose fully powered and reducing her output was a lot harder than what was expected.

(Even after nearly three decades, her chakra control was still terrible. On second thought, she probably shouldn't participate in the Formation Hiraishin unless it was in a supervisory capacity; she would plummet the rates of success drastically with her potent chakra.)

Alas, no one bought her assurances due to the toothy smirk she was sporting.

"That's still not a definitive no," Raidō deadpanned.

"Yeah, but none of you are dumb enough to overload the seal now that you know about the possible consequences. In fact, you'll probably underpower the seal."

"Now you're just trying to screw with us," muttered Genma under his breath. Unrepentant, the kunoichi continued to smirk.

"If anything," Minato interrupted them nicely, "the condition of the seal work isn't your main concern. If you accidentally overload it, I'll draw a few more for the sake of practice. When it's all said and done… I'll give you access to the final product.

"But for now…” He looked up at the darkening skies – although it was hard to tell if it was the time of the day or just the thick canopy— "you are dismissed. Training will take place again two days later. Go home and rest."

"And when I said rest," he looked meaningfully at all of them, especially his two errant and overworking students, "I really meant it."

...

Which was why the Yondaime Hokage found himself back on Training Ground 44 again a week later, watching over the youths who were arguing about how they could improve their synchronization. Thus far, Raidō, Genma and Tatami were the ones with closer affinities – both elemental and reserve wise – while his two students were far off. The Hatake, with his signature white and thicker chakra mutation, would have a bit more to go before he could get to the rate established by the trio, and his youngest, well—

She hung upside down on the lowest branch next to him as she had been relegated to working on her abysmal chakra control. Tree walking had been a choice of poison, but as to why she decided that hanging upside down would make the brunt of gravity heavier for her, he had no clue.

*Is she using chakra to stick her hair to her shoulder as well?* His cerulean eyes narrowed suspiciously at the ponytail that was lying limp on her shoulder.

*But she has taken her position with good grace,* the Namikaze inspected. Her chakra control was never the best, and in war time, she had compensated by using the chakra-intensive techniques he had passed onto her. But the problem was temporarily routed, still unsolved, and since she entered ANBU right after and he had post-war arrangements to deal with… he had forgotten about it.

However, between the both of them, Kara had quietly confided that she might never be able to use the Formation Hiraishin no matter how much effort she put into restricting her chakra flow. It was hard for her to channel her chakra in minute amounts – not from the lack of trying – and her sad blob of a Bushin attested to it. For once, her blessedly large reserves had worked against her.
Where her colleagues could slowly infuse chakra to light up a series of interlocking relays of heat-produced light, hers was a firework; quick and overpowering, so much so she melted the seal into a sorry mess, where there was no distinction between paper and words. She threw the paper away right after, seconds before the trapped energy sought for release and imploded.

Rather than being disgruntled at the results, she had shrugged it off as if she has had years to acclimate to her poor control. "It is what it is," she had told them, vermilion eyes vacant of expectations.

(Disturbing, the Kiiroi Senko thought, wondering how the dualities of acceptance and the anxiety to be more could coexist. He knew how tirelessly the girl trained. She had forgoed meals and sleep numerous times for it. What made her convictions towards her chakra so different?)

But it wasn't as if the Fūinjutsu mistress would never get to use the Hiraishin. It was only fitting he asked: "You understand how the Hiraishin works, don't you?"

Surprised by his question, the kunoichi almost slammed into the tree bark from a slip up. "W-What?" She spluttered, silently cursing a toad-loving pervert who probably sold her out.

"You understand how the Hiraishin works, right?" He repeated for her benefit.

She looked away. "Yeah," mumbled Kara, tugging at her tail ends. "Are you angry?"

"For what? Having an extremely talented student?"

"That I might take what's yours which is not mine to have?"

Against her insistence at theft, he rolled her eyes. "Get down, Kara-chan."

Once she dropped down next to him, he ruffled her hair roughly. "I'm not angry," said Minato, earnest, eyes crinkling. She was getting taller again. "Of all my students, past or future, I expected that you would be the first to crack the code. I'm quite proud – you needed only a few glances. And what I said a week ago, I meant it. If you want to use it, you can.

"What I am put off by, however, is that you have yet to show me your adapted version."

His student floundered, heat rising to her cheeks and to the tips of her ears. She scratched her cheek.

"Um... sorry, 'ttebane? I'm still working on it and umm... I wanted to iron the kinks out before I showed it to you." She lowered her head bashfully. "I wanted you to be proud of my variant, 'ttebane."

"Does Kushina know?"

"No. Kushina-nee wouldn't have kept it a secret from you. She'd probably out me in less than a day."

Laughing, he nodded, "She would have. You can bring it over for a trial run when you're ready."

"Hai."

...

While training up his security detail was legitimate, it was also a convenient excuse for the Yondaime Hokage to set up the site for his child's birth.

They were happening in the same place after all.
By a complete stroke of luck, the time-traveller managed to be part of the small circle who knew about the details of when and what was going to happen. Being one of the few in the village officialised as a Fūinjutsu user, she was indisputably involved in the proof-reading of the barriers and the reinforcement of the Shishō Fūin.

The couple may have decided against hiding the pregnancy since it was neigh impossible with the duties Kushina had to attend to as the First Lady, but it didn't mean her jinchūriki status, as well as its possible dangers would be revealed to the public.

(If they knew, they would be against a child coming out of their union like the council was, but a family was ultimately the couple's business and no one else's.)

To the populace of Konoha, Uzumaki Naruto was supposed to be born later than what was stipulated, in Konoha's Hospital with minimal complications rather than a cot on a cave's floor, fighting for both her life and her child's, against a tailed beast who was doing everything in his power to escape.

Despite being involved in the process of securing her mother's and future self's life, Kara was still torn with guilt because she had yet to figure out a countermeasure against the Uchiha's Kamui. All she could do was suggest improvements to the sensory layers. During Fourth War, her only tactic was to react to his teleportation based purely on reflex alongside an arsenal of large-scale and long-lasting abilities to get a successful hit on him. Later when she had the Hiraishin, it became a battle of who could teleport first to get the upper hand.

Constructively, she couldn't come up with a counteragent due to the similar natures the two techniques shared. If she anchored space to keep him grounded in the present dimension (she had never figured out how), she would hypothetically render both the Hiraishin and Kamui useless. But that would be denying the utility of the variant Shushin, which would defeat the whole purpose of resurrecting it in the first place.

And she couldn't just tell the Yondaime Hokage who the assailant was—

She clamped down on the thought, a throbbing sensation flaring in her temple again.

"Couldn't we try and get Ero-sennin back to Konoha before October 10?" Kara voiced her frustration to the man she regarded as her grandfather, bloodied crimson eyes pleading for a failsafe. She carded her fingers through her hair. "By the Shodai, I'm willing to even suggest Orochimaru if it means that there's extra security."

Sighing tiredly, Hiruzen shook his head. The knowledge of the events was taking a toll on his psyche as well. "Jiraiya was adamant to be near the borders of Tsuchi and Kaminari no Kuni to confuse the rumours going in and out regarding Kushina's pregnancy to stall any assassination attempts. Your mother—" the kunoichi flinched at the relation as if it burnt her—"is not overtly fond of Orochimaru. And by extension, neither is your father."

Deep within her, Kurama snorted. Being creatures attuned to the emotions of others, it would be harder to ignore the increasing depravity the snake summoner oozed. His cruelty and dabbling into human experimentation tainted him, sheeting him with dark matter; as deep as his curiosity; immortal in immorality; ensnaring him in his own sins, except he smiles, accepting it like an old lover's embrace, except it was strangle-hold instead.

"We can't find baa-chan under such a short notice and manage to persuade her to come back either," said Kara in defeat. She slumped over his table. "Took a week to convince her last time, with reason."
"We will have to make do with what we have," he consoled, patting her arm lightly.

"But, Jiji, what about your wife?" She asked so softly he barely heard her. "I cannot guarantee she will get out unharmed. I cannot, in good conscience promise you something I cannot keep." Her voice thickened with emotions. "You know I don't do such things, 'ttebane."

Much of the arrangements were already decided on: Biwako would be leading a team of medics to assist in the birth, the Sigma Squad and a select number of ANBU operatives would be guarding and Minato was responsible for holding the Kyuubi down. To ask the previous First Lady of Konoha to not participate for her own safety would be a grave insult to her abilities.

"Then, why don't you tell Minato?"

"No!" She snapped, hand slamming against his table with such force it started cracking. Surprised by her own outburst, she held her hands together to stop it from shaking, to stop the bursts of unrestrained chakra running amok throughout her body. The time-traveller was on tenterhooks; almost mad with the possibilities – from prophecy to probability – and she couldn't stop thinking about what could go wrong, how it could wrong, all this is just fucking wrong—

Miserably, she said, "No, I can't. Not yet. Maybe not ever. "It'd break him to know who is behind the mask, Jiji. And why would he believe a mad woman's fable—a tale that I have neglected to tell him about for nearly four years?"

"I believed you despite not knowing you for a day."

"But I wasn't breaking your trust."

"If you are aware of that fact, why are you doing it now?"

"Because honesty isn't always the right option, Jiji!" The time-traveller raised her volume unwillingly. "Sometimes I wish it was but it isn't. It's not that simple, 'ttebane. I thought about it so much, and I thought about it hundreds and thousands of times only to come to the realisation that the truth isn't going to save anyone. Truth did not stop his goddamn plans from happening back then, it is not going to stop him now. Truth isn't going to make the variables go away because this truth I bear in me now—" she clutched the fabric closest to her heart—"can become a lie if enough people know about it. And that lie can cost us more."

"I'm so tired, 'ttebane," she murmured brokenly, almost hysterical, with tears underlining her eyes. "So tired."

Kara continued to ramble. "And this must happen, 'ttebane. Sensei needs to know there is a threat he needs to prepare himself for. Once he does... a lot of things can and will change, Jiji. And that is when I start hoping things will get better." She shuddered. "And I don't want to break that faith, 'ttebane."

After hearing his charge's case, he pondered about it for a few minutes while the girl recollected her composure.

Sarutobi Hiruzen knew, from the moment she stepped into his office, he would not be winning any arguments against her. He had only seen a fraction of what she had experienced, and what drove her to such desperation was not of a magnitude he could fully fathom.

Did he blame the girl for her actions? No. He probably would have done what she was doing, except he would remain unmatched to her strong will.
She broke and was still breaking but what mattered was that she was sitting here, in front of him, hoping. She was weathered down and trodden on by the elements, but in her chest was a heart that beat strongly for a better world. She was optimistic and pessimistic in the same turn, torn between wanting to change the events proceedings whilst understanding that the full potential costs of her actions should she overstep.

He sighed, taking another long drag of his pipe. "Do what you must, Kara-chan. What I said four years ago was not a fib; I will unconditionally grant you my support, should you need it. I did not fail you back then. I will not do it now."

"Even to the world's end?" She lifted her lips futilely.

"We will not get there, Kara-chan. Above all, I would like to believe in miracles. I fervently hope, for you and I, that you succeed."

Chapter End Notes

**Beta'd by wecantgiggleitsacrimescene**
Annnnd we are entering semi-canon territory :D
Took us 25 chapters, but we're here~

Thank you for all the support you have given to the story thus far *bows*
"Biwako."

The lady paused at the porch step, her feet slipping into her sandals mid-way. Looking over her shoulder, she gave her husband an inquisitive stare for his call out. Under the high noon's illumination, the new flares of pigmentation on his face and the grey-white of his kimono – the signs of his years and what he has given to duty – seemed more pronounced.

But on his visage, there was something else, she noted decidedly, stalling her previous plans of leaving to stand in front of him. To anyone else, the Professor was a composed man: expression unperturbed and exuding a fatherly mien, of a trained, steady composition needed for a person with his mantle. He laboured tirelessly to stoke the fiery will of Konoha, never mind the heat that melts his skin with skin and the coal dust settling on him.

It created a weight; a burden; and even if he was no longer the Hokage, he was still Sandaime-sama. It wasn't something he could cast off because he wanted to. It was a second skin; it could fray but never moult, it never leaves, and it clings. Whether it suffocated him—

Only he would know.

(And she does too. She knows the empty bed she keeps warm, the cooling meal better packed into a box rather than a plate, her children's questions and then their condemning silence. She knows how he breaks.)

But to Biwako, he was just Hiruzen. The husband she married, the father she bore two sons for, and the man, who despite having proposed seconds ago, started talking about the share of weight he was placing on her by making her his. Their love may have clauses tied to them but she married him any way to gain everything he could give: his sincerity, love and limited time.

(Call her possessive, but Sarutobi Biwako knew what she wanted.)

She once loved him from afar, similarly deluded by his façade, but years in his company has taught her so much more. For all Hiruzen tried to be, he was but a man... And she tried to give him the emotional support the village doesn't grant to a warlord. She knew his troubles, the slight changes of his expressions and what they meant, and there was little he could hide from her.

Thumbing the curve of his cheek, she asked, "Whatever is the matter?"

"Stay safe," he requested, pulling her closer to press his lips on her temple. "That is all I ask."

"This one delivery isn't that much different from the others despite its complications, anata. Trust in
my abilities. Trust in the team you co-selected and set your mind at ease."

"Can you blame a husband for worrying as a mother would about the elements beyond his control?"

"When you put it that way, there isn't a way for me to retort," she kissed the side of the jaw in reassurance, "but most things aren't in black and white, and we have to make do with what we have. A mother has her reasons for worrying. What's yours?"

"His own," he replied vaguely, arms tightening around her waist. "And he asks for is the benefit of doubt. He bears good intention in asking you to take caution."

"Then you shall have it," she affirmed smilingly. "As you always have."

Quietly, he murmured, the rumble of his voice, vibrating low in his chest transmitted to her, "Sometimes I wonder if it will suffice." *I cannot bear the thought of losing you, even if I had survived once.*

"These half-truths? Better than lies, I reckon. At least I have points of inference." *I have learnt a long time ago that our love comes with a price.*

"I apologise."

"Do not sodden your good intentions with apologies you can't live up to. Do not ask me for the forgiveness that I cannot keep granting, and forgiveness you cannot accept, Hiruzen. I understand, I do."

"And it is worth more than all the gold pieces in the world and it is a treasure I would like to keep close."

"Stay safe, was it?" She pulled back, gazing into his brown eyes. *Weathered,* she scrutinised the brown of his irises akin to the soil, one dyed with acidity and planted in too many times. But there was something today… something belying the topsoil like a prey holding its breath in its lair, trying to escape notice.

"Yes."

She reached for the careworn pouch she kept in the drawer and started to slot more weapons into her sleeves and the invisible pockets fashioned into her white Haori and dress. Retired though she might be, but she was still *kunoichi,* the art of concealment and preparation was a reflex, not a conscious thought.

"Better?"

His hand slid down the length of her arms, finding comfort at the edges of the weapon he felt.

"Much."

At least she had a fighting chance now.

…

Kushina doesn't know—

No, she knew perfectly why she was in this situation, with the pain *ripping* through her every other minute and the pressure against her back. She had to bite back a mix between a low moan and strangled scream as her next contraction hit, hands wringing the steel rods they had nailed to the
ground. They were slick with her blood and sweat but she clung onto it for dear life, for anchorage. She tried to ground herself against the sensation of push and pull, pitting the instinctive push of childbirth against the unnatural whom she tried to keep chained.


"You're doing well, Kushina-sama," Taji soothed as she wiped away the tears and sweat from her forehead and eyes. "Your child will be here soon."

The soon-to-be-mother didn't bother to reply when another wave of pain slammed into her at the abdomen and her chest heaved with the effort to keep the sound in. Screams scarcely did anything other than bring an anxious look to her husband's face. Minato could not hold her hand when he needed to hold the Kyuubi no Kitsune at bay— and she can hear him. The loud, echoing roar resoundingly loud in her ears as the barriers between prison and reality started to thin, and the rattling of the reinforced chains loosening. The monster was unhinged as it breathed too close to the boundaries of his cage, so close to freedom, sending surge after surge of his own power to pry at the cracks of her lowering defences.

The jinchūriki could feel his resistance, blended with her unborn child's will; corrupting her act of bravery. There was nothing to ease her pain save the cool hands of the medical team and her husband against her feverish skin, for her lucidity was needed to differentiate between energy and babe. Uzumaki Kushina was its last bastion and a giver; the few of the Uzumaki left, prided for their vitality and resilience; born in chaos and blood and then forged with fire in her spine. By Uzu's Shodai, even if she was tired and bone-weary, she would not give.

She knocked her head back, teeth clacking shut harshly to swallow the hiss.

"The child is crowning," Biwako announced, and Kushina would have sagged bonelessly if it was not the last phase. "A few more pushes and you will have the baby in your arms," she encouraged and that was motivation enough after so many drawn hours of pain.

"Come on, Kushina," Minato encouraged as well, his smile shaky with exhaustion and relief.

"On a count of three."

Kushina whimpered, sucking in shallow breaths.

And finally let go with a shriek, volume on par with her child's scream. There were so many sensations: the stinging pain, the sudden loss of weight and pressure, the tightening at her stomach, (the Kyuubi's growls and snapping jaws, fringing her mind with madness and violence of being put down once more) but all she could focus on was the miraculous cry, and the tang of blood that tasted like success.

Tears welled up in her eyes.

"You did it," Minato's words echoed her thoughts. Her husband stumbled and clutched onto the surgical table, equally overwhelmed by the fact that it was over, that he had a child, a family to call his own, and he sank to his knees next to her in reverence. He clasped her hand in between his like in prayer and kissed the tips of her fingers. "Thank you," he said sincerely. "Thank you for bearing this child of ours, Kushina."

"Yeah," she choked out before her gaze shifted from his face to the orange bundle Biwako was carrying towards them.

Minato scrambled to his feet to reach for his child first, only to be chided by the Sarutobi. "No
touching!" She scolds. "The first face the child should see is the mother's!"

Properly chastised and slack jawed, Minato backed away in surrender to let Biwako to move closer to his wife. The Yondaime trailed after her helplessly, peeking over her shoulder to catch a glimpse of his offspring. By the Sannin. I have a child. The realisation floored him again, bringing a huge smile onto his face.

And upon first sight, Kushina fell in love all over again. She loved the child since the moment she knew of their existence; the one she tried so hard to conceive and bring to term; who she read and sang to as they squirmed in her womb, keeping her sane during her mostly-indoor pregnancy. But being able to hold her child in her arms was an experience like no other. It was real and warm and glorious and she couldn't help but tear again.

"Naruto," she cooed her child's given name as she drank in their blonde hair, tanned complexion and the whiskers on their blotchy red cheeks. Utterly perfect. She brought the bundle closer to her head and nuzzled theirs to quieten their sobs.

"Hey. No need to cry like your wimpy father," she murmured, ignoring her husband's proceeding whine. "Your kaa-chan's here, 'ttebane. She'll protect you and love you… so you don't have to cry, kay?"

"Don't put me down in front of our child from the moment they are born, Kushina," Minato honestly pouted.

"You better get used to it because it won't be changing any time soon, Hokage-who-almost-fainted." She shot back. "You weren't even the one giving birth."

Biwako and Taji laughed furtively as they busied themselves in clean-up.

"I'm allowed to panic, right, Naruto?" He asked the new-born pleadingly. "There was a lot of blood. You were screaming. It's my first time. My reaction was perfectly normal."

"See what we have to deal with?" She told her child with an exaggerated sigh. Her baby sniffed and rubbed their face against her chest. Kushina swore her heart was going to jump out of her ribcage when they seemed to take comfort in her, like they had always known she was safety and home.

The jinchūriki held her baby for a few more minutes quietly. Gently, Minato wiped away the occasional tear slipping down her face, and pressed kisses against her temple, murmuring thanks against her skin. He seemed to regard their child in fascination and some smugness that his likeness was taken after— although she'll be wiping it off soon by announcing that their child was Uzumaki in temperament, if the storm they kicked up was any indication.

"Time for you to rest," Biwako broke to her softly, arms reaching for the new-born child. Kushina wanted to protest with the irrational thoughts of losing them so soon but shoved it down because she shouldn't question the judgement of her midwife. She'll get more quality time with her baby later when they were back home.

"Kushina—" Minato stopped mid-sentence as the sigil connected to the barrier flared on his hand. He barely managed to issue a sharp warming in time: "Biwako-sama! Taji!"

The ANBU medic went down for the count, and the previous First Lady gasped before she collapsed with her hand on the open wound which was beginning to stain her garb crimson.

How did he managed to get past the barrier?
With his hand posed above the new-born's head in a threat to crush it, the assailant ordered: "Yondaime Hokage Minato. Step away from the jinchūriki, or your child's life is forfeit."

Minato repositioned himself in front of his wife. _Who is he?_ His icy blue eyes dissected his appearance before checking on the conditions of his fallen comrades and his wife and back to the enemy. The Shishō Fūin was unravelling, its lines trembling as it crawled and receded, visibly fighting its host and he didn't have the means for immediate suppression. But he placed faith his wife's willpower. He had to.

"I told you to step away from the jinchūriki! Do you really want to lose your child?" A kunai flicked out from beneath his sleeve, and both parents inhaled sharply. Naruto started crying louder, subconsciously aware of the danger.

His own hands were shaking. "What do you want?"

"You know what I want, Minato. Step away."

Even if Minato was aware the assailant wouldn't hurt Naruto just yet, it did nothing to calm the unforgiving anger that was stirring like a tornado. The enemy wouldn't _dare_, because if he did, nothing would stand in the way of his slaughter. A life for a life; the _Kiiroi Senko_ didn't gain his title through mercy.

For a tense moment, no one moved.

Then, Naruto was flung like he was a marker for a race and Minato threw himself into motion. It was familiar: the shift of his chakra, metal traded for warmth, the sound of cries and the steady structure beneath his feet.

"You really are the Yellow Flash."

A flare.

_Shodai—_

He shoved himself through another pocket dimension with Kushina's anguish still ringing in his ears and quickly discarded the blanket. On instinct, he flickered forward a few paces and slammed himself into and out of the door, before tumbling sideways and skidding to a halt on the grass floor. The resulting shockwave from the explosives blew past him but he didn't care, making sure his arms and chakra was wrapped around his child.

"You're safe," he repeated like a mantra, bringing Naruto closer, finding consolation in his cries. He was traumatised but _alive_. "You're safe. Thank kami you're safe."

But now was not the time for inertia. Minato pried a splinter out of his leg.

His wife was still in dire straits.

…

The first sign that something was going to go wrong was when the tugging sensation started.

It was not Kurama's intention to want to escape. Far from it, really, especially when he was invested in the time-traveller who he hoped would be his last vessel. But he was a _Kyuubi_, half of a whole; and instinctively, he yearned to reunite with his _Yin_.

(And also with the eight parts, but that connection has faded from a throb to pin pricks. It tugged dully on worse days where the siblings moaned for order in disaster, but they have grown to be without each other for more than a millennium and their onus kept them separate. Long have they settled into their own agencies as their father wanted… And it was a promise.)

A wish.

But it would not come into fruition in this century. There was too much to do: a madman to stop, a light needed to shine on the schemer who thrived in darkness and earth, and a person to protect. Even after everything was said and done, they might never be one with the two decades of difference, for no reconciliation of two identities would ever be easy.

Kurama growled in his own restraints while Kara was curled into herself at her own end. She gave him an apologetic smile through pale lips for the torii gates she had placed on him because it was going against what she had said when they became partners years ago.

"I won't lock you up or chain you like some animal," she had told him earnestly as she pressed her forehead to his snout, promise shining in her crystalline eyes. His jinchūriki had made an effort to let him out frequently back when her status was known. They didn't have the privilege now, but the lines between for his measure of control had blurred into obscurity ever since they stepped into the new timeline. Her eyes were his; her body a small extension of himself; she let his influence wash over constantly with her sharper incisors, deeper birthmarks and absurd regeneration.

She was suffering from his unwilling rebellion, but she still apologised, and the Uzumaki was a damn fool even after two decades and a half.

'Well, if we wanted a warning, we got one,' Kara laughed hollowly as she leaned her body against the gates she placed between them. The metal shook but did not open, and her grip on the key remained steadfast.

'Apolologies,' he grunted out, wrapping his tails around the seals even tighter.

'It's fine, ttebane. Nothing I haven't experienced, you know? It's not like I didn't go through this for five years.'

'I would like to cordially inform you—' an involuntary growl rose from his throat— 'It was seventeen. You did not sense the other twelve years of attempts because you were oblivious and stupid. Not much have changed in that respect.'

'How you manage to insult me even while we're in trouble is astounding, ttebane.'

'Big words for someone so small. What would you have me do then?'

'Uh, not,' she replied sharply, syllable breaking as his efforts renewed.

'Kara.'

'What!?' She croaked out, officially keeling over straight into the water.

'Brace yourself.'

Both of them growled when the torii gates broke and Kurama slammed himself against the seal.

…
"Fuck." Kara breathed out, body hunched over and head pressed onto her cold apartment floor.

A string of curses left her lips as her red chakra started to materialise around her, causing the calligraphy that lined her walls and floor to light up in precautionary blue. They contained the caustic energy but it burned, her skin blistering and peeling further with each swell her pores expelled. And while the jinchūriki could handle two tails, it still sucked.

Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto fucking hated it when people tried to take away her Kurama.

She remembered the hands on her skin, the metal threads on her lips— the haunting crimson eyes, the threats they acted upon, each hand seal that led to the ancient chakra being drawn out, taken away, parts of it gone, leaving her hollow, incomplete, with a fragmented partner, and his roaring, his pleas, her scrambling desperation to hold onto him but her hands were not big enough, her grip too weak; her chakra not adhesive like her mother's, her Fūinjutsu unskilled and she could only scream and scream—

She had managed to retrieve him but the separation haunted them, it always would, and there were nights where she would cling onto him tighter, and he, her.

And now as she felt the grimy hold of a corrupted fire coming close again, she snarled, beastly and territorial, her seals taking on a purple tinge. She won't lose him again. Kurama was hers and she will fucking rip out someone's spine if they so much as touched him.

They should not dare when all they have ever done was tried to subjugate and domesticate him— they shouldn't even dare. How dare they try to make the tailed beasts their thrall; for beings as powerful and necessary as them should never have been put down like some kind of animal in the first place. No one deserved Kurama's benevolence when they had shown him none.

Kara took a metaphorical knife: one made of words and sealings thought lost, each end stroke keen, and further sharpened with her whetstone of determination to cut down the chains before it latched on. Where its nefarious influence tried to touch, it melted against the fortress she had built; she razed and eviscerated with ruthless efficiency; her security practiced into the finest arts.

"You will not touch him," she issued a declaration in her own space, crazed and enraged, brandishing her weapon like a madwoman. In her mind's eye, she felt the widening of eyes and an echo of tortured uproar, causing her eyes to snap open when everything plunged into silence.

Her seals had stopped its activity and the interiors of her house smoked with the scent of burnt ink and wood. In the stillness, she could perceive the energy convalescing. It was dark, and red, oh so red, brimming with so much negative intent she could suffocate on it.

The other half of a whole.

He's here. It's time.

She clutched onto her chosen weapons and teleported out.

When Kara touched down on the top of her apartment building, she couldn't help the knee jerk reaction of reaching for the scrolls she had tucked into her pouch. The time-traveller drew in cold air into her lungs and exhaled them spitefully hot, trembling as the memories of her Konoha being destroyed by Zetsu and fire surfaced again. Or the white feathers falling from the skies like a thousand birds' wings clipped and the ensuing loud explosions— Is this reality or memory—

The girl bit into her lip, fury rising like bile in her throat.
'Calm,' her voice of logic returned in the face of the atrocities that his other half was wrecking, sanity regained. 'It is not the time yet.'

His ancient chakra filled her chakra coils and ran along the aerated rivers of her own, controlling its tempo and keeping her in place.

'It fucking sucks,' she quivered like a taut bow string, breath coming out fast. Her hands clenched, trying not to fight against her beast's influence. But it was so hard, damn it, to see the place she loved destroyed again (and again and again) when she poured her life into protecting it—there was fire on the left of her, the Hokage's monument was destroyed, the rock pieces laying on the ground with mouth gaping at the horror committed on their lands – she let out an enraged shriek, one that was drowned out by the chaos beneath.

She had tried to minimise the fatalities by blocking off minor roads with small pranks and placing seals with suggestive intent to make her people walk the other way, but it felt like it wasn't enough. Evacuation was happening faster with pre-emptive alerts: she could see the civilians being escorted to higher levels or beneath ground, but death was hard to prevent when the enemy was indestructible, illogical and with nothing to lose.

'Soon,' he sensed. 'You can stop me soon.'

The pair continued to watch as the Yin Kurama tore the village apart, his claws descending into buildings and tearing into them, leaving claws marks in his wake, his tails similarly lashing out in different directions to slap down Shinobi and structure alike. With his hulking size alone, each step he took was destruction; the crunch of his feet louder than the screams of his victims; the seismic roar battering down any opposition.

Glorious, the tailed beast was in the most morbid way, but she could not appreciate it when his violence was directed to what she loved.

Even though Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto once yearned to see the Kyuubi no Kitsune in his full might, this was not how she imagined it to be. She wanted him to be in the forests roaming and free—not in the middle of her home, her Konoha, and causing ruin. Her elongated nails dug into her thighs and every fibre of her being was yelling at her to move.

Just as a sharp gale and muddied fire disappeared from her chakra sense, her beast shouted in unison with her: "Now!"

Kara never performed hand seals faster than she did in that moment.

One second, she was at the top of her old apartment, the next she was on top of the Bijuu's head, her jutsu reaching the end of completion.

Blonde hair blazing in twin tails behind and crimson eyes silts, she snarled, "You're mine."

In an instant, black lines spread across furred limbs, head and tails, completely wrapping Kurama in her technique. Akin to snakes coiling around their prey to strangle, the sealing language in its inky blackness signified ill omen, giving the beast no chance of reacting before he was teleported miles away.

Taking advantage of the distortion in space and time, Kara leapt away from the beast. And without missing a beat, she unfurled the three prepared scrolls beneath her feet, nicking her thumb to draw a symbol to connect the first two.
The half-blood of an Uzumaki could never defeat Akai Chishio no Habanero in the quality and restraint of adamantine chains, but she would not lose out in quantity.

Stomping on the middle seal array, cobalt blue chains sprouted from the ground in the dozens. They shot up from the earth like plantains unrestrained and were thrown over the beast, resembling poisonous vines as they latched onto him. Greedy thorns instantly appeared and pierced him, refusing to let go, feeding off the corrosive chakra to thicken itself.

Barriers shrouded overhead in multi-coloured lights, blinding in the darkness of their landscape as she activated the next set of scrolls, erecting them one after the other, sealing any possibility of escape. Determination lined the crease of her brows. She only had two options: death or victory.

And she was going to do this right. The time-traveller didn't suffer through her own body shrinking into itself, retraining her chakra control and going through another war to fail.

'See that you do not.'

Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto did not flinch when the Kyuubi roared.

Neither did she wince when he struggled in her enforced chains. Her created restraints glowed blue with flecks of gold as it neutralised and absorbed, an unforgiving creation centred in incapacitating her partner. It was disgusting and she wanted to throw up, but necessity was necessity, so she did not relent. Years of her exposure to the Kyuubi had made her chakra both a good insulator and conduit and she wrested those advantages to absolute limits.

"Kurama," she spoke softly, her own body blaring gold with each step she took towards him. The aura added height to her smaller frame, finding compromise between she used to be and what she was now. Nine tails split from her cloak, waving to the rhythm of her other half.

The Bijuu roared incoherently, more primitive than cerebral, conjuring a Bijuudama in his mouth. Yet, the girl remained unfazed; pulling on a chain to tighten the one she weaved around his snout.

"Down." She commanded, bringing the beast to eye level. By then, Kara was right in front of his snout, hands reaching to stroke his fur as she had done a million times.

"Shhh…" she soothed, closing her eyes, more herself than her partner. "Shh… Kurama," She leaned her head against his head despite the intermittent growls. She searched for something familiar within the ancient chakra—

And found herself in the middle of a deep sea, where there was no beginning or end to the vastness of his ancient chakra. It was daunting and dark, almost impossible to navigate, but there was safety in the impossibility and its infinity. There were a few constants, and Kurama was one. (He was her eternal constant.) She swam higher and higher, heedless of the madness that attempted to ensnare and drown.

—Then, jerked, a growl tearing from her throat when she broke to the surface.

Above the sea of power, a blood moon stared back at her, its three tomoes mocking with its spin. Purple chains were stretched across the currents and branched out towards the limitless sky, joining at the circle which wanted to devour and control. Without suspense, Kara, who now stood level on curling waves, sought to tear the control apart.

However, the jinchūriki did not force the process.

Slowly, she slipped her own chakra between the chains and Kurama's, introducing her own presence
as a thin layer and spreading it out. Then she sank deeper; intermingling Yang with Yin, first as drops of gold before stretching it out and weaving, making him remember. Remember that the tailed beasts were not constructs of hatred, they were not the monsters that humanity made them out to be. They were dangerous, yes, but they were of freedom as much as they could be destruction and she needed him to believe. Kara helped him break those chains, one by one, simultaneously shedding the ones she had evoked in the physical plane.

Finally, the seas calmed after the last of the chains disappeared, leaving naught of its presence behind. The water transfigured into its truest form: a fox larger than she, made of nine tails and ears tall and wide.

'Kurama,' she smiled happily, nuzzling his nose. "Welcome back."

"Kit," the Yin half greeted, himself and yet… not. There was a dissonance within him; analogous to double vision, where he was himself and was not. Hatred still kept him company but at an arm's length, and the instinctive comfort and trust was not his. It was too soon to conclude if it was true. The Kyuubi needed time to adjust.

"Thank you," he told her, gratified nonetheless. There was no confusion to be had about being out of captivity or a madman's control.

"No need. I told you that if there one thing I had absolute confidence in no matter what timeline," she smiled so sweetly, curve familiar, "It was my ability to reach you."

"And you have," the Kyuubi no Kitsune concurred. "Although I must say, it is an odd phenomenon to thank myself. I have wondered who had the audacity to steal a part of me five years past on this very day, and I did not foresee that the answer will stand before me. It is unexpected, yes, but not unwelcome. However, I am quite disgruntled that my Yang half had the better end of the deal."

"I'm sorry about that," the time-traveller apologised, her sentences stringing together into a babble. "I can't switch since Yang has kind of been mine since forever and I'm part of him? I can't be easily separated or switched and plus someone needs to be with—"

"With your other self, yes?" He rolled his eyes. "I am not blind to the plans you have already laid out, kit. I will do what is necessary to prevent a madman's triumph, even if it means being sealed in a useless and tiny flesh bag again."

Should I feel insulted by that? Kara wondered.

Patting the scroll in her pouch, she assured him, "If it helps, this will make sure that we have a connection to one another, should we need it. And we could probably… teach my other self how to acclimate to your presence faster."

"Whether the interactions come years earlier or late, I will tide over it. The weathering of two decades is nothing compared to the eons I have known and will know. Patience comes with age. Despite having been reformed and remade… and I will always be a constant."

Fondness swirled in the vermilion eyes he had stained. "I know," her grin widened, splaying her hands against the open seal her abdomen. "In this timeline, you will live."

Kurama will not be without another vessel and no longer bound to death alone; with his yin half
assured, he would regenerate again even if it took years. He would eventually have freedom away from the chains of a human, and she would see to it before she died.

But the calmness was short-lived, for twin snarls ripped from them when a presence prodded at their barriers.

"Who dares?" They demanded as three, harsh.

Namikaze Minato's eyes widened at the combined pressure laid upon him. If he was a lesser man, he would have given into the urge to bow low but he remained strong.

"Ah, the Yondaime," Kara's expression twisted into a sneer under her partner's influence. "Have you come to chain us once more?"

At that horrifying moment, as Minato drank in the sight of the jinchūriki would stood close to the jaws of a Bijuu fearlessly, he wondered what the world has come to. First, there was someone who could control the Bijuu against its will, resurrecting the old tales of control from the Warring Clans era. Now, another who could work with the Bijuu stood before him, blazing gold, their coordination impenetrable and shining in their similarly coloured irises, right down to the pupiled silts.

"Who are you?" His voice was barely a whisper, the changed prophecy swirling in his mind.

Unlike his teacher, he did not fully trust fate, knowing that it was a possibility to make prophecies self-fulfilling. And when it determined the continued existence of world against its destruction, the sheer weight of words was dammingly high. It was unbelievable that a person could change the world so much and Namikaze Minato was a man of logic; of natural progression in small steps and not giant leaps.

The path he had carved with weapons and wits reflected his methods and it seemed right, until the jinchūriki turned all he had held faith in on its head. She was the irrefutable evidence of changed prophecies, too exact in prediction to be coincidence. Against her, there was nothing he could do.

"Someone. No one." They answered, as if they knew they knew his thoughts. Her humanity bled through. "But will you believe us when we say we want to reduce the harms?"

The Yondaime Hokage could now see the defiant tilt of the enigma's head as she stood closer to her constructed barrier, with one Bijuu tail lapping at her feet in protection. They made their allegiances clear, and he was struck again by how young this powerful person was.

"What do you want?" He asked roughly. Helpless. They who stood within the cage of their own making, who controlled the tool of imminent destruction, had him in the palm of their hands.

"A vessel," they answered truthfully. "Of our choosing."

"Who?"

Their grin returned, frighteningly mad and sharp. "Your child."

Their askance, however, was a choke-hold.

"No."

"Have you a better choice? Would you rather it be our previous, who will lose her life in the sealing? Or would you rather it be yours?" They mocked. He had chosen that in another time, but they took it away because they knew the outcome. They sought to throw it into disarray because she
had learnt the past was not meant to be repeated, not when it destroyed her. (They took away her choice too, unrepentantly, making her a true bystander in this case. \textit{She must learn}, they both urged. She must carve this lesson deeper than the scars her old wounds have inflicted and make her remember that their cruelty was also innate.)

"\textbf{You are already thinking of how to defeat us and put us back in a cage, are you not? I foresee no reality where you will let us go.}" The Yin half spoke, too attuned to a fearful human's intent. His posturing contained a lot of teeth. \textit{And should you choose the path of confrontation, both of us will come out worse for it. You know there are greater evils lurking that you need to ready yourselves for, and this is not a fight you want to take. It is not a fight you will win without consequence. We, in consideration—} Kara barely suppressed a laugh— "only ask that we get to choose the chains we are put in. That is fair, no?"

"\textit{Afterall,}" Yang Kurama continued through his chosen jinchūriki as he touched the birthmarks on her cheeks, "\textit{We have raised the vessel in the womb of its mother. It is only fitting if we get to utilise it.}\n
The time-traveller shrugged. "There is no circumstance where you will come out ahead. \textbf{Cease these trivialities and give in.}\n
"I want to be in charge of the sealing." Minato raised.

"\textbf{No. You will bring us the child} or set him free." The jinchūriki cocked her head. "Besides, you will reinforce the seal either way. We will have our control, and you will have yours."

The Yondaime's hands clenched and his reply was sharp: "Fine."

"\textbf{Then we have an accord.}" They crossed their arms in satisfaction before returning to their Yin, relishing in their last moments of wholeness before they would be separated again. In the mindscape, they were curled around each other with Kara at their centre, and they breathed the same breaths; in synchrony; their differences inconsequential.

'I think I'll miss you;' Kara said quietly, pressing her back deeper into his fur, inhaling the scent of earth and a fire's burn and felt his fur tickle her cheeks. She let her own aura darkened with the Yin's colours.

'Teach your younger better,' he murmured back. 'That will be repayment enough.'

'Of course. I'll make sure they'll love you and constantly pester you,' she teased. \textit{You won't be alone in this, never again.}\n
The Yang half snorted. 'Say your prayers. They are more insufferable when they are younger with their screaming and lack of logic.\n
'I am aware. Although it seems like they did not realise my existence until someone brought their attention to me. I have your memories, fragmented in reformation… however odd that is.'

'Do not try to be what I was,' Yang advised Yin. 'It is not your current nature. Our knowledge already negates it.'

'That much is true, but there is always interest in studying the probabilities.' His vermilion eyes
gleamed knowingly.

'Oh yes. That is part of the entertainment.'

Kara rolled her eyes when the silent implications went past her head. She suddenly understood why twin mentality could be insufferable. She felt acute pity for her old Kumo comrades.

Sensing that her teacher had returned, she opened her vermillion eyes and disentangled from the Yin. Discreetly, she wiped the sweat forming on her palms and checked for any forming black lines. What would happen when two similar souls meet?

*One way to find out.*

"Hand her over."

"Him." Minato corrected, catching the jinchūriki's unbidden surprise.

*What?* She almost blurted out, confused by the change in gender. If her fa-teacher hadn't held onto Naruto firmly, she would have dropped *him*.

*Him.* What has she *done*?

But ever so stiffly, she held on, bringing the child closer to her chest to support his neck better.

(She held irrefutable evidence of change; ironically herself. *Himself.* And Kara wanted to laugh and cry and *scream* at the choices she has ruined; the matters she will place upon his shoulders; the terrible privilege of a jinchūriki and how he was tied to her. She will apologise for the rest of her life.)

He scrutinised her, watching as the surprise was pushed behind a nonchalant mask. "Do you swear that no harm will come to my child?"

"The sealing will hurt, but I swear to you, Yondaime, I have no intention to hurt the child. They are the only ones who don't deserve the blame and pain, but they are often the ones at its receiving end." *I would know,* she thought mournfully, casting a look at her bright ensemble. *I lived through it.*

And somehow, the pain reflected on her face was uncomfortably familiar. Minato tried to identity what it was only to come up short, with more questions than answers, and at the back of his mind, disbelief.

But he found himself handing over his child with a less burdened heart, not even blinking as her hands withdrew back into the barrier and cradled the child closer. As a show of faith, Kara backed away with the baby in view before settling Naruto on the ground to run through the hand seals with both hands.

*His incredulity heightened. How did she—*  

*No. It's different. That's not the Hakke no Fūin Shiki.* His own hands ran through the lengthy chain of commands without chakra input to compare his works and hers. *But if she isn't going to summon the Shinigami, how will she provide for the expenditure needed for the initial sealing?*

*This is a mistake,* his pupils dilated, feet moving closer in subconscious protest. *She's going to end up killing herself to complete the process.*

But the teacher could not intercept without electrocuting himself. Her defences were formidable;
letting nothing in or out, and he doesn't want to imagine the consequences the jinchūriki had installed in the scenario of someone attacking it. He couldn't interrupt her either, lest he wanted her slim chances of success to lower.

Helplessly, he watched as Naruto was placed in the conjured cradle with utmost care and watched as the girl murmured something to his child. He could not read her lips from where he stood but his curiosity was quickly replaced with fear when the Bijuu trotted over to settle around the set-up. Its tails covered his son like a blanket and wrapped around her shoulders, to which she caressed as if she appreciated the support.

*How is this possible?* Minato pondered as he witnessed the cooperation between human and beast. The jinchūriki clearly *cared* for her Bijuu, and suddenly the supposed friendship between Killer Bee and the Eight Tails seemed less like rumours and more akin to truth. His mastery over his forms would then make sense, but the Kumo-nin paled against the jinchūriki in front of him. She glowed with its powers as if it was her affinity, letting it suffuse her so thoroughly he could not make out one from other, or where it began and ended— but it was unimportant compared to the fact that they just… *were.*

*Could my own son be like that too?*

But the preparation was not over. The girl took out another two scrolls and unfurled it and ignited it with her blood.

*Eight Trigrams, five participants.* He looked at the scrolls she placed beside his child in suspicion, and how they seemed to make the caster heavier and brimming with a different energy.

Then, when she touched Naruto's forehead, it begun: the gold she shrouded herself with was suddenly sucked back and superseded by blue, sheeting her so intensely that it darkened to a navy. The quality of it was distorted by the distance and the barriers cast, but it was terrifying thick. She trembled, but did not stop, her colours wrapping around the Kyuubi, familiar with his dimensions and travelling the paths her chains once made.

The Kyuubi roared and moaned as he was forcefully liquified – the rate in which the chakra was leaving her now frighteningly fast – before it was pushed into her new-born son. The Fūinjutsu mistress was crying tears of blood, he realised belatedly, but her emotions only served to strengthen the process and help her persevere.

"She's actually doing it alone," Minato marvelled out loud, wanting to believe that her act would succeed. *But why is she crying? Why is she doing this?*

Her barriers started to whine and lose its lustre. It *cracked,* fissures running across the entire dome, threatening to give. He doesn't know if the last moan was the Bijuu or jinchūriki or perhaps both, but the sound was one of nightmares; of longing and heartbreak, and pain. When the last sequence was complete, and she visibly turned the lock shut, everything *collapsed.*

There was a flash of bright light and the scalding sensation of shards and a shockwave of chakra hitting him, but everything was done.

At its epicentre, Namikaze-Uzumaki Naruto laid crying out his existence as if he was reborn, bearing a seal on his stomach. It pulsed its last few beats in inky blackness before it sunk into his skin, the progress irreversible. Surrounding him was a Kyuubi-shaped indent and three blacked out spots, with the jinchūriki nowhere to be seen.

Gingerly, Minato picked his child up to soothe him. He blinked owlishly, trying to process what had
happened, only to be left with no answers but with the absolute certainty he had found the key Jiraiya spoke of.

He sighed, resting his head against his child. He was so tired.

...

...

"How can there be two?" One tittered, his anxiety a din in the dark. His hands clasped and unclasped, akin to roots twining and snarled; stuck between the awkward transit of connectedness and branching out.

"But they are." His Other replied, words spat out in a hiss. Then, in another voice, calmer and wary of its longer existence: "But who? From where? Will they bring ruin to my plans?"

"Ours?"

The other's eye narrowed unnaturally at the correction. His eye was closer to an orb than organ, bulging from the shadow of socket, too round and bright like lanterns. It glowed, and One was blinded by its opulence, shrinking into himself and the darkness. Closer. More like One than two; a half; not creation.

"We need to know."

"We need to know."

"Where did she come from?"

"Where is the Kyuubi now?"

"Plans must go on."

"Yes, plans," One agreed eagerly, subservience a quagmire he willingly sunk into. Thrived in, if nothing else. He belonged. His frame curled around a sunken form of bone and sinew with cords extending out of him like he was caught in the centre of a spider web. They have nourished each other, but One was destined to be his tomb. He was breathless and senseless.

"You know what to do."

"Yes, yes."

"There can only be One."

One pulled himself apart and joined his other.

"Only ever One."

Chapter End Notes

Beta'd by the beautiful wecantgiggleitsacrimescene
This chapter was a pain in the ass to write. I shit you not, I went through perspectives like it was clothes. Like do I continue with Biwako? Focus on Minato? Completely omit the birthing scene? Write the scene between Minato and Tobi?

And somehow I just settled on the jinchuriki (Kushina and Kara) with dashes of Minato and Kurama. It worked out. I hope it was sufficient. I needed this to make sense or else everything that follows will just be weird. Also, the next few chapters will be a headache with the amount of legwork needed to make a proper foundation for the new act. (Yeah, I classify my timeline by before and after birth.) I apologise in advance if I go MIA for a bit to churn out 3 chapters in a row before I post something xD

Blergh. I'm going to stop rambling and instead thank you guys instead!

THANK YOU FOR 983 KUDOS AND OVER 25K VIEWS. MY HANDS ARE SWEATING. SO ARE MY EYES.
I DON’T KNOW WHY THIS STORY HAS SO MUCH TRACTION BUT THANK YOU

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!