

you have no control

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/6522316) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/6522316>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	Gen
Fandom:	Naruto
Characters:	Hatake Kakashi , Hyuuga Neji , Gaara (Naruto) , Uzumaki Naruto
Additional Tags:	Time Travel , Fix-It
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of history has its eyes on you
Collections:	kakashinobi , Road to Nowhere Discord Recs , Def_Read_Again
Stats:	Published: 2016-04-11 Completed: 2016-04-21 Words: 17,210 Chapters: 4/4

you have no control

by [tasalmalin](#)

Summary

Sasuke kills Itachi, but this time he joins forces with the remaining Uchiha to seek vengeance on Konoha. It's a disaster for the village. The survivors are scattered, desperate, falling one by one. They need a miracle.

Notes

Warnings: This is a setup for a time travel story. This part of the story features multiple, major character deaths, descriptions of war-related injuries, references to PTSD, suicidal thoughts, and suicide.

Note: Titles from History Has Its Eyes On You from the Hamilton Soundtrack by Lin-Manuel Miranda

Chapter 1

Naruto's disappointment is a tangible thing as they slowly make their way back to Konoha. Every few hours, someone will look at his bent back, his slumped shoulders, and open their mouth to say something. Always, they remain silent. What is there to say?

If only the masked ninja hadn't chosen just that moment to play with them?

If only the brothers' showdown had lasted a little longer?

If only Sasuke hadn't left the village in the first place?

But that last thought is forbidden in Naruto's presence.

Even though Kakashi can't be the only one who's thinking it.

Naruto drops back to walk by Kakashi, visibly drooping.

Kakashi braces himself.

"I just... I thought he'd come back," Naruto mumbles.

Kakashi sort of shrugs. He's terrible at this kind of thing.

"After he killed his brother," Naruto clarifies, in case Kakashi is both blind and stupid. "I thought he'd come back."

Kakashi had nursed a very private hope that that would be the case, but he hadn't believed it, not really. Sometimes he really, really hates being right.

The silence stretches.

"He didn't," Kakashi says finally, because what else is there to say?

Naruto forces a smile. It's painful to look at. "I'm still going to bring him back," he says. "I never go back on my word."

Kakashi knows, probably better than anyone, how much of a betrayal this is for Naruto, one in a long series of them. Watching him try to put on a brave face, to summon up that sunny pigheadedness that he gets from both his parents, he could almost come to hate Sasuke.

~*~

Kakashi jerks out of an uneasy sleep. Something is wrong.

He's up and moving before he's really even awake, the instincts of wartime rising to the fore even though it's been years since the last war ended.

No alarms have sounded, and there's only the usual early-morning sounds, a faint mist already dissipating as the sun rises.

Wait. It's too early for sunrise.

Kakashi blinks, and it's the Hyuuga compound. It's on fire.

He's halfway out the window when the alarm goes off, and by the time he reaches the compound a dozen others have joined him, with more going to their assigned posts. Jiraiya's sacrifice gave them a precious few days to try and prepare, and this attack is expected.

For all the good it'll do, Kakashi thinks privately. An enemy that could take down Jiraiya-sensei... just what is this Pein, anyway?

Kakashi searches the smoke and flames for survivors, for the flash of orange hair or metal accessories that the toad elder assured them characterized the various Peins.

He resolutely does not linger over the charred bodies.

And then everything gets a hundred times worse.

"Sasuke!?"

His former student rolls his eyes, not the least bit repentant, and shoots one last, unnecessary fireball into the destroyed compound before moving off.

Kakashi stands there stupidly for a full twenty seconds.

Then he hardens his expression, and his heart. He is a ten-year ANBU veteran, one of the most skilled assassins in Konoha, and however good Sasuke thinks he is, whatever is going through his thick skull, it doesn't matter.

The Hound will find him.

~*~

Hound passes by battle after battle, a silent, deadly shadow. Sasuke may be no match for him, but anyone else might have trouble with those Sharingan eyes. He has a responsibility, a clear goal.

He finally spots him, closing in on the Hokage Tower.

Arrogance, Hound thinks, sneering.

Good.

He has a perfect shot at Sasuke's unguarded back, when he is interrupted.

"Just like I thought."

It's the masked ninja from before, the one who kept them from reaching Sasuke in time.

Sasuke turns, startled. He hadn't heard either of them coming up behind him.

"I knew if I stayed with him, I'd run into you," the masked ninja says, his tone one of childish mockery. "Friend-killer Kakashi."

No one's called him that to his face in a long time, but deep in the persona of the Hound, Kakashi is unshaken.

"Leave this village," he says.

The ninja shakes his head. "Oh, Kakashi. All that genius, and still so stupid. Don't you get it? Don't you see? There *is* no village. This is the end of Konohagakure."

"I will not allow you to destroy this village."

The masked ninja laughs, high-pitched and more than a little crazy.

Hound gauges the distance between himself and his quarry. He might be able to reach Sasuke, even with the element of surprise gone. Sasuke doesn't seem to notice his silent assessment, but the other shinobi does.

"Get out of here, boy," the masked ninja says, cutting off his laughter mid-cackle, suddenly deadly serious.

Sasuke actually pouts. "I don't need any help," he says. "I can take him."

Hound and the masked ninja both scoff. They glance at each other, startled by the moment of synchronicity.

"I thought you were going after Danzou," the masked ninja says.

Sasuke's face twists with hate. "Yes," he says, and sprints away.

He is still such a child, easily manipulated by his emotions.

Also, how the hell did Sasuke learn about Danzou? The old warhawk has been under house arrest since Sasuke was a young child... actually, almost to the day since Sasuke was so violently orphaned.

Hound's calm is disturbed, but it quickly settles again. It doesn't matter now.

"Ah, there's that much-vaunted genius," the masked ninja says, like he can read the thoughts in his head. "Yes, our Sasuke has reason to hate this village."

There is no reason that justifies those charred bodies, children caught sleeping in their beds. Hound refuses to be distracted. "If I must go through you first, I will."

The lone, visible eye goes cold. "You can try."

They fight.

The masked ninja, Hound quickly learns, is amazing. They are well-matched, Sharingan for Sharingan, and he is forced to use all his strength and skill just to keep from dying. The other ninja's ability to phase in and out of the physical plane is an almost-perfect defense, and Kakashi can't seem to get enough time to see if it's faster than his Kamui. His mind is working overtime, analyzing and attempting to formulate a counter.

Well, he has one glaring weakness, one that Hound is in a position to recognize.

A shinobi who wears a mask has something that he wants to hide, usually from himself.

Once he's set his mind to it, it's mere minutes before shattered pieces of a spiral mask are crashing to the ground.

Along with everything Kakashi thought he knew.

“O—Obito?”

He is paralyzed with shock, his ANBU calm shattered, an easy target.

But Obito, and who else could it be, is too busy laughing to take advantage. He's bent almost double, positively howling with mirth. But his eyes, the Sharingan to match Kakashi's and what can only be the Rinnegan, set in a mass of thick scars, are sharp and cruel.

Kakashi's thoughts are caught in a constant loop, *Obito is alive Obito is alive Obito is alive...*

Obito's laughter finally comes to a hiccupping end, and he eyes Kakashi with disgust. “This is just disappointing,” he says. “I went through hell for this?”

Kakashi attempts some kind of response, but the words don't make it past his throat.

Obito is walking toward him, kunai drawn, and Kakashi can't bring himself to move.

He's already looking into the spirit world when an armguard appears in front of his face.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Anko screams, right in his ear.

It's Tenzou who's blocking the descending kunai. Before Kakashi can muster a warning, assuming he could even voice it, Obito phases right through the armor and slits Tenzou's throat.

Tenzou makes one, surprised sort of gurgle and dies.

Kakashi still can't move, even as his kohai's blood splatters warm across his face.

“There, that's better,” Obito says, wiping the kunai on Kakashi's flak jacket. “Everyone should be able to see the kind of monster you are.”

Kakashi closes his eyes. Obito must know, somehow. He must know about Rin, and how she died. How Kakashi killed her. Kakashi has often wondered what Obito's judgment would be.

At least he doesn't have to wonder anymore.

He feels someone grab his elbow, then his opposite shoulder, and suddenly he's yanked sideways, caught up in the familiar-forgotten pull of sensei's Hiraishin no Jutsu.

He reappears outside the hospital, blinks away the memories of a pristine white cloak with red flames. He left Obito to die alone, and he has no one but himself to blame if Obito hates him now. But sensei is dead, Kakashi heard his last breath with his own ears, carried his cooling body to lay it beside his wife in his own arms. Genma and Raidou and Iwashii must have found him, and mistakenly thought Kakashi could contribute meaningfully to the village's defense.

Ignoring the obvious hint, Kakashi turns away from the door, slipping easily through the crowd of injured and panicking people, leaping up to the roof to try and escape the crush.

He still hasn't seen any sign of Pein. Is this just the vanguard?

There's someone standing on the other side of the roof.

Some distant part of his brain that isn't overloaded with shock starts ticking over. The hospital isn't the tallest building in Konoha, that's the Hokage Tower, but it does have the best view of the stone faces, and it has strategic value as a vantage point, not to mention the devastation that would result from attacking the building itself.

There should be a guard up here. A substantial guard. And this man is no Konoha ninja, with his eye-catching but decidedly old-fashioned armor.

He turns his head slightly, giving Kakashi a view of his profile.

Kakashi chokes on air. He was mistaken; it is a Konoha ninja. Sort of. He knows that face, he's seen it a thousand times in the ANBU mess. Konoha's very first missing nin.

Uchiha Madara.

Exactly how many Uchiha are going to appear today? Kakashi wonders, a little hysterically. Is Itachi running around somewhere? Fugaku? No, Kakashi saw that body himself, in the hellish clean-up after the Massacre. Who founded the Uchiha clan? Kakashi can't remember.

He can't imagine what he might have done, in the face of a shinobi legend, but that doesn't stop him from regretting his pathetic non-action for the rest of his life.

Madara raises his hands, releases some insane jutsu that Kakashi has never seen before and hopes to never see again, and the entire mountain collapses.

It's not vaporized or anything, it's still obviously a mountain, but the faces are distorted beyond recognition, and the chambers inside, full of children, civilians, the elderly, and the ninja to keep them safe, are certainly destroyed, the people inside crushed in an instant.

It's such an utterly pointless loss of life.

He has to... he has to do *something*. It's too late to stop Madara's attack, not that Kakashi is arrogant enough to think that such a shinobi would waste a single second worrying about someone of Kakashi's caliber. Can Madara be stopped at all? How the fuck is he even alive? He has to be well over a hundred years old.

Kakashi's feet turn to the Hokage Tower, and the rest of him goes with them. This is a hopeless battle.

Naruto would punch him if he could hear Kakashi's thoughts now. But Naruto isn't here.

Not many people know the village warning codes, and fewer still have access to the sound system that projects them, but Kakashi was a student of the Fourth Hokage and a member of the Hokage's Elite Guard. He knows.

He encounters no one at the Tower, which would worry him if he were allowing himself to feel worry, and quickly enters a sequence that has never been used in the village's too-short history.

Flee. Retreat. Escape.

He fancies that he can feel the village holding its breath, but he doesn't wait to see what happens. He still has two students left, and nothing and no one will keep him from ensuring their safety.

He goes for Sakura first, because Naruto's on the other side of the world, and the hospital is close by and he's reasonably sure she'll be there.

She is.

"Leave him," he says, pulling her away from a patient with a shattered femur.

"What..."

"The village is lost," he says bluntly. "They've sounded a retreat."

All the blood drains out of her face. "But..." She gestures vaguely at the moaning, dying people around her.

"Sakura," he says, looking her right in the eye. "We have to go now."

She trembles, swallows. She seems to age ten years right before his eyes. "Okay."

Naruto isn't in any immediate danger, off training with the toads on Mt. Myoboku, but it's hardly much of a relief given the degree of danger he's *about* to be in. Kakashi thinks he remembers someone sending for him, but either he's misremembering or the message got lost somehow, and Kakashi can't help but be grateful. He can't imagine trying to drag Naruto away from both the village and Sasuke.

As he and Sakura run through the village, Kakashi finally starts to get a picture of what is happening here. There don't seem to be any enemy shinobi about, no signs of the mysterious

Pein or any of the three Uchiha he knows are around somewhere. Instead, there's a sea of bizarre white constructs, some kind of animated flesh with no independent thought and little skill. What they do have is volume, and someone with a brain is backing them up because as often as not one will suddenly explode from the inside. Some jutsu of Madara's? He doesn't think Obito or Sasuke knew anything like this, but it's pathetically obvious that he didn't know either of them at all.

The village isn't prepared to defend against this kind of mindless, unending horde, and just because he can't see them doesn't mean the Uchiha aren't wreaking havoc somewhere else. Sasuke certainly managed the Hyuuga compound well enough.

It's obvious that Sakura has been in the hospital the whole time, because she is looking around at the devastation with horror.

The white constructs are either too stupid or too uncoordinated to get up on the roofs, so where buildings are still standing, there's a path for the mobile shinobi.

Kakashi doubts that a single civilian will survive this madness.

They pick up survivors along the way, many of them acquaintances of Sakura's who she greets with obvious relief. At one point Ino-Shika-Cho seniors join them, and Shikaku speeds up to run next to Kakashi.

"Do you have any information?" he asks curtly.

"We have a complete security failure," Kakashi says, just as bluntly. "I haven't seen any signs of Pein, but there are three dead Uchiha out there: Sasuke, Obito, and Madara."

A slow blink is Shikaku's only reaction to this news. "So that's how they got in without breaching any of the perimeter defenses. They probably know the village better than we do." He swears. "And Obito and Sasuke were never declared missing nin, so they wouldn't have triggered the wards."

"Sasuke is too young to know about any of the safehouses, but Obito isn't," Kakashi says, because he can't deal with the ward issue. He should have pushed after Sasuke's betrayal, should have gone after him personally, should have... "And who knows what Madara might know."

"There are one or two," Shikaku says, "that were established after Obito... after the last war. I'll take this group. You have to report to the Hokage."

Kakashi absolutely does not want to report to the Hokage, somehow it will make his catastrophic failures seem more real, but he just nods and changes direction, heading for the worst of the fighting.

Tsunade-hime is there of course, screaming orders and receiving reports in between crushing the constructs by the dozen with whatever's nearest at hand.

Like Kakashi's arrival is a signal, she turns the perimeter defense over to the remains of her personal ANBU guard, and Kakashi joins the crowd around her. Gai and Kurenai are there, and all the village elders, including Danzou.

Kakashi bites back the urge to demand answers that hardly matter anymore.

"Who the hell rang that damn bell?" Tsunade demands.

Kakashi takes a tiny step forward.

"At least someone in this village has the brains they were born with," she says, kicking a wall twice her size into an incoming construct without breaking eye contact. "I'm officially endorsing the evacuation. Get everyone out that you can. Shikaku has a few safehouses in mind; Inoichi will broadcast them as soon as it's safe to do so. Until then, word of mouth only. We'll start with Number 203."

There are a few faint protests, but the suddenness of the attack, the sheer scale of the devastation, have sucked the heart right out of them.

Then Madara is there, and her mouth sets in a grim, tight line as chakra spirals out from the seal on her forehead. She whirls on Kakashi suddenly, and he takes a reflexive step back.

She grabs him, plants a totally unexpected kiss on his masked cheek, and presses something into his hand. "Run," she whispers in his ear.

He runs, and he doesn't look to see who follows.

Their little group is still far from the village walls when Obito catches up with them, eyes glittering with madness.

"Oh, no, Kakashi, you're not going anywhere," he says.

"Keep going," he orders. "It's me he wants."

Gai and Kurenai give him identical, stubborn looks. Danzou doesn't bother looking at him, but he also doesn't stop, running with more agility than a man of his age and with his injuries should really be capable of.

Kakashi glares at Kurenai until she drops her eyes, lets herself be tugged along by some chuunin Kakashi doesn't know.

That isn't going to work on Gai, though.

Another figure touches down beside Obito.

"Running away, sensei?" Sasuke taunts.

Kakashi closes his eyes, unable to face Gai while his student and teammate threaten them and everything they stand for with death and destruction.

“Go away, brat,” Obito says.

It’s probably too much to hope for that they’ll just kill each other off.

“I have just as much a right to be here as you!” Sasuke says.

“Please,” Kakashi says, ignoring the squabbling. He rests his hands on Gai’s chest, pleading with him to just go, because there’s no reason that they both have to die here.

He opens his eyes, because for once Gai is silent, and he has to know what he is thinking.

Gai isn’t looking at him.

Kakashi follows his gaze to his own hands, which are clutching Tsunade’s last gift to him.

It’s the Hokage hat.

Gai raises his eyes to meet Kakashi’s, and Kakashi doesn’t know if he wants to scream or cry.

Gai pats his hands, takes a small step back, and opens all eight inner gates at once.

Kakashi runs, and finds that he still has enough breath to scream *and* cry.

Chapter 2

About three hundred ninja make it to the rendezvous, along with a bare dozen civilians. Three hundred and twelve, out of a population in the tens of thousands.

Kakashi turns the Hokage mantle over and over in his hands.

He's been getting haphazard reports all day. Apparently the Uchiha are a talkative bunch.

Madara is caught up in some mad vengeance against the Shodaime, or possibly the Nidaime, or maybe it's his own clan. Everyone he hates is dead, or his ally, so what the fuck he even wants is anyone's guess. No one has figured out how he's still alive.

Obito has sworn vengeance against Kakashi, and incidentally the village, for taking Rin from him. Once he was unmasked, he announced it to everyone he encountered. Kakashi suspects that Obito's primary goal is for Kakashi to suffer as much as possible. If it is, he's succeeding.

As for Sasuke—and there's definitely a theme here, Kakashi thinks with grim humor—he has sworn vengeance on Danzou, convinced by some unknown source that he ordered his clan's destruction and killed his brother, never mind that that last was Sasuke himself, and the village for daring to live while Sasuke was suffering.

It is only now, sitting in a dirty tent deep underground surrounded by people too deeply in shock even to mourn, that Kakashi can begin to understand that kind of thinking.

All the loss he's suffered, all the upheavals he's weathered, but it's only now that his heart can begin to embrace that kind of hate.

He smiles, and it is not a pleasant smile. He will never forgive, never forget.

"Hokage-sama," someone calls, stomping their feet in lieu of knocking. You can't really knock on a tent anyway.

Kakashi attempts to compose his face into something fit for company, grateful for his mask because he's pretty sure he fails.

It's Anko, so his efforts were wasted anyway. She still has blood stains around her collar, Tenzou's blood.

Come to think of it, so does Kakashi.

"Danzou's agitating," she says. "You need to say something. People are starting to panic."

Kakashi's grip tightens on the damn hat, cursing Tsunade for laying this burden on him and himself for his utter inadequacy for the task.

Then he smooths out the wrinkles, rises, and places it on his head.

“Let’s go.”

Danzou is indeed agitating, trying to raise support for one of his hideous schemes “for the greater good”. Kakashi doesn’t have to hear to know what he’s doing.

“Haven’t you done enough?” Kakashi asks, his voice ringing in the sudden, echoing silence.

“What was that, boy?” Danzou asks, the firelight glittering in his lone eye.

“We all heard that you were responsible for the Uchiha Massacre,” Kakashi says bluntly. The time for secrets is long past.

“You have no evidence,” Danzou says. “The word of liars and murderers.”

That’s a bit rich, Kakashi thinks. He forces himself to laugh. “Really? You want to go that route?”

For a moment, there’s a hesitation in Danzou’s eyes. And that’s when Kakashi knows it’s the truth.

The laugh is a little less forced this time, but not any nicer. “Then allow me to draw on an example that I can validate personally. In the wake of the Fourth Hokage’s death, when Konoha was vulnerable, did you or did you not conspire to overthrow the Third Hokage so you could take his place? Even going so far as to order the ANBU to betray and assassinate him?”

There’s a burst of hushed murmuring. All heads swing to look at Danzou.

For a moment, there’s the deadly fury of a dangerous shinobi in his eye. He glances at the crowd, reading the room as easily as Kakashi is. “He was weak,” Danzou says. “He was poisoning this village.”

More murmuring, louder, shocked. But people are too worn and emotionally exhausted to get truly upset. As Danzou must have anticipated.

Danzou fixes Kakashi with a sly, unpleasant look. “I warned him,” he says. “When the Nine-Tailed Fox destroyed the village, I told Sarutobi that the Uchiha were involved. I confined them all to the village, but one got away. That masked ninja is the one who killed the Fourth Hokage.”

Kakashi fights to keep any expression off his face. He hadn’t known that. Obito... sensei...

Danzou smiles, knowing he’s scored a direct hit. “I warned Sarutobi, but he was sure we could all just ‘get along’, and then his policies led us to the very brink of civil war. If I hadn’t acted as I did, the Uchiha would have turned on the village... and I don’t think I need to tell anyone how devastating that would have been.” Danzou spreads his good arm in a gesture of helplessness. “I did everything I could to contain the Uchiha threat, but I was thwarted at every turn, and now look where it has led.”

“Don’t put all the blame on others,” Sakura says, her voice ringing through the complete silence following Danzou’s little speech. “You need to take responsibility for your own actions.”

Danzou turns to look at her. “Ah, yes. Still defending your lover?”

Sakura turns red, but she isn’t a little girl anymore. “Of course I’m not defending him,” she says, ignoring the insinuation about being lovers. “What he did was disgusting. It’s unforgivable. But you aren’t any better.”

There are some in the room who will believe Danzou no matter what he’s done, because they agree with his hardline approach, or because he is older and scarier than Kakashi and they’re frightened. The man is ten times wiler than Kakashi could ever hope to be, and worse is that he knows it. His personal troops, from the should-have-been-disbanded ROOT, are fresh and strong and more numerous than the regular forces.

Suspiciously so.

For the second time today, Kakashi recognizes a losing battle when he sees it.

He takes a step forward, letting the fire reflect off the symbol of his (unofficial) office. “I can say that you are wrong,” he says, and Danzou frowns, thrown by the calm resolve in Kakashi’s voice. He’s never understood Kakashi at all. “I can say that you are destroying this village as much as the Uchiha with your outdated philosophies. But nothing I say or do will change your mind. And neither,” he raises his voice, forcing everyone to hear him, “will you change mine. I believe in my sensei’s teachings, in the Will of Fire that burns brightly at the center of this village. Even if the village itself is destroyed, it will continue to live on so long as there are those who believe in it.”

Some of the younger generation are nodding along. Sakura has actually summoned a smile from somewhere.

Danzou opens his mouth, but Kakashi doesn’t let him interrupt.

“We know the Akatsuki’s goal,” he says. “They will come for the Jinchuuriki.”

“It’s safe on Mt. Myoboku,” Danzou swiftly interrupts.

Kakashi gives him the long, scornful look that such idiocy deserves, even as several people protest the ‘it’. “Safe? It’s only a matter of time before someone talks, or one of the enemy realizes where he must be. Madara was a famed leader, and by all accounts a brilliant tactician. Naruto doesn’t even know that he needs to hide.”

Someone makes a pained noise, a female, though Kakashi can’t be sure that it was Sakura. Well, he’s not looking forward to breaking the news to Naruto either.

“He must stay safe as long as possible,” Danzou insists. “That’s why no message made it through.”

“Already usurping the Hokage’s authority?” Kakashi asks dryly. It doesn’t even really matter, it’s what he should have expected from Danzou.

Danzou’s eye glitters with hate.

Kakashi has seen worse. “I am going to warn Naruto,” he says. “And we are going into hiding.”

He turns on his heel and marches out of the cavern, towards the dark and winding tunnels that lead to the outside.

There is stunned silence in his wake.

Kakashi counts his steps, forcing himself not to falter, not to second-guess himself. He is in as much danger in that cavern as he was in the village. Maybe even more, since Obito seems to delight in drawing out his suffering. Danzou won’t hesitate to eliminate his only rival, so he can lord his authority over the pitiful remnants that his machinations have reduced their once-great village to.

But it isn’t until he hears the sound of running footsteps that the rigid line of his shoulders starts to relax.

“Sensei, geez, how can you see a damn thing?” Sakura says.

“Pssh, are you a ninja or aren’t you?” That was Shikamaru, carrying an emergency torch as he picks his way carefully over the rocky ground.

By the time he’s made it out of the cave, Kakashi has collected thirteen people, more than he could have hoped for. All of Naruto’s little friends that made it out, including two of the dramatically-reduced Hyuuga clan, and a number of Kakashi’s own colleagues.

“I wouldn’t follow that guy out of a burning house,” Anko says.

Shikaku and Inoichi step up beside Kakashi, offering their wordless support, while Genma and Raidou take rearguard, scanning the area for threats.

“So how do we get to Mt. Myoboku?” Kurenai asks. “I thought the whole point of sending him there is that it’s a parallel dimension kind of thing.”

“That’s the easy part,” Kakashi says.

No one questions him, whether out of respect for his new position or sheer exhaustion.

“Genma, Raidou.”

They step up immediately, saluting as if... well, as if he were the Hokage.

Kakashi refuses to let it unsettle him.

“We need to make a circle,” Kakashi says.

Genma gets it immediately. “We’re going to use the Hiraishin?”

“Yes,” Kakashi says, herding everyone into a tight cluster. It will be awkward, for three people to circle nine adults, but he’s certainly not going to leave anyone behind.

“Uh, and there’s a marker on the mountain?” Genma asks.

“The Fourth could also summon toads,” Raidou reminds him.

“The marker is on Naruto’s body,” Kakashi says. “Once it’s placed, it never disappears. Naruto has been marked from the day of his birth.”

“Oh,” Genma says. He’s blessedly quiet for all of five seconds. “You know that… Iwashi…”

“Am I a student of the Fourth or aren’t I?” Kakashi asks, exasperated.

“Oh, right,” Genma says, and finally subsides into silence.

Of course, Kakashi’s track record with the Hiraishin is haphazard at best. Obito’s eye disrupted his chakra to such a degree that he basically had to relearn how to perform jutsu, and delicate sealwork he had to give up entirely. But there isn’t time to teach anyone else—Danzou isn’t going to take this blatant rebellion lying down, nevermind that *Kakashi* is the one who is Hokage here, so technically it’s Danzou who’s the rebel—so Kakashi will just have to manage. Somehow.

Maybe he should just rip the damn thing out and be done with it.

They get everything set up, and the younger generation shows a commendable maturity as they don’t demand an explanation for what exactly is about to happen.

Genma gives Kakashi a funny look as he starts sending his chakra down the seal’s pathways, trying to smooth it out by sheer force of will.

Then Danzou appears at the mouth of the cave, a contingent of ROOT members around him, and they’re out of time.

Kakashi grits his teeth and tries harder, willing his chakra to cooperate, just this once.

The Hyuuga prodigy—Meiji? Neji? Kakashi really should remember his name—reaches up and taps Kakashi’s shoulder, sealing off one of his chakra pathways.

And his chakra flows smoothly into the pattern and they’re gone in a flash.

As he probably should have guessed, they land in an undignified heap on top of Naruto.

“Hey guys!” Naruto says, and Kakashi locks the memory of his welcoming grin in his mind, just in case he never sees it again. “Miss me that much?”

Kakashi wavers on his feet. Naruto’s voice seems to be coming from the other end of a very long tunnel.

“Hey...” Naruto says. “Is everything alright?”

Kakashi passes out.

~*~

Kakashi is ashamed at how pathetically grateful he is that he slept through the entire ordeal of explaining the situation to Naruto and weathering his reaction. By the time he regains consciousness, all the shouting is over, and the only sign that anything has changed is the hard, dead look in Naruto’s eyes, one he tries to cover with his usual smiles.

That cold fire of hatred stirs again in his heart. If he can hate Sasuke, then he doesn’t have to think about hating Obito, because that way lies madness. It takes more effort than he wants to admit to keep from pulling out a kunai and stabbing himself in his traitorous eye.

The impromptu council around his bedside is all blinking at him.

Right. He is the leader here.

“What was the question?” he asks.

“What do you think?” Anko asks. “There’s only one question: what’s the plan? What do we do now?”

“That was two questions,” Naruto mutters, but his heart isn’t in it.

“This is the situation,” Kakashi says, trying to buy himself some time to think. He tries not to cringe too obviously at being the focus of everyone’s complete attention. They’re all relying on him, and he doesn’t have a fucking clue what to do next. “We have to assume that Akatsuki’s goals remain the same. Although Pein never appeared, two of the attackers were wearing Akatsuki cloaks, so we can assume they’re affiliated with that group.”

“Right,” Inoichi says suddenly. “You didn’t hear. Tsunade-sama...” there’s a brief moment of silence, but Inoichi doesn’t let it linger “...she insisted that I remain in contact with her, so she could pass on as much information as possible. I’m still not certain of many of the details, but it seems that Pein had the ability to raise the dead, a true resurrection, not just the Nidaime’s Edo Tensei. He sacrificed himself, or was made to sacrifice himself, in order to restore Madara to life. This was always one of Akatsuki’s main goals, according to Madara.”

“Alright,” Kakashi says. “Wherever he came from, we know that he will come for the Jinchuuriki. If our information is correct, there are only two left: Killer B and Naruto. It would be too tempting a target to have both of them in the same place, but we need to be in constant communication with the Raikage. At the very least, he needs to know what happened.”

“I can’t reach him from here, assuming he would listen,” Inoichi says.

“We can send Kurenai,” Shikaku says.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Kurenai demands.

Shikaku looks at Kakashi, who looks at Sakura.

Sakura takes a deep breath. “Kurenai-sensei, you can’t have your baby on the run,” she says gently. “Frankly I’m amazed that all this... this, hasn’t sent you into premature labor.”

Kurenai slumps. “I know, you’re right. I just... I don’t want to be sitting somewhere safe when the village needs me. That’s not why I became a ninja.”

“How do you think I feel?” Naruto asks bitterly. “I’m just going to sit here while everyone else fights, right sensei?”

Kakashi immediately shakes his head. “No, it isn’t fair of us to dump our problems on the toads. None of us will be fighting, not the way you’re thinking. Our number one priority is now to keep Naruto out of Akatsuki hands for as long as possible. The course of the war—and a war is what it is—will have to be decided by the other villages. And Kurenai, you’re not getting an easy job. You have to make the Raikage understand the situation, convince him to cooperate with the remaining hidden villages.”

“I’ll go, too,” Shikaku says. “The Tsuchikage and the Raikage can’t even be in the same room together, let alone coordinate a joint assault.”

“Right,” Kurenai says, some fire coming back to her eyes. “I’ll have those two braiding each other’s hair by the time this little one is born.”

That wasn’t exactly what Kakashi had in mind, but it seems like a sound plan so he just rolls with it. “As for the rest of us, we need to go into hiding. But we will also have to be mobile; our enemy is formidable, so we can’t risk getting comfortable in any one place.” He’s not saying anything of substance at this point, but although his mind is working furiously he can’t think of where to go. The whole of Fire Country is basically closed to them, with three Uchiha standing in opposition, and he doesn’t know the terrain of the other nations well enough for their purposes.

“Hey,” Naruto says. “Why don’t we ask Gaara for help?”

Kakashi turns slowly to look at him. “Naruto. That’s an *excellent* idea.”

~*~

Kakashi explains the situation to the Toad Elders personally, and he politely pretends not to notice their gratitude that this very human problem is taking itself elsewhere. They had been extremely close with Jiraiya, but they have more than honored that tie, and now they prefer to look to their own affairs.

Kakashi bears them no grudge.

They are also kind enough to use their summoning techniques to send Kurenai and Shikaku directly to the Raikage’s doorstep, and Kakashi’s own group to the Godaime Kazekage’s office.

“Hmm,” Gaara says, not even blinking at their abrupt appearance.

“Well he hasn’t killed them yet,” Inoichi says, in the dreamy tone that means most of his attention is on the mental realm.

“I still could,” Gaara says.

“You can’t just barge in here!” one of the Suna ninja protests, taking an aggressive step forward.

Gaara raises a hand, and the man immediately subsides. “You have news for me?” His sharp eyes miss nothing, from their filthy, disheveled state to the noticeable gloom on everyone’s face. He stops at Kakashi’s new accessory. “Hokage-sama?”

~*~

Kakashi has to give the young Kazekage credit: he has more than earned his position. It takes several hours for Kakashi to explain everything—there’s no point in trying to keep village secrets anymore, and he has to backtrack a few times to explain about the rivalry between Hashirama and Madara, and his own disastrous first mission as a jounin. By that time it is late into the night, and the cool desert air stirs the Kazekage’s hair, the only movement in the almost-empty office.

By the time the sun has fully risen, Sunagakure is a seething hub of activity. The Konoha ninja had collapsed into bed, exhausted by their recent ordeal, and they are shocked by the change when they finally emerge.

“What’s going on?” Naruto asks.

Kakashi shrugs. He hasn’t slept. He’d been in a chakra-depletion-induced coma for two days on Mt. Myoboku, so he hadn’t really needed the rest.

He hasn’t tried that logic out on Sakura yet, though she’s been too distracted by... everything... to fuss the way she normally would.

He can only wait and see what the Kazekage has in mind. Hopefully, they will be granted some kind of local guide, maybe even a full squad, to show them the boltholes around Wind Country. With Sasori dead, none of the Akatsuki is especially familiar with the territory, and the desert is a deadly enemy all on its own for the unprepared.

He wanders into the apartments hastily assigned to them, vaguely wondering if he should do or say something. Minato-sensei would have said something. Kakashi doesn’t have the faintest fucking idea what words could possibly matter at this point, which is one of the many reasons that he is totally unequal to the role of Rokudaime Hokage.

Just around the corner, someone is crying.

Kakashi instinctively fades back into the shadows.

“It’s just—I don’t know!” Ino says, between sobs. “I don’t... I don’t want to dishonor his sacrifice, but I wish he was still here!”

“I know,” Inoichi says, hugging his daughter tightly. “I always told Chouza that that big heart of his would get him in trouble one day. It’s okay to be sad, but remember that Chouji and his father wouldn’t want you to dwell on their deaths. Remember their lives, and the good times you had with them.”

She sniffles.

Kakashi slips back down the corridor. Both of them had still been alive when he left to report to the Hokage. They must have stayed to fight off the hordes of constructs, to give the others the chance to escape. That was his decision, his responsibility.

He’s almost back outside, considering whether it would be cowardly to go and see if he can help Gaara somehow, when he runs into Team Gai, miraculously intact.

Well, the students, anyway.

The girl forces a smile, and all Kakashi can think of is that he’s such a pathetically inadequate friend that he only knows one of his students’ names. Gai probably knows—knew—every single detail about Team Seven.

Kakashi’s lip curls behind his mask. About Sakura and Naruto, that is.

“I expect he tried to take on Madara by himself?” the girl asks dryly.

Kakashi forces himself to match her tone. “I’m afraid the Hokage claimed that honor. He had to settle for Obito and Sasuke together.”

She laughs a little, mixed fondness and exasperation, and Lee offers a slightly shaky thumbs-up, even as tears stream unashamedly down his face. They’re going to be okay. Gai raised his team well.

Kakashi abruptly has to be elsewhere. He nods, probably too curtly, and tries not to actually run away.

When he stops, he finds that he isn’t alone. The Hyuuga boy has followed him.

“My name is Neji,” he says, without any trace of resentment for having to introduce himself to someone who’s known him for five years and specifically consulted on whether he was Konoha’s next Itachi.

And apparently Kakashi is just blurting out whatever’s in his head.

“It’s fine,” Neji says.

“Don’t you have something to do?” Kakashi asks.

“Yes,” Neji says.

“Somewhere else?” Kakashi prompts, unsubtly.

“I expect that Inoichi-san will be very busy trying to communicate with the rest of our group,” Neji says, undeterred.

“I don’t think he can actually reach that far,” Kakashi says absently. “During the last war he had some kind of device.”

“And you’ve assigned Genma-san and Raidou-san to guard Naruto,” Neji says.

That gets Kakashi’s attention. He thought he’d been subtle about that. Had Naruto noticed? No, he would have heard the complaints. “What’s your point?”

Neji straightens up and squares his shoulders. “Then as senior jounin, I ask you to consider me as second in command.”

Kakashi gives the kid a long look. He can’t be more than seventeen. At that age, Kakashi had already managed to kill off his entire team and irretrievably fuck up the future of the entire shinobi world.

Neji’s right about Inoichi being too busy for the job, but Genma and Raidou won’t be on guard duty every minute. They could do it.

“Alright,” Kakashi says. This is Gai’s student, after all.

“I expect I’m supposed to tell you that it wasn’t your fault,” Neji says.

Kakashi reflexively cringes. This is exactly why he’s avoiding everyone instead of acting like the disciplined leader they all need.

“But that Sasuke didn’t care who he killed. I went back for my cousin, Hitaro. Her body was so burned it crumbled when I touched it. She was two.” Neji looks Kakashi straight in the eye. “Do better.”

Kakashi rests a trembling hand on the young man’s shoulder. “I will.”

~*~

By evening, less than twenty-four hours after their sudden arrival, Gaara calls them back to his office.

Well, technically he only calls Kakashi, but the Konoha remnants have taken to clinging to each other, and they tend to travel as a group. Gaara is surrounded by ninja: his brother and sister, a handful of jounin Kakashi doesn’t know on sight, and what looks like the entire council of elders. He recognizes Chiyo-baasama’s brother, Ebizou, among them.

“We are taking the Uchiha’s actions as an act of war,” Gaara says, straight to the point as usual.

Kakashi raises an eyebrow. Because the Uchiha are Konoha ninja—Sasuke is even still on the duty rosters—he could easily have treated this as a Konoha problem. By this action, as Konoha’s ally, Suna is obligated to commit all its resources to their defense. It seems obvious

to Kakashi that this is far past being ‘just a Konoha problem’, but he can’t quite see, say, the Tsuchikage, making the same decision under the circumstances.

“You know that the village has been abandoned,” Kakashi feels obliged to point out.

“The Akatsuki is everyone’s problem,” Gaara says. “Their stated goal is world domination.” His face twists; Kakashi thinks the expression is supposed to be a smile. “Besides, having been killed by them once, I am inclined to take their threats seriously.”

Right. Well, Kakashi hadn’t particularly wanted to talk him out of helping them anyway.

“Temari, Kankurou.”

The two come to immediate attention.

“You will take the main troops and reinforce the Raikage’s defense of the Hachibi,” he says. “You may have to convince him to accept your aid.”

Kakashi coughs into his hand. The Raikage won’t even let his own shinobi back him up, let alone outsiders, and in the one letter he deigned to reply to about the Akatsuki threat he referred to the new Kazekage as an untested infant. That was him being polite.

“Oh, he’ll listen,” Temari says, and something in her expression convinces Kakashi that she will succeed.

“Baki, you will take the rest to the safehouses,” Gaara says. “Once there, seal yourselves off. We will erase the knowledge of the location from the mind of anyone who is not joining you.”

“Uh,” someone, presumably Baki, says. “Can we do that?”

“Naruto has volunteered Konoha’s assistance,” Gaara says.

Inoichi starts; obviously it’s the first time he’s heard of this.

Kakashi is pleased at this evidence that Naruto is regaining some of his usual personality. Even if it’s the annoying and intrusive part.

A few of the Suna nin are watching Inoichi, not bothering to veil their suspicion.

Kakashi can’t blame them; he doesn’t know if he would be willing to let a ninja from another village poke around in his mind.

“Is there a problem?” Gaara asks mildly.

There’s a chorus of “no, sir” and any potential opposition fails to manifest.

What a fascinating Kazekage this boy must be. And a boy he is; he still has the slight softness in the face of a child who hasn’t reached his full growth yet.

“You’re abandoning the village?” Kakashi asks. That seems kind of extreme.

“Yes,” Gaara says. He obviously doesn’t feel the need to explain himself. Not that he has to, especially not to Kakashi. “You have your orders.”

His calm finally wavers when he is squashed between his two siblings in a terribly awkward-looking hug.

“Don’t die,” Temari says.

“Again,” Kankurou adds.

The two smile weakly at each other.

Gaara shrugs them off. “You’re the ones going to the front.”

It looks a little abrupt, to Kakashi, but it’s not like he’s in any position to criticize.

By the time that little show is over, it’s just the Kazekage, the Konoha group, and four other ninja.

One of them is Ebizou-jii-sama, one is definitely of an age to have fought against his father, and one has a prominent facial scar that Kakashi is pretty sure he was responsible for, during the failed invasion four years ago. Yet there isn’t a trace of the (justified) hostility that must be feeling on their faces.

“And we,” Gaara says, “will come with you.”

None of his people so much as flutter an eyelash, ready to give their lives for Konoha ninja.

It’s more than Kakashi could ever have dared to dream of, insanely generous, and it’s exactly what they need.

“Understood,” is all he says.

“You are prepared to begin your alterations?” Gaara asks, looking at Inoichi.

Inoichi has probably been preparing his objections since Naruto’s little scheme first came to light. But he swallows them back when the Kazekage himself inclines his head, the first to have his memory altered.

It has to be the first time something like this has ever happened. Uchiha Madara, if he’d had the courtesy to fucking stay there, would be rolling in his grave.

Chapter 3

Kakashi helps to organize everyone, which is to say that Neji follows him everywhere, asking for instructions and issuing them to the appropriate party. Even if they were standing right there the whole time.

It has to be Gai's influence.

Inoichi ropes his daughter into helping him.

"But I don't have any experience with such delicate work," she says. "I'm barely through the first level of training. You know that."

"Ino," her father says patiently, "if I die, someone has to be able to use the mind communication jutsu. There is no one else, so you're about to get a crash course."

There's a long pause. "...right."

Kakashi leaves them to their work.

On the other side of the building assigned to the Konoha ninja, Sakura has had the same idea.

"It's just the basics," she says, when Kakashi finds her standing over the rest of their companions, who are sweating over a pile of dead lizards. "But I shouldn't be the only medic, just, you know... in case."

Kakashi resolutely does not think on that "in case". "I thought you were supposed to use fish?"

She rolls her eyes. "Would you believe that the guy I asked laughed in my face? What kind of country doesn't have *fish*?"

The village empties out over the next several days. The Suna nin are amazingly well-organized, and if they didn't have to see Inoichi first they probably could have gotten out faster. As it is, the man works himself into unconsciousness and it takes a little under a week. The ever-frugal desert people have done everything but pry up the floorboards, and the village is an eerie, empty echo.

The Kazekage, his ceremonial robes discarded somewhere, rolls up his hat and secures it beside the gourd on his back. "Let's go."

Kakashi's about to ask a stupid question, like go where?, when the entire desert goes fucking crazy, an almost-solid wall of raging storms, except for the small circle where they are standing. That quite calmly rises into the air and starts to fly in some direction Kakashi is too disoriented to note.

The raw power of a Jinchuuriki—or former Jinchuuriki, in this case—never ceases to amaze him. It's almost enough to think they might actually have a chance.

~*~

The first night they stop, Kakashi interrupts Sakura and Inoichi's lessons.

"There's one thing we have to learn first," he insists.

He teaches all of them, even the Sand ninja, the secrets of the Hiraishin. He doesn't think sensei would mind. The Nidaime probably would, but he's dead and hopefully he'll buck the trend and stay that way.

It goes without saying that Kakashi and his shitty chakra can't be relied on to be the necessary third to utilize the technique. And whatever trick Minato-sensei used to keep his chakra from looping endlessly through the seal until he died followed him to the grave, so they need a full team of three people.

Well, unless they want someone to die every time they use the technique. Besides, it isn't really feasible, with the size of their current group, to have only one team performing it.

Since their entire strategy relies on hiding and running, everyone bends diligently to the task.

Probably out of sheer stubbornness, it's one of the older Sand ninja, Isamu, who masters the technique first. He gives Kakashi a challenging, triumphant look, but Kakashi doesn't rise to the bait.

The very next day, Obito finds them, an army of constructs at his back. Everyone understands the plan, and they don't even take the time to pull out their weapons. Genma, Raidou and Isamu immediately form a circle around Naruto and everyone else near him and teleport away.

Two of the Sand ninja and Lee are left behind.

Kakashi forces himself to consider the possibility that Obito will abandon such insignificant extras and immediately resume his search. He doesn't think about them again.

He drills the others endlessly in assembling in the minimum possible time, letting his calm instructions and the hard work ease the anger and bitterness at such a disastrous first confrontation.

And every night he castigates himself for his complete idiocy. And people used to call him a genius; it was so *obvious* that a basic headcount was necessary, a few extra seconds wouldn't have made that much of a difference, and any schoolchild could have seen the need.

He makes sure no one else sees it, though. He is the Hokage, and that means he has to be more than human.

Tenten—he finally caught her name—spends every waking moment after that incident working on the Hiraishin, writing the seals in the air as she runs and even reciting them in her sleep. She fully embraces Kakashi's policy of throwing herself into her work so she doesn't have to think.

Kakashi would have expected Neji to be the one to go that route, but he seems so totally unaffected by his teammate's death—disappearance, Kakashi reminds himself—that he wonders if he should have Inoichi take a look at him.

But then he goes to tell Gaara something, and catches Neji coming out of the Kazekage's tent.

They're not being secretive about it, and it turns out Kakashi was the only one who didn't know—not that that's terribly unusual—and his only further thought on the matter is that he doesn't have to worry whether Neji has an outlet for his pent-up feelings.

His old ANBU teammates are clustering together, and while they're not openly excluding him, Kakashi can't help but feel like even more of an outsider than usual. He suspects that they find the distance between themselves and the authority figure comforting, after so many years in a military structure, or maybe they're just disgusted by him and the situation he's gotten them all into. With Naruto's agetates naturally clinging to one another, and the two older Sand ninja mostly keeping to themselves, Kakashi spends a lot of time alone.

"Come sit with us," Gaara says, one night when Kakashi is desperate enough to escape his thoughts to actually consider it.

He eyes Gaara and Neji, who are sitting a little closer together than is usual for a public setting. Which this isn't, Kakashi reminds himself, since they are in Gaara's tent. "I wouldn't want to intrude," he says.

"It's fine," Neji says.

"We can go outside to have sex," Gaara says.

Neji's expression of mortified dismay is so comical that Kakashi thinks, what the hell, and he settles onto the ground beside them.

Obito isn't stupid, and the next time he finds them he goes straight for Genma and Raidou. He slices Raidou's arm clean off and somehow times his phasing to leave a kunai inside Genma's body.

Sakura keeps Raidou from bleeding out, though they had to leave the arm behind, but they're still looking for the damn kunai when Genma stops choking on his own blood and dies.

Raidou and Anko are united in their grief, and Kakashi lets Neji lead him back to Gaara's tent, where they all sit in complete silence for four hours until Kakashi falls asleep.

There isn't any official word about it, and certainly no one says anything to Kakashi, but when the tent Sakura and Ino are sharing suffers a fatal mishap with the only tree in a hundred miles that Naruto swears was in no way his fault, somehow Kakashi's tent ends up being their replacement, and somehow he ends up with Neji and Gaara.

Kakashi manages to summon up a faint smile when he tells Gaara that it's fine if they have sex in the tent so long as he is not actually there.

He's bordering on genuine amusement when the very next day he has to explain to Gaara about wrapping some chakra wire around the entrance to signal that it's being used for carnal pursuits. Neji probably does permanent damage to his blood pressure while Kakashi explains all the different shapes you can make to indicate exactly what's going on. And he only has to invent a few; ANBU was full of people with way too much time on their hands.

Ebizou-jisama builds Raidou a new arm using the puppet master jutsu, and it can even channel chakra, so he can still perform the Hiraishin. By that time, everyone in the camp can use it except Kakashi and Naruto.

Kakashi knows what his own problem is, and very privately he suspects that Naruto's difficulties stem from the Fox being difficult. The entity hates the Fourth Hokage, not entirely without justification.

They practice constantly, so everyone can work with everyone else, and learn that if Sakura is part of the group, they can manage with only two people. That kicks off a lengthy debate as to why. If it's a chakra control issue, why can't the two Hyuuga copy her feat? And if it isn't, what do Sakura, the Nidaime, and the Yondaime have in common that the rest of them don't?

It gives them something to talk about during the long hours they aren't running for their lives, even if there's no real chance of resolution.

They encounter Obito again, but this time they are quick enough that everyone escapes.

It's just their luck, Kakashi thinks bitterly, when they find Ebizou-jisama cold in his bed the next morning.

Kakashi is troubled enough by these repeated encounters with Obito that he asks Inoichi for a more substantial contact with Shikaku, something beyond their weekly 'still alive' updates.

Ino settles beside him, and together the two stretch their minds across the entire world.

"It's about time you asked for a report," Ino and Inoichi say, in eerie synchronicity.

"Shikaku," Kakashi says politely.

"Hold on," Inoichi says, and then Kakashi can hear Shikaku's voice as clearly as if he were standing beside him.

"Inoichi tells me I haven't got long, so I'll get straight to the point," Shikaku says. "Killer B is safe. Kumogakure still stands. There's so many damn mountains here, it's a natural defense, and those constructs are having a hell of a time with the weather. We keep finding them frozen in the snow."

"Good," Kakashi says.

"And it's only Madara who's attacking," Shikaku says, with an amused huff for Madara being "only" anything. "Obito is caught up with chasing you, which you probably already knew, and Sasuke is pursuing Danzou just as obsessively. I've got to hand it to the bastard,

he's keeping the brat nicely occupied. Though I can't say I appreciate the body count he's racking up."

"So they aren't really allies," Kakashi says.

"I don't think so. More that they're mutually using each other to pursue their own goals. Sasuke doesn't seem to give a shit about the Jinchuuriki, for the little good that does us. I think the Tsuchikage's finally got it through that boulder he calls a brain that this isn't a bid to undermine him somehow. The new Mizukage got here about the same time as half of Suna—thanks for that, by the way—and she's been a true ally. I guess the Akatsuki have secretly been controlling the village, and now that they're free she's out for blood."

"Good," Kakashi says. "Naruto is still safe here. We can keep this up for a while."

"Time," Inoichi says.

"Right," Shikaku says. "And... my son...?"

"Fine," Kakashi says, though he's not sure if Shikaku hears him before the connection breaks.

"Father!" Ino shouts, as the man collapses.

Inoichi's bedridden for three days, and though he claims he makes a full recovery, Kakashi makes a note to keep any future telepathic conversations short, and for true emergencies only.

Obito finds them again, and again they escape without injury. Kakashi sits up for 48 hours afterwards, waiting for the other shoe to drop, until Neji drugs his tea.

And it's the last of the tea, too, Kakashi thinks mournfully when he wakes up almost 15 hours later.

"You needed it," is Neji's idea of an apology.

Neji, Kakashi is learning, is bossy. And nosy. It must have been hell for him, growing up a branch member in the Hyuuga household. He's a natural leader, and ends up in charge of most of the day-to-day running of their little camp. Kakashi tends to forget about little details like food, and tents, and anything that doesn't involve actual combat or fleeing from such, and Gaara can't be bothered.

Apparently Gaara and Neji know each other, sort of. Kakashi gets the whole story of Neji's promotion to jounin from them one night, which has the rare quality of being even more unusual than Kakashi's own promotion record. They're good company, and sometimes Kakashi catches himself pointlessly wasting energy wishing that he could have known them under other circumstances.

Gaara and Neji aren't the only ones who have paired off. Raidou and Anko are sharing a bedroll, and Naruto and the Hyuuga girl are blushing and being awkward at each other so obviously that even Kakashi picks up on it. He also suspects that something more than

platonic is going on between Sakura and Ino, but no one else has said anything so he's probably wrong.

"They're both with Shikamaru," Neji says, when Kakashi finally works up the nerve to ask.

Well, he was half right? A third?

They don't see Obito for almost three months, but it turns out to be because he was thinking up something particularly nasty.

They teleport away easily enough, but Kakashi immediately knows that something is very wrong. He can feel the malevolent chakra saturating the air, and he turns to Naruto, already knowing what he's going to see.

So far, Naruto has only had two episodes of losing control of the Kyuubi, and both were stopped before more than three tails manifested.

Now, he's already at six, and there's nothing human in his eyes.

"Do we run?" Shikamaru asks. "Can we risk leaving him?"

Kakashi wants someone else to be the one who has to answer these questions. "That's exactly what Obito is hoping we'll do," he says.

"I agree." Shikamaru cracks his neck. "Troublesome."

That's one word for it, Kakashi thinks. Clusterfuck, is also appropriate.

One burning tail aims for him, and is blocked by a dome of sand.

Gaara has both arms up, visibly straining for the first time in Kakashi's experience, singlehandedly holding back the wrath of the Nine-Tailed Fox.

"This is a temporary measure," Gaara says calmly.

Kakashi accepts that he can handle himself until he says that he can't and turns to the others. "Do we have any ideas at all?" he asks.

"Eventually he'll wear himself out?" Sakura suggests.

"We could try to seal the Fox again," Raidou says. "With the Reaper death seal."

"Can one person have two seals?" Anko asks. "That's not how I thought Jinchuuriki seals worked."

"Well, well, look who's all alone," Obito says, voice muffled by the sand barrier.

"How the fuck did he find us so fast?" Anko demands.

"That demon isn't exactly subtle," Tenten says dryly. "Let up, Kazekage-sama. We're fighting."

Everyone looks at Kakashi, who nods. They've no choice, now.

The sand dome collapses and pitches them straight into hell.

"Well, this is even better," Obito says, grinning. There are white constructs ranged out behind him as far as the eye can see.

Naruto has fully transformed, but the Fox seems conflicted over whether it wants to attack Obito or Kakashi's group first.

"Well, can't have that," Obito says, and his eye shifts to the Mangekyou Sharingan.

A moment later, so does the Kyuubi's.

"Well, that's not good," Kakashi says, barely flinging himself out of the way of an attack. He turns the fall into a roll, one hand going to his hitai-ate automatically.

Where it freezes.

Fuck. It was almost five years after he killed Rin before Kakashi could use the Chidori again, and a vengeful Obito is even worse than a dead Obito. He imagines using the Sharingan and wants to throw up.

And now he's also thinking about Rin, and his right hand is shaking. Fuck, he thought he was past this.

He *cannot* fall apart right now. He is the Hokage. Literally the entire world is depending on him. He takes a deep breath, holds it for a count of seven, breathes out for a count of eight. In, out. In, out.

"I'll take care of it," Inoichi says, who helped Kakashi learn to function after he left ANBU and knows the signs better than Kakashi himself does.

"You'll what?" Ino shouts.

Breathing is not helping. A burning limb misses Kakashi by a hair, leaving a scorching burn on the exposed part of his face, but he can't force his muscles to cooperate.

The world goes dark, and Kakashi is terrified that he's fainted before he realizes that, if he can think that, clearly he's not unconscious. The cocoon of sand, because that's what it is, scoops him up and deposits him next to Inoichi, whose body is helpless while he fights whatever mental battle he's engaged in.

All around them ninja are dodging and rolling, trying to stay away from the literal force of nature hunting them, all except for the Kazekage. He's standing tall and proud, eyes narrowed, as his sand darts across the entire battlefield, aiding everyone and protecting both Kakashi and Inoichi. It's damn impressive.

Unfortunately the constructs, who have no true life and ascribe no value to it, are not impressed. They swarm over and under the Fox, dying by the dozen but leaving dozens more

to further hamper the ninja.

“I will take care of these,” Gaara says.

Kakashi doesn't have the breath to waste countering such a ridiculous claim. There must be hundreds of them, and he's already committed so many of his resources to defense.

Suddenly, the attacks stop.

“Well now, you are a bit of a bother, aren't you,” Obito says.

The Kyuubi is no longer under his control. And he no longer looks conflicted over who it hates more.

Kakashi leaves the two of them to fight while he checks on Inoichi.

His daughter is holding his face in her hands, running a diagnostic jutsu that was a favorite of Tsunade-hime's. But a glance is enough to show Kakashi that there's nothing left behind those glazed and staring eyes. His body is still breathing, but his mind didn't survive the strain.

“Ino,” he says.

“I can save him,” she says.

“Ino,” he says again, a little louder this time.

Her hands are shaking, and her face is streaked with tears.

He takes her arm, and she lets him pull her away.

Kakashi wonders how tactless it would be to point out that they can't just leave him like this, because even an empty shell holds secrets, when the Kyuubi takes a step back and crushes the body under one massive foot.

Ino is starting to look a little glassy-eyed with shock.

Kakashi knows the feeling.

This can't continue. He reaches deep into his own mind, to the emotional training that Danzou implemented among the ANBU in the wake of the Fourth Hokage's death. It kept Kakashi alive once, and it will have to do so again.

Even if he promised himself he would never embrace that amoral, automaton existence ever again.

He's holding a crying girl. She's not helping the fight.

He drops her, and a fiery tail sweeps her up and out of sight.

The mission is to protect the Kyuubi. There are two choices: try and move the Kyuubi as is, or kill Obito.

Only the Fourth has ever managed to transport the Fox, and no one here has his skill. But the second option... Obito is emotionally compromised where Kakashi is concerned. He is preoccupied with Kakashi's continued existence.

And that, is an exploitable weakness.

He pushes up his hitai-ate as he stands, Sharingan immediately spinning to form the powerful Mangekyou. He draws a kunai and assumes an easy guard position. "Obito."

"Kakashi," Obito sneers, actually turning his back on the Kyuubi.

Weakness. Emotion.

The Kyuubi is as much a hazard to Kakashi as to Obito in a close-quarters fight, possibly even more so, since Kakashi is not immune to physical attacks. It will have to be distracted.

A Hyuuga steps in to engage the Kyuubi, and Kakashi anticipates that he has perhaps five minutes, maybe less, before the ninja is overwhelmed and he will have to account for the Kyuubi again.

Best make this quick then.

"Sasuke tells me that you've modeled your entire life after me," Obito says, mockingly. "Not that you mention me, of course. Just appropriated the ramblings of the foolish child I was then, and claimed them as your own. Come to think of it, that's basically your entire reputation, isn't it? *Sharingan no Kakashi?*"

Kakashi ignores him. He would never be so foolish as to rely on something as nebulous and fickle as another person. He throws a brace of shuriken, which pass harmlessly through Obito's insubstantial body.

Obito frowns. "What's wrong with you?"

He's making it too easy, insisting on talking and letting Kakashi unleash attack after attack. Explosive tags are just as ineffective, as is chakra wire. Just what is this jutsu?

"Well this isn't any fun," Obito says, and attacks.

Kakashi is skilled, but Obito is, too, and they battle back and forth far past Kakashi's five-minute mental countdown. There's something not quite right about Obito's body, the side that should have been crushed and unusable is stronger and more durable than normal human flesh. But it has too much give to be wood, like Raidou's artificial arm.

And then there's the phasing. If Kakashi could just land one hit, it would be over. He would make sure of it. He is better than Obito, but as a non-Uchiha he will run out of chakra first, and it doesn't take any skill at all to kill an unconscious opponent.

With every clash of kunai, with every dodge, he is studying Obito's movements, analyzing his jutsu and searching for weaknesses.

A trickle of blood gathers in Obito's eye, a single drop sliding down like some macabre tear.

From the Mangekyou.

Kakashi has an idea.

He throws two kunai in quick succession, catching the second in his Kamui and sending it elsewhere.

"Doing my work for me now?" Obito taunts.

Showing the same arrogance he's displayed throughout the battle, he doesn't trouble himself to dodge, utterly confident in his ability.

Kakashi registers the look of shock and pain on Obito's face that means his kunai must have hit the mark. And there it is, buried precisely in Obito's heart.

He doesn't fully understand it, but although they may look different, his and Obito's abilities are linked. Wherever Obito's body goes when he phases, it's the same place Kakashi sends things with his Kamui.

"You smug bastard," Obito says, yanking the kunai out. "I'm not done yet." There's no pain on his face now.

Kakashi blinks. Had he missed? It doesn't matter. He has the trick of it now.

He runs at Obito, who is disturbed enough that he uses his teleportation jutsu, sending himself elsewhere.

And Kakashi turns his Kamui on himself.

He appears in a strange, black and white non-place, but he doesn't waste his time on the décor.

"It ends now," he says.

"How did you get here?" Obito demands, furious.

Kakashi's only answer is a punch to the face.

Obito is good, very good, but in a straight fight without all his tricks, he's no match for Kakashi. Now that they're fighting on this side of Obito's little pocket universe, he can't risk using the phasing ability haphazardly. The flesh he is protecting from Kakashi's strikes will end up in the middle of a fight with the Kyuubi.

Kakashi has him. He can feel it in the firmness of the ground beneath his feet, in Obito's harsh breathing, in his own calm centeredness. The air fills with the sounds of his Chidori.

“You would dare,” Obito spits, “to use that, against me!?”

Kakashi doesn’t think, doesn’t hesitate, safe in a world of facts and techniques and utterly devoid of emotion, and for the second time in his life he thrusts a sparking fist straight through his teammate’s heart.

Obito laughs.

Kakashi blinks, and his calm starts to waver. Mid-battle isn’t really the ideal time to do precise mental work, and it’s not as solid as it could be.

“All that effort, and you waste your shot,” Obito says.

It shouldn’t be possible for Obito to speak, Kakashi thinks wildly. Kakashi’s holding a piece of his lung.

The wound is perfectly circular, which Kakashi can see clearly because there isn’t any blood.

He’s starting to get a very bad feeling about this.

The edges of the wound don’t look like human flesh at all. In fact, it looks exactly like the stuff those white constructs are made of.

“Bakakashi,” Obito says, with what sounds like genuine fondness. “There’s nothing there. You destroyed my heart a long time ago.”

Kakashi can’t answer, can’t move, can’t think, his calm a very distant memory.

“I don’t know why I thought you deserved this,” Obito says. “I think I’ll take it back.”

He rips out the gifted Sharingan.

Slashing the other eye with a kunai is just vindictiveness on his part.

Blinded, almost paralyzed with the shock and pain, Kakashi stumbles through Obito’s teleportation window mostly by accident. It’s only when he feels a breeze on his ruined face and the sickening weight of the Kyuubi’s chakra that he realizes he’s back in the real world.

“Sensei!” Sakura almost tackles him to the ground, yanking down the mask that’s already saturated with his blood. “Your eye!”

“Not mine,” Kakashi mumbles, but she doesn’t hear him. He reaches out, clocks Sakura in the chin before she takes his hand. “Get Shikamaru,” he says, a little louder this time.

She goes without protest, but only so she can get back to treating him sooner.

It isn’t worth fighting her while he talks to Shikamaru, so he allows it. “You have… tell everyone. Something. There’s… it’s…” He swears, gives up trying to keep himself from shaking in an effort to get some coherent words out. “We have to go. Now. Obito can’t die.”

Shikamaru just accepts that. That's right, he'd fought that Hidan character. Kakashi had forgotten about that. "And the Kyuubi?"

"Hiraishin," Kakashi says. "We'll take the Kyuubi as is."

Shikamaru makes a skeptical noise. He probably thinks Kakashi's crazy. Well, he's not wrong.

"Sensei transported the Kyuubi once, to the edge of the village, so it can be done," Kakashi insists. "Though sensei isn't here..."

"Alright," Shikamaru says. "If you say it can be done, I believe you. I'll let everyone know."

"I've never matched sensei," Kakashi says. "I want to say, if he can do it, we can do it. But we probably can't."

"Mhmm." That sounded like Sakura.

"But we have to anyway."

"That's enough, sensei," Sakura says firmly. "Shikamaru's already told everyone. We'll get Naruto to safety."

Kakashi still can't really see anything, and at least two-thirds of his attention is occupied by the searing agony that used to be his face. It's actually a welcome distraction from his thoughts.

He's an easy target now, but the main fight is taking place some distance away, so it seems he will continue to plague this world with his existence for just a little longer.

It's hard to follow the fight by sound alone, and he's getting dizzy with blood and chakra loss. Though without the Mangekyou draining away his resources he might actually survive long enough to hear his comrades die, haha, maybe he should thank Obito. Maybe if he shouts Obito will hear him?

Throughout it all, the suffocating chakra of the greatest of the bijuu covers everything. It clearly hasn't gone anywhere, not that he should be surprised. Transport the Kyuubi, what the hell was he thinking?

Then Hyuuga Hinata's voice rings clearly across the battlefield. "I will not allow you to take Naruto," she says.

"And what do you think *you're* going to do?" Obito mocks.

"Whatever I must," she says, with calm resolution. "Because I love him."

Kakashi could tell her a few things about placing your mental well-being in the hands of others, about the dangers of caring, but he thinks he might be unconscious. He's definitely lying down, because that's sand in his mouth.

It tastes like blood.

He's so preoccupied with this discovery that he almost doesn't notice when the Kyuubi's presence abruptly vanishes. He does hear Obito's howl of frustrated rage.

"Come on," Neji says in his ear, and he, Gaara and Isamu spirit Kakashi away.

He reappears in a place that is unexpectedly quiet. Too quiet.

"Where did you take me?" he demands, or tries to. What comes out is more like "Whaaaaaaaaa?"

"Relax, sensei," Sakura says, sounding as exhausted as he feels. "When we transported the Kyuubi, it must have shocked its system or something because it changed right back into Naruto. There's a spot of luck."

Kakashi makes a vaguely affirmative grunting sound, batting weakly at her hands. Is anyone else still alive? She should be helping them.

"I have to take charge here," Gaara says, taking Neji with him to try and salvage whatever they can.

"Honestly, sensei. Just hold still," Sakura says. "There's nothing I can do about... about the left one, but I think I can restore some of your vision on the right."

Kakashi would just as soon have been left to die, but he can't exactly say that, not when Sakura is trying so hard, so he submits meekly to her healing.

Despite her words, she focuses on the left side first, stopping the bleeding caused by Obito's abrupt field surgery. "Are you hurt anywhere else?" she asks.

Kakashi feels like he's the one with a gaping hole in his chest, not Obito, but the truth is that he's barely even scratched. His one blow from the Kyuubi was only glancing, and Obito arguably did him a favor by relieving him of the Mangekyou. He manages a whole word this time. "No."

Such is Sakura's skill that he can quickly determine that wherever they are, it is still light out, and then he can distinguish some blurry shapes, splotches of color.

Along with one that he shouldn't be seeing.

He grasps Sakura's shoulder, or where her shoulder should have been, and his hand comes away wet.

"Sakura..."

"Don't," she says, and what he'd taken for exhaustion in her voice is something much worse. "It's... Tenten's the one who figured out how to do the transport. She's got these long chakra wires, and it's as good as holding hands as far as the jutsu's concerned. Hinata was going to help, but Obito realized what we were doing right off, and she... distracted him. So it had to

be me. Tenten's like a demon herself, I've never seen someone move so fast, but, well... it got me."

Kakashi thinks he makes some kind of protesting sound.

"You know as well as I that the Kyuubi's chakra interferes with normal healing," Sakura says briskly, or tries to. She has to stop to catch her breath halfway through. "There's nothing I can do for myself. You have to protect Naruto now."

By the time her body slumps gently against his, he can see her face well enough to pick out the familiar features. He doesn't cry for her, his bright and brilliant student who did nothing wrong but have the extreme misfortune to be assigned to Friend-Killer Kakashi. Maybe because she didn't get a chance to repair his tear ducts, or maybe because he can't. It was always Obito who cried, before.

Chapter 4

No one is cruel enough to tell Naruto exactly what happened, or openly blames him, but he blames himself enough for all of them put together. He drags himself around camp, when he bothers to get up at all.

The fight has devastated them. Not only are they down a quarter of their fighting force, but it seems to have sapped all their strength and will. If Obito finds them now, they'll probably just lay down and die.

"Maybe we should find a big hole in the ground and leave me there," Naruto says bitterly, late one night when they're as healed, physically, as they're going to get. There are more scars than usual, now that they have to make do without Sakura.

And it's not doing anything for Naruto's mood that everyone except him has some visible reminder of the fight against the Kyuubi. Kakashi got off lightly; his face was only blistered, and the scars will be nothing compared to the rest of his face. Ino was struck across the back, and any movement is agonizing for her. Neji can't use his left leg at all. He's been spending time with Raidou, trying to see if he can create a puppet replacement for himself. Raidou himself is severely burned across almost a third of his body. He had to be carried off the battlefield.

Even Gaara didn't escape unscathed. When his sand shield failed at a critical moment, he tried to catch a tail in his bare hands. The extreme heat reacted badly to his sand armor and there are chunks of glass fused with his skin.

It has to be incredibly painful, but Gaara seems to be enjoying the effect, forever holding his hands over the fire to watch the light reflecting off them.

It's Neji and Gaara who break free of the general apathy and get them up and moving. They have to teleport to a new camp before Obito can find them, they remind everyone. Eventually it becomes less trouble to follow along than to put up with their nagging. By unspoken agreement, they find a cave with a stream, where they can (hopefully) stay for some time, so any healing of the non-physical kind that can happen will have the chance to.

Two weeks later, Ino asks for a private word with Kakashi.

"I don't have the range my... my father does. Did," she says, speaking too fast and mostly to the wall as she attempts to find a comfortable position to sit in. Her back did finally scar over, but the scars have seriously limited her mobility, and still pain her greatly.

Kakashi lets her fidget and babble. He's not going to deny her whatever small comforts she can find.

"But he showed me how to reach Shikaku-san, and even if I can't quite communicate across it, I know the connection's there. But this morning... it wasn't." She bites her lip, which is raw and bloody. "It could mean nothing. I could have made a mistake somehow."

“But you think he’s dead,” Kakashi says heavily.

“Yeah. I didn’t want to say anything... and it doesn’t mean Kumo has fallen...”

“Thank you, Ino. You were right to tell me this.”

She slowly and painfully lurches out of the tent.

Kakashi explains the situation that night, everyone huddled around their fire in hopes it will warm their spirits as well as their bodies. They even put together a special pallet for Raidou, so he can hear the news at the same time as the rest of them.

“So... is this it?” Anko asks, after a painfully long silence. “I wouldn’t bet on us in another attack like that last one.”

Shikamaru shifts, but doesn’t say anything. He barely reacted to the news of his father’s death. Kakashi is worried about him. He’s worried about all of them. Including himself.

“Just say it,” Kakashi says. “We have to consider anything at this point.”

“I was just wondering... what happens if Naruto dies,” Shikamaru says, sending an apologetic look at his former classmate. “Obviously if the Akatsuki capture him, they can extract the Kyuubi, but...” he can’t bring himself to finish.

“Would that help?” Naruto asks, so calm and serious and accepting that Kakashi’s battered heart twists in his chest. It’s morbidly fascinating how, just when he thinks he’s taken as much emotional hurt as he can, something happens to twist the kunai even more.

“No,” Kakashi says. “Inside a Jinchuuriki, the bijuu is at least somewhat protected. If the Kyuubi is... released... it will have no defense against the Uchiha. It doesn’t think or reason, and they would simply have to follow the trail of destruction and snap it up. It would be a matter of days, at best.”

There’s another agonizing silence.

“Well, what about the dark hole idea,” Naruto says. “Or maybe the middle of the ocean. Can a bijuu drown?”

“We’ll sleep on it,” Kakashi says firmly, because he can’t listen to this for one more second and retain any shred of sanity.

The next morning Kakashi goes to check on Raidou and finds him with his tanto through his stomach.

How did he even manage to move enough to do that? Kakashi wonders. They’ve been taking turns feeding him, because he can’t bend his arms enough to reach his mouth.

He’s still standing there an hour and a half later, when Neji and Gaara come looking for him. His face feels as empty as his soul, but they must see something worrying there because they don’t leave him alone for a second.

He thought it was bad having to call another assembly so soon to break the news, but then he sees Naruto, who looks almost *jealous*. That gets a full quarter-turn of the metaphorical kunai.

Two days later it's Ino cold in her tent, though she finds some kind of plant to do the job. Kakashi can't decide if that's better or worse. She looks like she's sleeping. Shikamaru is the one who finds her. They went to sleep together like they have every night since that last fight, curled around the empty space where Sakura used to be, but only one of them wakes up.

Kakashi is honestly doubting whether they'll last the week, a prospect he faces with guilty anticipation, when Naruto almost gives them all heart attacks, screaming his head off in a passable imitation of his youthful exuberance.

"What the fuck, Naruto," Kakashi says, once it's clear that they aren't actually under attack. He cuffs him, a little off-center because his vision is shit, despite Sakura's efforts, but Naruto pretends not to notice. Or maybe he genuinely doesn't.

"I had a vision!" Naruto announces.

"*You?*" Neji scoffs automatically.

There are a few half-hearted chuckles, surprising themselves that they're still capable of such a sound. The resilience of the human spirit is amazing.

"Yeah, *Neji*," Naruto says, refusing to be daunted. "I had a dream last night, a blond man and a red-haired woman, get this, they said they're my *parents*, their names are—"

"Minato and Kushina," Kakashi finishes with him.

Naruto rounds on him. "Wait, you knew that?"

Kakashi blinks, painfully. Hadn't he ever told Naruto about his parents? He must have forgotten, what with all the... everything.

"Well, it doesn't matter," Naruto says. "I know now. The point is, my Mum says that there are secrets in her old village that can help us. So we have to go to the Land of Eddies."

He looks ready to pick up and go right this second.

The remnants of their group look to Kakashi. He looks at Gaara, who gives a minute shrug.

Well, Kakashi's done stupider things on shakier grounds. Anything to put off having to think. "Sure, okay. We'll have to walk straight, though. I don't think sensei left any markers there. He visited once, but that was before he mastered the Hiraishin. And we can't keep depending on Gaara to scatter them across the sand. From what I remember, it rains pretty much nonstop there."

Gaara makes a face. "Water," he hisses.

A tiny smile tugs at the corner of Kakashi's mouth. Maybe he's not quite finished yet, either.

~*~

At least they have a purpose now, farfetched as it may be, and they make good time to the ruins of the once great village. Their most severely injured members were left behind, so that helps.

Kakashi hates himself for even thinking that.

Naruto's enthusiasm is doing wonders for morale, and Neji and Gaara are picking up the rest of the slack. Neji wasn't able to deconstruct the puppetmaster jutsu just from that arm, and Kakashi was too checked out to help, so Gaara came up with the idea of making one out of sand. It still depends entirely on Gaara's chakra to move, so the group has come up with a game of trying to distract Gaara so the leg moves—or doesn't move—at awkward times and Neji falls.

Sometimes ninja humor is a little strange.

They don't encounter Obito.

Kakashi dredges up every shred of his knowledge about seals to try and recreate the one Jiraiya-sensei created to suppress the Kyuubi chakra, because Naruto won't give him a moment's peace until he does. Towards the end he was just painting whatever seal came to mind. He has to remember to tell Neji and Gaara that Naruto has a storage seal for water across his left hip. They'll probably think that's funny.

Hopefully Obito's still running around the desert looking for them, and not thinking of some way to just kill them all from a distance or some other bit of nastiness. They should have tried striking out in random directions before, to keep from becoming too predictable.

Well, it hardly matters now.

Naruto is fixated on his goal, obviously pinning all his hopes on some miracle from his parents.

Kakashi can't begin to imagine what could help them at this point, unless it's a jutsu that causes everyone with Uchiha blood to suddenly drop dead and everyone else to miraculously come back to life, but whatever keeps Naruto alive and fighting, he'll support it.

The two don't talk to each other, being together only highlights the empty spaces where another teammate should be, so it's a surprise when Naruto corners him one night when they've almost reached the coast.

"I have something for you," Naruto says.

"Um, okay," Kakashi says intelligently.

"I saw you today," Naruto says.

Kakashi winces. Everyone saw him fail to see a rock outcropping right in his blind spot, clock his head, and fall off a cliff like a raw genin. If Gaara hadn't caught him with his sand,

he'd probably have died there, in such a ridiculous and pathetic way.

He wonders if he'd have any luck insisting they leave him behind, now that he's become a liability.

"Itachi gave this to me," Naruto says. "Before... well. Before."

It's so wholly unexpected that it snaps Kakashi out of his downward spiraling thoughts.

"What?"

Naruto scrunches up his face the way he does when he's trying to do precise chakra work, sparking off fond and painful memories of the early days of Team—of teaching Naruto and Sakura. Then he starts to cough, and by what machination Kakashi can't even imagine he coughs up a live crow.

"Wha—" Kakashi starts to say, then he sees that the crow, impossibly, has a Sharingan eye. A Mangekyou Sharingan.

His blood runs cold.

"Dunno what he thought I was going to do with it," Naruto mumbles, shoving the crow into Kakashi's limp hands. "I thought maybe... yeah."

He leaves.

Kakashi truly doesn't know if he could ever bring himself to wield a Sharingan eye again. But it's a moot point, because without Sakura there's no one with the skill to perform such a delicate surgery. He picks up the crow, which watches him calmly.

He snaps its neck.

He burns the body, because whatever the secrets of this eye, he can't trust anyone with them.

Naruto never brings the matter up, either out of complete—and misplaced—trust in Kakashi, or because he's distracted by their arrival at the village ruins.

Naruto has them crawling over the whole place, poking at everything, until Anko literally falls into a vast hidden library of advanced seal techniques. Naruto throws himself into bookwork with the most enthusiasm he's ever shown for the task, roping everyone else into helping him.

Kakashi, whose remaining eye isn't up to the task of deciphering faded writing in half-light, volunteers for guard duty. Gaara, who it turns out can't read kanji, joins him.

"We're making our final stand here," Gaara says. It isn't a question.

"Yes," Kakashi says. "They don't have the spirit to go on if Naruto doesn't pull off this miracle."

"You'd be surprised," Gaara says. "As long as you continue on, so will they."

Kakashi gives him an incredulous look.

“It’s true,” Gaara says. “I am also a Kage, a match for you in battle, and certainly the stronger now.”

Kakashi doesn’t take offense to this bluntness, it’s just Gaara’s way.

“But it is you the others look to, and are inspired by. I, myself, am not immune to it. When they see how much you have suffered, but you are still determined to stay true to yourself and fight on, they want to do the same.”

To his horror, Kakashi thinks he might be blushing. Is that really what he looks like from the outside? It’s a good thing they can’t see inside his head. It’s only the sure knowledge that this suffering is temporary, that it can’t be long now, that keeps him going. “I’m not anything special,” he mumbles.

“Yes,” Gaara says, looking him straight in the eye, “you are.”

There’s nothing to say to that, and Kakashi doesn’t even try.

It’s a tense few weeks while everyone except the two Kage comb frantically through scrolls.

“Sensei! Sensei!”

A bittersweet smile crosses Kakashi’s face. Only Naruto calls him that now, and honestly, it’s a little painful to hear the respectful address when he so spectacularly fucked it up, but Kakashi would never deny Naruto any small comfort he could give him.

Naruto skids to a stop in front of him. “I found it!”

“Well, let’s call everyone together then,” Kakashi says.

It doesn’t take long before they’re all assembled. There are too few of them.

“This,” Naruto says, “is the same scroll my Dad used to deconstruct the Hiraishin.”

“So?” Shikamaru asks. “We already know how to do that.”

Naruto scowls, reminded of his own failure to perform the technique. “Well, I knew it was important, but I didn’t understand why, not at first. I don’t know anything about this seal stuff.” He falters for a moment, probably remembering Jiraiya. “But then, but then!”

His enthusiasm is infectious, and Kakashi can’t help but smile a little.

“So, the Hiraishin works by bending space, so instead of having to run all the way from one place to another, they’re actually right next to each other,” Naruto says.

Kakashi winces. That isn’t how it works at all. And explains a lot about Naruto’s failure to perform it.

“But it turns out, space isn’t the only thing that you can bend,” Naruto says. “You can also bend *time*.”

Kakashi gets it right away. He sits bolt upright in his chair. “What!?” He reaches automatically for the scroll, cursing when he remembers his disability.

“I mean, it just looks like a bunch of squiggles to me,” Naruto says. “But Mom and Dad both promise that that’s what it means.”

Well, Kakashi has taken advice from worse sources. “Why hasn’t anyone used it before?” he asks.

“This is all forbidden jutsu,” Naruto says. “There’s a bunch of warnings about destroying the fabric of the universe and shit. But since we’re totally fucked anyway, I don’t see why we shouldn’t try it.”

A fair point.

“It also requires a lot of power, and I mean a lot,” Naruto says. “I’ll have to be the one to actually cast the jutsu, and I don’t think I can bring more than one person back with me.”

“I’m lost,” Tenten says. “Bring who? Back where?”

Naruto makes an impatient noise. “Weren’t you listening? Back in time!”

There’s a moment of utter silence, as the room holds its collective breath, and then everyone starts talking at once.

Kakashi lets it go on for five minutes, and then he stands.

It seems Gaara was right, as usual, because everyone immediately quiets.

“Obviously this is a dangerous, forbidden jutsu, and for good reason,” Kakashi says. “That fact is not in dispute. The only question that matters is: are we going to do this?”

Around the circle, heads move. Then there’s a chorus of slightly embarrassed affirmatives as Kakashi futilely squints in the dimming light.

“Well, then.” Kakashi gives Naruto his full attention. “What do we do?”

They clear out a large cave to use for the seal array. It really does rain constantly here, and they can’t risk any lines being smudged. They check and double-check each other’s work, and Kakashi is constantly reminding them to take time for things like food and sleep. The irony is not lost on him.

It’s all going so smoothly that Kakashi is starting to freak out. It’s a genuine relief when Naruto comes looking for him one night, shuffling his feet like he used to when he had to confess to some childish misdeed. Kakashi tugs him inside the bare stone room he is sharing with Neji and Gaara. They’re currently inside, but he doesn’t have any secrets from them anyway.

“So I was right that I have to be the one to cast it,” Naruto says. “But I don’t think I can be the one who goes back.”

Kakashi doesn’t know what he expected, but this wasn’t it. So really, that’s why he should have expected it.

Anyway.

All the talk the last few weeks has been around who will be lucky—or unlucky—enough to accompany Naruto back in time.

“Shikamaru figured out this bit at the end,” Naruto says. “Only the spirit can go back, and you can’t go back further than your own lifetime. And... and only one spirit can exist in a single moment in time, so you’ll have to... overwhelm your younger spirit. I think that’s a polite way of saying kill.”

No wonder this is a forbidden jutsu, Kakashi thinks.

“We also found that the you in this time, well, you die. And we’ve already decided that I can’t die,” Naruto says. “Hopefully, this time will never exist, after we—I mean you—fix things, but we don’t know for sure. You might start a completely new timeline, and I can’t abandon my responsibility to this one.”

Kakashi wants to appreciate his student’s maturity, reasoning this out instead of shouting about the injustice of it all, and selflessly offering to stay behind, but... “What do you mean ‘you’?”

Naruto has the temerity to roll his eyes at him. “Sensei, the only one who didn’t know it would be you going back is you. You’re the obvious choice.”

It hadn’t been obvious to *him*. Kakashi needs a minute to muster his arguments for that issue. “Naruto, you can’t bear the entire responsibility for this future on your own. And... you know there isn’t much hope.”

“I know,” Naruto says, trying out a weak smile. “It’s not only that. It’s... whoever goes back, they’ll fix everything, we’ll all live long and happy lives.”

Kakashi highly doubts that, but he can’t ruin Naruto’s dreams.

“But not for the person who goes back. They’ll have to remember all of this, the way things could have gone. And sensei... I don’t *want* to. I want to be happy.” He raises eyes gone shiny with tears. “Is that so bad?”

Kakashi smiles at him, decision made. “That’s what I want for you, too. Of course I’ll go.”

“And...” Naruto looks at Gaara, guiltily. “We think it would be best if you go, too. You have the best chance of withstanding the kind of power we’re going to call up.”

Gaara inclines his head, accepting the task with dignity.

“What about me?” Neji asks.

Kakashi feels a pang. He and Gaara and Neji have been living in each other’s pockets for over a year now, and it will be very strange to leave one of their number behind.

“Are you sure you can’t manage three?” Neji asks.

Naruto gives the three of them a long look. “For what we’re asking you to do... I’ll have Shikamaru take another look at the equations.”

They stand in slightly awkward silence for a moment.

“I’ll just go give them the message,” Neji says. “Come on, Gaara.”

“I wanted to sleep,” Gaara says, but lets himself be dragged out, anyway.

Naruto chuckles weakly. “Subtle.”

“Oh, you wanted to talk to me alone,” Kakashi says, wanting to smack himself for his obliviousness.

“It’s just...” Naruto is silent for a long time. “Sasuke.”

Kakashi can’t help his snarl at the sound of that name.

“I know, and... I’m not defending him, or what’s he’s done, but... he wasn’t always like that. You remember, don’t you, sensei?”

When he lets himself think of those days, Kakashi finds himself dwelling on the seeds of arrogance, or obsession, that he’d failed to give the proper attention to. But he is self-aware enough to know that his perceptions might be colored by more recent events. He settles for a neutralish grunt.

“Please, sensei, try... try to save him?”

What Kakashi wants to do is run a blade through his traitorous heart. If he’s younger it will only make it easier. But Naruto is shouldering an enormous burden, and Kakashi can’t in good conscience deny him this one request. “Alright.”

The raw gratitude on Naruto’s face is too painful to look at. “Thank you.”

“You don’t need to ask,” Kakashi says to the wall. “You need only order.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” Kakashi says, darkly amused at the irony, “it seems that you are to be the Nanadaime Hokage.”

He doesn’t even try to face up to whatever is on Naruto’s face just then, just chucks the filthy, ripped hat in the general direction of his head.

After that, it seems like Kakashi blinks and then he's standing in the center of a huge seal, the most complex he's ever seen, stark naked and wondering if that was really necessary. It's cold in here.

Neji and Gaara are there with him, Gaara in the middle. Neji doesn't seem to notice the cold, but Gaara looks downright miserable. They hadn't even let him keep his sand, concerned that it would interfere in the process in some unspecified way, and the desert boy is shivering.

"Don't forget to destroy the library," Kakashi says. "And all evidence of this array."

Shikamaru rolls his eyes. "Yes, mother, geez."

By universal agreement—behind Kakashi's back, of course—everyone will continue to defer to Kakashi until his actual departure, at which point Naruto's unofficial appointment will officially begin. Kakashi's just glad that he remembered to hand off the hat. Anything's better than forcing Naruto to retrieve it from his corpse.

Naruto places both palms on the ground, in the circles inscribed for that purpose, and begins pouring his chakra into the seal.

Kakashi watches, fascinated in spite of himself, as the lines and words inscribed on the floor seem to rise up and flow into Gaara's body. It has to be painful, but he grits his teeth and doesn't voice a word of complaint.

"You'll do it, right?" Tenten says.

Kakashi looks at her.

"You'll do better this time?"

Kakashi opens his mouth to reply, and dies.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!