

**who lives, who dies, who tells your story**

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# who lives, who dies, who tells your story

by [tasalmalin](#)

## Summary

Everything was a mess, but Kakashi, Neji, and Gaara have a chance to set things right. These three are some of the smartest and most capable ninja in the world, surely there's nothing they can't do, especially with their foreknowledge. Of course, they're also some of the most messed up.

## Notes

Warnings: This series is a time travel fix-it. I solemnly swear that there is an actual fix-it, with years of therapy and happy endings for (almost) all. This story, however, is not that. Multiple, major character deaths, references to PTSD and suicidal thoughts, some moderately graphic descriptions of violence and fighting-related injuries.

There is also one brief, non-graphic reference to the off-screen sexual assault of a minor character in the second chapter.

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

# Chapter 1

It's disorienting, being dead. Kakashi can sense, distantly, his own body, which is in much better condition than he last left it. But mostly he feels a sensation of otherness, stuffed into a mind that isn't quite his and is already occupied besides.

*What is this?*

Kakashi hadn't thought to prepare some kind of explanation, which in retrospect is deeply stupid.

He imagines how he would react to a sudden intruder in his mind, and can feel an eerie echo as the exact same thoughts go through his younger self.

*I'm, uh... you. From the future.*

*Ridiculous.*

Kakashi sends a few images, of Naruto and Sakura, happy and grown, in that brief time between Naruto's return to the village and... what came after.

*What was that?*

*You don't want to know.*

There's a sensation of suspicion.

Kakashi searches through his memories, trying to find one that isn't too painful to share. There aren't any, so he just sends the first one that comes up.

It's his last memory of Gai.

There's a brief mental silence, and then he feels the sensation of movement, very peculiar in his current disembodied state.

He thinks he hears a faint *okay* before sensation comes back full force, and he's very occupied with drawing air into his lungs and releasing it.

He should probably be worried at how easily he consigned himself to oblivion, but he has more important things to focus on. The future of the world, for example.

He throws the blanket aside, and it's not his old shuriken-patterned one. Actually, he's on a futon, not a bed, and come to think of it, this isn't his apartment. Where the hell is he?

He rolls over, intending to stand, but instead he lurches into the wall, barely missing braining himself on the hard wood. What's going on? Was there a problem with the transfer? He should have known it was too good to be true, a miracle jutsu at just the right moment...

A lamp flickers on. “Sensei!”

His muscles refuse to cooperate, and he only manages a sideways view.

There is Sakura, silhouetted in the doorway and looking impossibly young, her long hair framing a round, expressive face. A child’s face.

Kakashi can’t breathe.

“Shh, it’s alright,” he hears, some undetermined length of time later. An unknown woman is supporting him through his fit of hyperventilating.

“Everything’s okay,” Sakura says, voice quavering.

It’s the fear in her voice that reminds him that he needs to get a hold of himself. This Sakura doesn’t have the experience or confidence to handle herself, let alone anyone else, in an emergency.

This isn’t the first time he’s had a panic attack, and he has a few tricks still. He deliberately thinks of nothing, certainly not Sakura so small and vulnerable beside him, or the awesome weight on his shoulders, or his physical debilitation. He counts, and he breathes, and he *makes* his body obey him.

He looks around, and a lot more time has passed than he realized because it’s natural sunlight filtering through the windows, and he’s pretty sure it was night when he woke up. Or maybe he was just mistaken about that.

He finally gets a look at the woman supporting him, and he has absolutely no idea who she is, so there’s no help there. Once she’s sure that he isn’t going to fall on his face, she retreats to another room.

Sakura is giving him a look that is so transparently hopeful that he has to look away.

“Not to worry,” he says, smiling at the worn but well-cared for tatami floor. “It’s perfectly normal.”

He starts to reach for her, to ruffle her hair, and remembers the last time he touched her, the missing flesh and the wet warmth as she bled out in his arms.

He freezes.

She snuffles. “We were really worried, sensei! Chakra exhaustion is very serious!”

Well, that explains what’s wrong with him. He felt so much better in general that he didn’t immediately recognize the symptoms.

Unfortunately, identifying the ailment doesn’t really narrow down the possibilities. The number of times he’s come back from a mission with chakra exhaustion is—was—a village-wide joke. But Sakura knows him, so this is after Team—

He automatically stops himself from thinking the term, having erased it from his vocabulary long ago, but that's going to get strange fast, since—that entity—exists in this time.

But although he can recognize the logic in letting go of this particular habit, he can't make himself accept it. After a few moments' struggle, he abandons the exercise.

He'll leave that particular issue for another time.

Sakura is still looking at him like he holds the secrets of the universe.

They hadn't been on *that* many missions before—That Incident—so he really should be able to remember where the hell he is.

“Everything's fine,” he says again, stupidly, and tries to assess his physical condition.

If it's chakra exhaustion—and this Sakura might have misdiagnosed him, hard as that is to reconcile with what he knows of her in the future—then he is well on his way to recovery. His disorientation was likely a combination of the extraordinary events that brought him here and a lack of adequate sustenance. His appetite is always the first thing to go when he's injured, ill, or emotionally affected in any way. He doesn't eat much.

“Naruto and Sasuke didn't come back last night,” she whispers.

Calling himself ten kinds of fool for just lying here instead of doing literally anything remotely useful, Kakashi puts a hand on the wall and pulls himself to his feet, riding out the first wave of dizziness until he's sure he can stand unassisted.

Sakura, biting her lip in concern, hands him a crutch.

He hobbles into the next room, and finds Naruto stuffing his face at the table, manners even more appalling than he remembers. The pace is too much even more Naruto, and he turns to throw up noisily all over the floor, kicking off the same reaction in...

The air is thick with killing intent, suffocating, the Kyuubi, it's here, it's too soon, Kakashi isn't ready, he can barely stand...

Naruto's face, pasty white around the whisker marks on his cheeks and smeared with vomit, appears over the edge of the table.

Wait.

Naruto?

Then where's the Kyuubi?

Kakashi casts out with his senses, and oh, that's him generating that killing intent. Because there is Sasuke, frozen in his seat like a rabbit before a hawk, his round, boyish face transparently terrified.

He's never going to be able to keep his promise to Naruto if he can't even exist in the same room as Sasuke. Kakashi tries to rein himself in, he really does.

But all he can see is the chain of death and ruin that begins with Sasuke, and even the knowledge that it's monstrously unfair to claim it 'started' with Sasuke he can't help himself, picturing Sakura and Gai and little Hyuuga Hitaro who he'd never even seen...

There's an acrid smell in the air, someone—or several someones—has wet themselves.

Kakashi has to get out of here. Now.

"I have to check the perimeter," he says, his voice sounding odd in his own ears.

No one but Naruto is moving, paralyzed by their fear, and Naruto doesn't challenge him. Kakashi spins on his heel, almost falls, and pulls on the dregs of his chakra to keep upright and mobile as he puts as much distance between himself and Sasuke as possible.

He will keep his promise to Naruto. He gave his word, and he owes it Naruto, for his own failures and to support Naruto's dreams. He has to think of it as a mission, and break it down into steps.

Today he'll live in a world where Sasuke is alive, and he won't kill him.

It's the best he can do.

~\*~

Kakashi passes out in the forest, having overstrained his limited chakra reserves, so Sasuke survives the night. He walks back to the house slowly, following the scent of his own trail because he was a little... disoriented... and didn't pay much attention to what direction he was going in.

He uses the crutch, not touching the tiny puddle of chakra he's managed to regenerate, because if Sakura and Naruto are as young and helpless as they looked, he is the only thing standing between them and danger. His missions *always* end up being a complete disaster, so there's no doubt that they will need him at some point.

The house is a decent size, the family must be reasonably well off, though they look to have fallen on hard times recently. The interior, what Kakashi remembers of it, was spotlessly clean, but the roof could use a re-patching, one of the shutters is broken, and there's a general air of dispirit and shabbiness that usually indicates poverty.

It's also on the coast, and through the dissipating morning mist Kakashi can see some kind of construction project. Looks like a bridge.

Kakashi leans against a tree so he can smack himself with both hands. He's going senile in his old age. This is obviously their first real mission together, where Naruto kept trying to murder their client and Kakashi got his ass thoroughly and embarrassingly kicked by Zabuza. And then the Kyuubi tried to break free of Naruto.

Fuck, they're *babies*, this is back when Sakura still cried in every fight and Naruto flew off the handle over every little thing.

He hastily picks up his crutch again and hurries back to the house, forgetting his resolve not to use his chakra. He can't believe he left them alone like that. Anything could have happened to them.

He throws open the door, almost knocking it out of the frame, and once again interrupting everyone at breakfast. It's basically the same story as yesterday, with less puking.

"Sensei!" Sakura exclaims, with obvious relief. "We thought you'd found Zabuza again!"

Kakashi starts to frown, then remembers that he'd told them he was going to patrol. Right. "Well, you know..." he stalls. He can't tell them he was alone and unconscious for almost twenty-four hours, abandoning them on such a dangerous mission.

Naruto groans dramatically. "Not another of your ridiculous excuses, sensei!" he whines.

Well, this might be the first time that particular personality quirk has actually helped him. Kakashi attempts a smile, which quickly falls away when he remembers his last encounter with Obito, when his fr—when his *enemy* had accused him of being a poor copy of the other boy.

Kakashi will never think of him as his friend again, the titles of best friend and rival belong to someone else, someone who deserved much better than Kakashi.

The silence is getting a little awkward. Kakashi makes a neutral sort of noise, hoping it comes across as cool and aloof, and Sakura and Naruto both relax and smile at him. Sakura scoots over and pats the bench beside her.

Sasuke doesn't look convinced, but that could also be because Kakashi is treating him like an enemy combatant. He's managed to keep the killing intent tamped down, but he's hyperaware of Sasuke, and Sasuke has enough training to know that.

Kakashi considers the bench, but he's not sure he trusts himself to be in arm's reach of Sasuke just yet.

"I'm done," Sasuke says, putting his half-finished bowl down. "I'm going to train."

Kakashi watches him the entire way out the door, and judging by the tense set of his shoulders Sasuke knows it.

"You should eat something, sensei," Sakura says. "You need to regain your strength."

"Yeah!" Naruto says, and he actually deigns to put a tiny portion of his egg in Kakashi's bowl.

Kakashi is warmed by the support of his comrades, before he remembers that these aren't the comrades he remembers, not yet (*not ever*), but he's already sitting and he does need to eat so whatever, it's fine. Maybe he scared them yesterday.

He hopes not.

He's so preoccupied that he forgets his mask is on and ends up spilling rice in his lap.

Naruto laughs.

Sakura looks a little bit concerned.

Right. Kakashi hadn't bothered with his mask after the fight where Sakura... where Sakura died, because it was ruined and he didn't have a spare, and he really wasn't worrying about much of anything at that point except to keep breathing.

Fortunately he doesn't actually use a jutsu to eat, because he doesn't think he could manage a substitution jutsu right now, let alone anything more substantial. His little tricks are all sleight of hand and distraction.

Naruto is still laughing, almost falling off the bench in his innocent, whole-hearted mirth, and it's the work of a moment to kick Sakura, then look innocently preoccupied with his meal.

"Naruto!" she shouts, and lunges across the table to grab him.

Kakashi manages a few bites while they're distracted, and Naruto and Sakura are both comically dismayed.

It's agony. All he can think of is Naruto, the other Naruto, on the night he asked Kakashi to go back instead of him.

*I just want to be happy...*

Kakashi hadn't really understood the burden he was taking on when he made that promise. Not that it would have changed his answer. But he doesn't know how much of this carefree happiness he can bear... or what he'll do if it ever stops.

Naruto's face pinches in concern, and Kakashi is terrified that his gloomy thoughts have somehow ruined everything already.

"Hey, hey, sensei," Naruto says, in a whisper that projects clearly through the whole house. "Sorry for making a mess yesterday."

Kakashi is totally confused.

"And for wasting food," Sakura hisses, just as loudly as Naruto.

"Oh, right, and for wasting food when they don't have much and they still shared it with us. I bought some more," Naruto says.

Wait. They think his little display yesterday was because Naruto was puking on the floor? That was obviously rude, but...

Kakashi reminds himself that these little children only had their first encounter with killing intent a few days ago, and Zabuza was mostly just fucking around.

“Ah, it’s fine, Naruto,” he says, when they start to look really worried. “You apologized, and —” He pauses. Naruto can’t have much money, and food must be horrendously expensive here. It was a generous and selfless thing of him to give up his own food money for this family.

Kakashi will never forgive himself for having ignored him for so long. He’s such a good person he’s almost unsuited for the life of a shinobi. Would be unsuited, if he weren’t so determined to change the nature of shinobi to fit his own ideals.

Speaking of...

“What are you two supposed to be doing right now?”

“I’m learning to climb trees!” Naruto shouts immediately. “I’ve almost got it!”

“Last time we, um, went to guard the bridge,” Sakura says.

Before Kakashi decided to take a vacation mid-mission. “Right, then. It should be too soon for Zabuza to be recovered, but that’s no reason to relax our vigilance. More missions go wrong for lack of information than anything else. Naruto and Sakura, you’re with me.” He stands.

Neither of them do. They’re just staring at him.

Kakashi fights not to sigh. Now what?

“Sensei, is something wrong?” Sakura asks.

Besides everything?

“It’s just... you don’t usually tell us this much. Or anything at all, really.”

As if Kakashi really needed the reminder of how inadequate he was as a sensei. It’s probably not worth trying to smile, in his current mood. “This is a real mission,” he says, “so you need to take on some of the responsibility.”

“Um, okay,” Sakura says, still not convinced.

Naruto cheers, pumping the air before dashing out the door. “What are we waiting for? Hurry up, Kakashi-sensei, Sakura-chan, old man Tazuna, let’s go!”

Sakura lingers beside Kakashi, matching his slow pace. “What about Sasuke?”

Kakashi’s definitely making progress, his face barely twitches at the name. “He’s further along than Naruto, so he should be fine practicing on his own.”

She bites her lip but doesn’t comment further.

Kakashi settles on one of the bridge struts gratefully. His legs are trembling, and it's a small miracle that he doesn't fall on the way here.

"Okay, you two," he says, looking at their bright and eager faces and trying not to cringe too visibly. Let's see, at this age Sakura's greatest weaknesses were her insecurity and the fact that she didn't know anything besides the basic Academy techniques. Naruto's problem was control, both of chakra and self.

"Sakura, you did very well with the tree-walking exercise the other day," he says, watching her face flush with pride. "That's due to your precise chakra control. The next step is water-walking. Normally I would wait a little longer before teaching this technique, but, well, we're on a bridge." He gestures at the water surrounding them, and she smiles and nods. "The main difference is, a tree is static. The discharge of chakra is constant. But water is always moving, always changing, and you need to vary your chakra output to compensate. It's not easy; this technique normally isn't taught until genin are being considered for the chuunin exam. But I think you have the necessary control, and with practice, you can learn it."

She flushes, but gives a determined nod. "Okay, I'll try!"

She sensibly goes in close to the shore, a fair distance from the bridge but still within sight.

"Now, Naruto," Kakashi says. "It seems to me like you're having trouble regulating the amount of chakra you use. That's why the tree keeps exploding. So we're going to work on your chakra control. This won't just help you with tree-walking, but it will improve all your jutsu."

Naruto nods vigorously. "Gotcha!"

He only does that when he doesn't understand at all. Kakashi reminds himself of the great man Naruto will become, and patiently explains the theory behind chakra discharge. Again.

~\*~

It's not a good night.

Sakura is too easily discouraged, and when she doesn't pick up the water-walking as quickly as she did tree-walking, she's convinced that she can't do it. And she can't, if she doesn't put some effort into it. That's what training is for.

Naruto destroyed a few key sections of the bridge before he was banished to practice on the trees along the shore. He just doesn't understand the most basic principles of chakra theory, and none of Kakashi's efforts have made a dent in that ignorance. He's not even sure Naruto was actually listening.

And then there was Sasuke. He was *pissed* when he learned that the others got one-on-one training today, and took their lack of progress as a sign that that training was wasted on anyone who wasn't him. Kakashi had to take a few moments so he didn't smack that arrogant sneer right off his face, and by that time Sakura was moping in her room and the boys were venting their feelings with punches.

Kakashi can't watch the fight, wants to dive in and save Naruto before Sasuke can do anything permanent or fatal, but he has just enough perspective to realize that that response would be inappropriate to the current situation. He goes to bed instead, determined to analyze where he went wrong and do better tomorrow.

~\*~

He doesn't.

~\*~

The day finally comes that Zabuza is supposed to attack, and it's a relief. Kakashi knew he was a shitty teacher, but he hadn't realized he was this bad. It still takes Naruto just as long to learn the technique, and Sasuke still does it better despite having no assistance at all from Kakashi. As a bonus, Sakura is totally discouraged and her doubt has even affected her tree-walking to a certain extent.

If they did so much better with him essentially ignoring them, how much better would they do if he wasn't here?

He stops himself before he can dwell on that train of thought for too long. He owes it to Naruto and Sakura, to Neji and Gaara, to rest of the world, to hold it together until their future is secured. It's the same story as before he traveled back, but that surcease from pain is a little further away than he'd anticipated.

He just has to hold out until then. He'll make a world where Naruto's dream of long and happy lives for everyone is a reality, a promise that conveniently frees him of the obligation to live in it.

He leaves for the bridge a little later than he meant to, because Naruto exhausted himself practicing and was nearly comatose with chakra depletion, and there's no way Kakashi is leaving him alone in such a state. He eventually elects to carry him, but Naruto wakes up partway there so it all works out.

The civilian workers are slumped on the ground, caught in a genjutsu, when they arrive, so at least something is going right.

Zabuza sets himself against Kakashi, but doesn't attack, just keeps him from interfering with his apprentice. Kakashi vaguely remembers this, but the exact cause of the close call with the Kyuubi is frustratingly elusive. Honestly, it wasn't even that long ago.

The apprentice has a bloodline limit, that much he remembers, something to do with ice.

"There's no way those brats can defeat Haku," Zabuza says.

Kakashi smiles, not letting any of his panic show in his voice or his body language. They beat Haku before, and he'll just have to trust that they can do it again. "Perhaps he could take them one on one, perhaps not. But in Konoha we learn to work as a team, to rely on our comrades. And Haku is no match for Team—work."

Zabuza is too busy scoffing to notice his hesitation at the end. Of course, Kakashi has not been putting any particular emphasis on teamwork lately. He can't figure out how to do so while still excluding Sasuke, and he doesn't want the others to become too attached just in case Sasuke is beyond saving. If his promise to give Naruto his happy ending and the promise to save Sasuke come into conflict, Kakashi knows which one he's choosing. The other Naruto would see it as a betrayal, but Kakashi has already accepted that burden on his conscience. What's one more drop to the ocean, really?

He does notice that Sakura is hesitating on the fringes of the fight.

"Support your comrades, Sakura!" he calls. "If both our enemies are occupied, the bridge builder is in no danger." Besides, Kakashi wouldn't hesitate for an instant to sacrifice him if it saved his kids.

"Way to announce your strategy," Zabuza says, laughing.

"And what exactly are you doing?" Kakashi asks. Zabuza's easy confidence in Haku is unnerving him. Didn't Naruto arrive late to this fight before? Could that affect the outcome somehow?

Sakura almost becomes a human pincushion, but Naruto shoulders her out of the way just in time, taking the senbon in his own arm. It's not enough to overcome the Kyuubi's healing factor, but Kakashi feels the cold knot of panic in his gut growing stronger. Only long familiarity with having to fight with this weight on him keeps him from leaping to their rescue and damn the bridge builder.

Zabuza is eyeing him a little strangely, so some of his inner conflict must be evident. Kakashi tries to exercise a little discipline.

Naruto is enraged, more at the threat to Sakura than the damage to himself, and attacks Haku with unexpected speed and ferocity.

Kakashi tenses a little, but there's no sign of the Kyuubi yet. Just the normal human reaction to a bond being threatened.

Sasuke backs Naruto up, actually working with him, and Haku is starting to look slightly inconvenienced.

How in the hell had they beaten this guy? This is about the best Naruto and Sasuke have to offer at this time. Was it all down to the Kyuubi?

Haku makes a handsign, and Kakashi walks right into Zabuza's sword, the need to go to their aid is so reflexive. A one-handed handsign. The last time he'd seen that had been Itachi.

"Nuh-uh," Zabuza says. "Your fight is with me."

Standing against the blunt side, Kakashi could make it to the boys before Zabuza could get his giant sword into a useful attack position. He knows it, and he knows that Zabuza knows it, too.

The mist in the air condense, then freezes into a maze of ice mirrors, encasing Haku and the boys.

Now that he sees it, Kakashi remembers this. So things aren't completely off track, then. He relaxes just the tiniest bit.

Now Zabuza is definitely looking at him like he's crazy.

Kakashi is sure that he said something cool the first time he lived through this, but nothing comes to mind at the moment.

Another excruciatingly long minute goes by, and then he hears Naruto's agonized scream.

"Sasuke!"

Kakashi's feet move without any input from the rest of him. He's at the mirrors before Zabuza has time to react, and only years of instinct keep him from being stabbed in the back when he reaches them.

"I said not to interfere!" Zabuza says, and his eyes are smug, superior.

The only thought in Kakashi's head is 'what has Sasuke done now?' His entire body is vibrating with the need to get to Naruto, to save him, and Zabuza is in his way.

He kicks the sword, moving inside Zabuza's guard with a kunai headed for his heart.

Zabuza leaps back with a curse.

That's fine, now Kakashi has some room to maneuver. Zabuza might have been a concern when Kakashi was actually this age, but he's learned a few new tricks, and he has more reason to fight now.

"What, no Sharingan this time?" Zabuza taunts.

Kakashi freezes. He's forgotten something very critical.

The last time he tried to fight, in his own subjective timeline, he fell the fuck apart.

Frantically, he reaches for that quiet space in his mind, but he can't focus, the panic is so sudden and all-encompassing. He can't breathe, can't think, can't do anything because he's *fucking useless*.

Obito's eye. Somehow he's let himself forget about it, but it's *right there*, it's *tainting* him, what if he becomes like Obito, what if instead of his pathetic inadequacy he actually, actively tries to destroy the people who trust him most, hell he's already cold-bloodedly considered killing Sasuke and decided that he could, how much bigger a step is it from 'could' to 'would'?

He doesn't need any help, he's already there, already the monster.

His body moves without his conscious control, blocking Zabuzza's over-sized sword with crossed kunai, leaping back, dodging to the side, and he needs the Sharingan for this fight but he can't, he just can't.

He remembers now, he killed Zabuzza, or was it Haku, someone, he killed them with his Chidori, and he *can* use the Chidori without the Sharingan, it's not like the jutsu will fail, and he couldn't possibly disappoint sensei more than he already has so breaking his word on this one small point hardly matters and as long as Naruto and Sakura survive, it will be okay, Gaara and Neji are here, too, they'd probably do better without Kakashi anyway, it seems like everyone does, the ones he doesn't kill anyway...

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Zabuzza demands, because he's not so stupid as to realize that this fight is shaping up very differently than their last.

Kakashi forms the signs for his Chidori, and as the sound of chirping birds fills his ears, Rin's dying smile fills his vision.

"No, fuck, not now!" he shouts, swiping his hand in front of his face and losing control of his technique. It's been *years* since that's happened, why does he always fail exactly when he is most needed, whywhywhy....

Zabuzza is an elite ninja, a missing nin. He knows what breaking looks like when it's shoved right in his face.

He stops attacking, his guard up warily, but the instinctive avoidance of deadly blows is the only skill of Kakashi's that's actually working right now. He just stands there shaking and trying to do fucking anything at all.

Zabuzza chuckles nastily, then turns his back on Kakashi, the ultimate insult, and runs for the bridge builder.

Sakura, her knees shaking so much they knock together, moves into a defensive position in front of the client.

Kakashi's vision whites out.

The next thing he's aware of is pain.

Pain, and screaming.

Sakura in pain? No, Sakura is screaming. The pain is his.

Zabuzza's sword is buried deep in his shoulder, almost cutting off his arm.

It got caught on the leather strap he wears under his uniform, the strap for a tanto he can no longer bear to carry. It's also the only reason he's still alive.

He coughs, spitting blood all over Sakura's white, terrified face.

“I won’t let anything happen to you,” he says. “I promise. I will protect you. I *will*.” He can’t use the Sharingan, can’t get his jutsu to work, is probably going to bleed out right on top of her (oh, the irony), but as long as he is alive he will do whatever he can, even if it’s just shielding her body with his own.

Zabuza yanks out the sword, and Kakashi almost faints.

He does collapse, it was the only thing holding him up, and he leaves a long and probably disgusting blood trail down Sakura’s nice dress.

“Sorry,” he slurs.

Zabuza is still standing, so he’s not done yet, can’t rest yet, Sakura is still in danger, Naruto might already be dead.

He tries to stand, can barely lift his head. His hand slips in his own blood.

His blood.

With the last of his strength, he summons his pack.

## Chapter 2

Kakashi wakes up. A not-so-small, traitorous part of him regrets it.

But then he remembers his students, in mortal peril, while he just stood there and did nothing.

He tries to get up, and his entire shoulder protests, vehemently.

He grits his teeth and tries again, more slowly, and has just about managed a basic pushup position when a member of the ANBU medical corps walks in.

It's such a shock that he drops back onto the bed, a move he immediately regrets. He tries to writhe in pain, but that just makes it hurt more.

When he can think about anything besides how much his shoulder hurts, the medic is standing over him giving him an unsympathetic look. There's a trick to discerning facial expressions through ANBU masks, and Kakashi has something of a natural advantage there.

Ah. Someone who knows him, then.

"My students..." he croaks.

"I will tell you everything if you drink this while I do," the medic says.

It's one of the vile nutritional supplement drinks they give invalids. Kakashi hates them with a passion.

He studies the medic's body language. It is unyielding.

"Fine," Kakashi says, pulling a face.

There's a little stool for the drink to rest on, so he can reach the straw without having to move. Looks like they've thought of everything.

It isn't until he's actually drinking that the medic starts to talk.

"Your students are all alive," the medic says.

Kakashi immediately stops drinking, because that's about 90% of what he wanted to know, but he is glared into taking another tiny sip.

"Sasuke was seriously injured. He was the victim of a targeted senbon attack, and it's a miracle he wasn't killed. As it was, he was mostly paralyzed for two days, and his chakra is only just starting to replenish."

Kakashi doesn't especially care about Sasuke's suffering, though he thinks he remembers this now, and if he does Sasuke's relative lack of injury was no accident. He is concerned about the 'two days' comment. He tries to look a question.

“It’s been ten days since the fight,” the medic says.

Kakashi spits out his drink.

“Don’t waste it! Not if you want to hear about your other students.”

Grumbling, he takes another drink.

“Sakura was unharmed physically, but she was quite traumatized by your collapse. She kept pressure on the wound, and it’s likely she saved your life.”

That was his Sakura, Kakashi thinks. Though he didn’t have any part in her medical training. Probably why she turned out to be such an amazing medic.

“Naruto was also traumatized, both by your and Sasuke’s collapse. He lost control of himself and nearly unleashed the Demon Fox.”

Wow. Kakashi must have really been close to death if he missed the Kyuubi’s chakra making an appearance.

“It was contained, however, and no witnesses appear to realize the significance of the event.”

Something about that phrasing was a bit odd. Are they worried that Tazuna is a security risk? Sakura and Sasuke probably would have found out eventually anyway.

“The two Mist shinobi escaped.”

Kakashi’s eyes widen. He assumed Naruto had killed them while in his demonic state.

“We were not able to get a clear story of what happened. Sakura remembers nothing after you fell, Sasuke was unconscious, and Naruto has no memories from when the Fox was leaking through the seal. It appears that he fought the younger Mist ninja, Haku, to a standstill, and your pack kept Zabuza occupied. At some point Zabuza’s employer arrived—you know he was working for Gatou?—and he must have said or done something because we found his body in six parts, along with a score of mercenary trash.”

“And Zabuza?” Kakashi asks.

“According to Naruto, Haku is his ‘friend’ and asked Zabuza if they needed to keep fighting, since their goals no longer opposed Naruto’s. Zabuza agreed that it wasn’t necessary, and then they left.”

“They *left*?” Kakashi repeats.

“That’s what Naruto says. We didn’t find their bodies, nor have we seen any sign of them in the area.”

“We?”

“Pakkun arrived in the Hokage’s office six days ago. He must have run the whole way. He collapsed before he could give his message, but it was pretty obvious what it was. The Hokage sent a whole ANBU team to back you up, though the excitement was all over by the time we got here.”

“Is he alright?” Kakashi asks, because that’s danger from a completely unexpected quarter. Pakkun...

“He’s fine, just exhausted. Hana is tending to him.”

Kakashi relaxes. Marginally. “And the mission?”

“The bridge builder is still alive, and considering the mission was supposed to be a simple escort, I’d say that’s a success. We’ll be renegotiating the mission fees, of course, in light of what’s happened. He wants to see you.”

“See me?” Kakashi asks.

“Yes. I’ll allow it, if you insist, but if it gets to be too much I’ll kick him out.”

“...what do you mean?” Kakashi asks. “Didn’t we win?”

“Yes, but he may not see it that way. His daughter and grandson were killed. Looks like a hostage situation gone wrong. And the woman was... badly handled. He is... distraught.”

Kakashi is frozen with horror. That hadn’t happened last time. How had his interference done that? “I... send him in,” he says, after too long of a pause.

The medic radiates disapproval, but moves to obey.

Tazuna shuffles in, the image of a broken man. Gatou is dead, and his bridge is safe. This should have been a moment of triumph for him.

This is Kakashi’s fault.

Tazuna can’t seem to muster up the will for recriminations, and he seats himself at Kakashi’s bedside. The heavy silence stretches.

“You ever lose someone?” Tazuna asks at last.

The sound Kakashi makes could loosely be termed laughter.

Tazuna’s answering smile is just as grim and dead. “How do you do it? How do you go on?”

“You just do,” Kakashi says.

Tazuna gives him the look that answer deserves.

“You make a list,” Kakashi says, deciding that he owes this man the truth, even if Tazuna never fully understands just how much Kakashi has failed him. “I wrote mine down, at first.”

He looks at his arms, bared by the sleep shirt he's wearing. There are a few faint scars from where he dug the pen too deep. Maybe it's time to start that again. "After a few years, it was a mental list. Today I have to teach a kenjutsu lesson. Today I have a rematch with my rival, he's counting on me to be there. I promised my dogs a treat. Whatever it is, you have to get up, because you have something you have to do."

"And that really works?"

Kakashi shrugs. "I'm still here, aren't I?" He hopes that doesn't come out quite as bitter as it sounded in his head. "I have students depending on me. I have to train them, until they can stand on their own."

"The village is still depending on me," Tazuna says slowly. "I have to finish the bridge." He looks Kakashi in the eye.

"And then... you'll have to ask someone else," Kakashi says, looking away.

"And then, I'm done," Tazuna says, and there's a certain satisfaction to it.

Yeah. That sounds about right.

~\*~

They limp back to the village, pointedly escorted by the ANBU, and his students are quiet and subdued.

Kakashi is stuck debriefing for most of the night, trying to justify his decision to remain in Wave and go outside the mission parameters. The only reason he doesn't receive an official reprimand is that the mission was, at least technically, a success, and Konoha has negotiated an almost criminally favorable trade agreement for when the nation starts prospering again.

After that he's grateful to just curl up under his own worn blanket with a fully-recovered Pakkun on his pillow, trying to find a position that doesn't pull on the hole in his shoulder.

~\*~

He wakes to a summons from the Hokage.

And listens, first with incredulity, then the simmering embers of anger, as he is informed that there will be an official investigation into his actions during the mission. With the mission unexpectedly turning A-rank, the genin were all debriefed separately. It spares their pride while letting the higher-ups assess their level of trauma. It's supposed to be a routine procedure.

But Sasuke reported Kakashi for acting strangely, and now there's going to be an official investigation.

Kakashi can't believe this.

“Normally we wouldn’t give this much weight to a new genin’s opinion,” the Hokage says, sounding apologetic. But not apologetic enough. “Because of his... well. His unique situation, we’ll say, we want him to know that we take his concerns seriously.”

They’re accusing Kakashi... *Kakashi*... of being the next Itachi?

Naruto used to bitch endlessly about Sasuke getting special treatment, and for the first time Kakashi considers that he might not have been exaggerating.

It has to be guilt driving the Hokage, leading him to overcompensate in the other direction.

Kakashi slowly becomes aware that the chair back he is leaning against has been warped under his hands. He forces himself to let go.

“This isn’t a reflection of our faith in you,” the Hokage says.

Like hell.

Kakashi is deeply ashamed of himself for just going along with the catering to Sasuke last time around, when it had such disastrous results, but it appears that he might not have had any choice. Not that that frees him from culpability.

But someone has to keep an eye on Sasuke, so he has to get a hold of himself.

“Well,” he says, forcing his voice to sound light. It’s just another mission, he’s an expert at those. “He was quite angry that I spent more time trying to teach Naruto the tree-walking technique than him.”

The Hokage blinks at him. “...that’s all?”

“I believe he also resented being the only one seriously injured,” Kakashi says. He hadn’t actually observed anything of the sort, but he knows the kind of person Sasuke is. “He considers himself well above his teammates, and doesn’t appreciate being burdened with them.”

The Hokage’s slight wince tells Kakashi that he’s hit his target.

“I am becoming concerned about his attitude,” Kakashi says. He’d seriously considered reporting Sasuke for being unstable when they returned to the village. If he could wrangle an actually unbiased review of Sasuke’s mental state, it isn’t likely he’d be cleared for active duty. The only thing holding him back was concern that the village wouldn’t let go of the last Sharingan.

Now, of course, his word definitely won’t be enough to get anything done about Sasuke. They’ll think it’s retaliatory. Which it is, but not for this ridiculous, childish pettiness.

“Perhaps a guard would be appropriate,” the Hokage says. Accusations of being the next Itachi cut both ways. “And you might want to have someone join you in training for a few weeks, just to avoid any appearance of impropriety.”

Great. *Supervision*. Kakashi considers reminding the Hokage that he'd fought bitterly to avoid being a jounin-sensei at all, and if he's shit at it the Hokage has no one to blame but himself, but Kakashi doesn't want to lose his team entirely. No other jounin knows the dangers Naruto is going to face. He can't protect him if he's not there.

"I'm also concerned about this other report," the Hokage says. "From your female student."

The stab of betrayal is all the more painful for its unexpectedness. "Sakura?" he says dumbly. *Sakura* reported him? What did he do now?

"She says that there were three major confrontations with enemy ninja, and two of them ended with you nearly dying."

"That first one was only chakra exhaustion," Kakashi mutters.

"From what I can gather, you barely fought back at all on the bridge," the Hokage says. He puts on his 'bad news' face. "There is some concern that you might be... relapsing."

It takes Kakashi a moment to understand what he's hinting at. Then he sits up sharply. "*No*."

"You have to admit, this is similar to the start of your full-time employment in ANBU—"

"No it isn't!"

"—when you were taking S-ranks back to back in hopes that one day you wouldn't return."

Kakashi prefers not to be reminded of that time, but there's a (thick) file on him somewhere very secure that has almost five years blocked out as 'actively suicidal'. He's past that. He is.

Sort of.

Even so, that wasn't what happened in Wave, but if he tries to tell them the truth he'll be straight back in the bowels of ANBU medical, stripped of his weapons and under 24-hour eyes-on watch.

He never wants to go through that again.

Not least because there is no chance at all that he'll pass any kind of psych exam in his current state.

He must not be doing a very good job masking his desperation, because the Hokage is making his paternal face, the one that makes Kakashi want to be sick.

"I don't think we're at the point where I need to take any... official steps... but I *strongly encourage* you to find someone to join you in team practice, and I'm restricting Team Seven to in-village D-ranks. After such an intense mission, no one will question it."

Kakashi doesn't protest, even though he's essentially being labelled incompetent and everyone will know it, official word or not. He's too grateful at dodging the psych bullet.

“Now, I’m sure your team is waiting for you.” The Hokage chuckles. “Not that they’re not used to it.”

Kakashi attempts a weak smile, probably fails, and makes tracks out of there.

~\*~

He isn’t even given the dignity of choosing who will be supervising him. Not that he wouldn’t have chosen Gai anyway, Gai who pitched a fit at anyone who stood still long enough until Kakashi was released from the official suicide watch, only to take up the burden himself. They hadn’t even really known each other back then.

Kakashi has never deserved a friend like Gai.

He is sharply reminded of this when he sees Lee’s smiling face. It’s not that he’d *forgotten*, exactly, he just... hadn’t thought of it. Hadn’t thought of him. Hadn’t cared.

His stomach lurches.

Gai doesn’t draw any attention to Kakashi or the unusual situation, distracting everyone with his flamboyant personality. If Kakashi were in the mood for it, he would be amused by Sakura’s horrified expression.

He kind of wants to punch the contemptuous look right off Sasuke’s smug face. As if he has any right to look down on Gai, who is a hundred times the shinobi he is. A thousand.

“I hear that you are learning the tree-walking technique!” Gai shouts, finally winding down his welcoming speech. “So that is where we shall begin!”

“Aww,” Tenten groans. “Do we really have to do baby stuff?”

There’s a beat of silence, where Sasuke tries to glare her into the ground.

“Yeah,” Neji says. “We mastered this ages ago.”

Kakashi whips his head around, stopping his contemplation of Sasuke, and meets Neji’s eyes. He looks as exhausted and miserable as Kakashi feels.

In Wave, where he didn’t have access to either of his allies, Kakashi sort of forgot that he wasn’t alone. He needs to find a way to get a private word with Neji as soon as possible.

Gai lectures everyone indiscriminately—and loudly, of course—on the necessity of maintaining a solid foundation in the basics, and sets his team to sparring perpendicular to the ground.

Sasuke watches this display with mixed resentment and envy.

Kakashi hopes he’s not the only one who notices this.

When Gai is satisfied with their efforts—and Team S—fuck, this is ridiculous—*Kakashi's team*—is reeling with exhaustion, he sets the two teams to sparring against each other.

This is something of a disaster from the very start.

Lee and Naruto get on like a house on fire—with about the same effect on the general landscape. They're too similar, both too impulsive and stubborn, and with Naruto's inhuman stamina Lee's taijutsu looks ineffective, when it's actually quite impressive for a genin. They abandon technique fairly early on, fighting with a desperate sloppiness that is totally out of place in a training spar.

Tenten is openly contemptuous of Sakura, with her tiny pool of skills and focus on boys rather than training. She's easily dominating the fight, and maybe she's being a little excessively nasty, but the way Sakura is cringing and on the verge of tears is frankly embarrassing.

And then there's Sasuke and Neji. Judging by Neji's tense expression, he's having a hard time not showing Sasuke what jyuken really can do, and damn the consequences. Not that Kakashi can blame him; he's scrupulously avoided actually fighting Sasuke since his return. But from the outside he probably looks like a spoiled brat, used to being the best and sulking when he doesn't win effortlessly. Sasuke actually is that spoiled brat.

Gai calls for a halt fairly quickly, and mixes up the pairs. Tenten ends up paired with Naruto, and seems to enjoy her mobile target practice. Sasuke and Lee last one single hit from Lee, after which Sasuke starts spitting off vitriol about how ridiculous he is and how Sasuke's going to show him what a real ninja fights like.

So Lee ends up with Sakura, and he seems as hesitant to hurt her as she is to be hurt, so that works out well for everyone, even if Lee's probably wasted this practice day.

Gai himself trains with Sasuke, which puts the smug look right back on his face. The idiot thinks it's a privilege, instead of a last resort since he won't work with anyone else.

And then he has the nerve to look resentful as Gai cheerfully kicks his ass up one side of the field and down the other. Does he actually think he's a match for a jounin?

“So do you, um, want to spar?” Neji asks.

Kakashi blinks. Right. There's one left over.

“Sure,” he says. Well, this is convenient.

They fall into an easy pattern, though not as easy as it should have been. Kakashi raises an eyebrow.

“I'm shorter and considerably weaker in this body,” Neji says, “what's your excuse?”

Kakashi snorts. “I'm a head-case.”

Neji's next strike is just a hair too short to connect. He grits his teeth. "Yeah, I'm not immune to that myself. I keep waking my bunkmates with my screaming."

"Can you get away?" Kakashi asks.

Neji shakes his head. "Branch family has a curfew."

It's frustrating, but Kakashi reminds himself that Neji's the one who has to live it, and it isn't fair to add his own frustrations to his burden.

"This wasn't a good time in my life," Neji admits. "I was bitter and so I was an asshole to everyone. Not so different from Sasuke, actually."

"You're nothing like Sasuke," Kakashi says sharply. Too sharply.

"Are you doing okay?" Neji asks, after a long pause.

"No."

"Me neither."

~\*~

Neither Sasuke nor Kakashi snap and try to kill everyone in the village, so their ANBU shadow eventually goes away. But Gai makes his own judgment about Kakashi's state and insists on continuing the team practices.

This ends up with Gai's team training themselves and Gai trying to extract some sort of cooperation or competence out of Kakashi's team. Kakashi... well, he tries. He can at least give himself that much credit.

Even knowing the strong shinobi and treasured comrades they will one day be, he finds that he doesn't have as much patience with Sakura and Naruto as he should. He'd forgotten how annoying they were at this age. Nothing seems to penetrate Naruto's thick skull, and Sakura... she's lacking commitment, of all things. They both changed so much after Sasuke's defection, and Kakashi is no Jiraiya or Tsunade.

He can barely look at Lee and Tenten. He won't fail them this time, he *won't*.

Somehow.

So when he's not just cloud-gazing, he mostly spars with Neji. It's a relief to just be near someone who knows, even if they can't risk talking too much about the future. Or the present, since they're both grimly determined to put a good face on things for the other's benefit.

Naturally, this only pisses Sasuke off even more. Neji also has a reputation for being skilled, and he sees him as competition for Kakashi's attention that nobodies like Lee or Sakura simply aren't.

Had he always been such an arrogant little shit? And Kakashi had just catered to it? It's bitterly obvious Naruto and Sakura turned out well in spite of, not because of, anything Kakashi did.

And yet the mornings are still the best part of the day. Kakashi has been permitted to supervise missions on his own—in-village D-ranks, a real sign of trust—and their teamwork has degraded to the point of complete non-existence.

Kakashi thinks he could give his 'rely on your comrades' speech in his sleep, he delivers it at least once a day, but he doubts they even listen anymore. He does put an immediate stop to any nastiness or name-calling, which surprisingly—or not—puts him constantly at odds with Sasuke. Apparently Kakashi just let him insult Naruto to his face before.

Just how much more of a fuck-up can he possibly be?

He can't even work on his primary mission, because he's not allowed to leave the village. Orochimaru is still out there, not to mention the Akatsuki, and Madara.

Every night, Kakashi goes out to train, and every night he ends up curled into a ball, shaking. Pakkun was concerned enough about this behavior that Kakashi had to dismiss him, and he won't call him again until he can demonstrate some kind of improvement.

At this point he'll be lucky if it takes Orochimaru a whole five seconds to kill him, five seconds of Orochimaru laughing.

He has a responsibility, to all the people who trusted him with this mission, to the whole world that didn't ask for Kakashi to abandon a dying comrade and neglect a psychotic student and thus destroy civilization.

Neji is a child in this time, and subject to those restrictions, but the only one holding Kakashi back is himself.

So he trains. It's not like he can sleep anyway.

~\*~

Even knowing the future, the announcement of the chuunin exams still catches him by surprise.

"Are you going to nominate your team?" Gai asks, as they make their way to the Tower.

"No."

Gai looks shocked.

"You think they're ready?" Kakashi asks. "Have you seen them?"

"The exams can be a necessary and humbling experience for the prideful," Gai says, something Kakashi has said to him on more than one occasion.

“Not this time,” Kakashi says firmly. End of discussion.

Gai lets it lie, but the Hokage doesn't.

“You're not nominating Team Seven?” he asks.

Kakashi can't help flinching at the name. “No.”

He's not sure what the problem is. Rookies are rarely put in the exams, and he seems to recall that his decision to nominate them last time was also challenged. It seems he never does anything right.

“But... the Uchiha.”

Kakashi doesn't remember that guy's name, but he's one of Danzou's minions. Could he have been working with Orochimaru all this time? That would explain a lot about how easily Suna got so many troops inside the village. The bastard.

“He isn't ready,” Kakashi says.

They're still hesitating. This is supposed to be the sole decision of the jounin-sensei!

“I'm sure I don't need to remind you of the dangers of promoting too quickly,” Kakashi says.

They back down after that, but Kakashi can hardly believe that he had to go so far as to bring up Itachi. His team is a mess, and it should be completely obvious to anyone with eyes that they're not even in the same nation as ready.

He skips out before anyone *else* can question his professional judgment.

## Chapter 3

Kakashi is seldom late to what passes for team practice these days, but he has enough of a reputation established that no one will think it odd if he takes his time getting there. Except Gai, perhaps, but despite his uncanny ability to unravel what's going on in Kakashi's head, he'll never guess the truth this time.

The point is, he's wandering around the village, actively avoiding his team and the inevitable confrontation with Sasuke over the exam, when he almost falls over the Sand Siblings.

*Gaara.*

It's a shock, seeing him. He's just so... small. Seeing Sakura, with her long hair and round face, was surprising enough. But Gaara looks more like eight than eleven, and horribly unhealthy. The bones of his face stand out starkly, and his eyes are dark holes in his head.

It isn't often you meet someone who looks *better* after a year on the run in wartime.

Kakashi's ready to move right along, because if he can't manage to speak to Neji alone he sure is hell isn't going to manage with a complete stranger from another village, but he'd forgotten who he was dealing with.

"Temari, Kankurou, leave."

It's even more eerie that his voice is the exact same as it will be as an adult.

"Uh..." Kankurou says.

Gaara turns to look at him. Kakashi is used to Gaara's 'Kazekage look', absolute certainty that he will be obeyed. This isn't that look. He looks psychotic.

Temari and Kankurou practically run away, and the air reeks with their terror.

"I'll show you where the Suna ninja are staying," Kakashi says. Not that he has the faintest idea where that is, and as excuses go it's pathetically transparent. But his desire to talk to Gaara outweighs his practicality.

A ghost of a smile crosses Gaara's face, and he almost looks like the Kazekage Kakashi remembers. For a moment.

Then Gaara moans, digging the heels of his hands into his eyes.

"Are you alright?" Kakashi asks, almost too quiet to be heard. The last thing he needs is more suspicious attention.

"Headache," Gaara says. "I'd forgotten. My control is... better, I suppose, but... it fights."

Kakashi hadn't even thought of that. Back in this time, Gaara has to contend with the Shukaku once again. "Can I help?"

"No," Gaara says. "To be a Jinchuuriki is to bear this burden alone."

Now Kakashi feels terrible for complaining about his own, insignificant problems. Not that he was complaining to Gaara, but still.

"Your concern is appreciated," Gaara says, after a long pause. "Temari and Kankurou... they are afraid of me. Everyone is afraid of me."

Someone walks by then, and Kakashi misses his opportunity to say something reassuring, not that anything he thought of would have been adequate.

"What has happened?" Gaara asks.

Kakashi almost died, Sasuke almost died, the Kyuubi almost broke out, Neji came to practice yesterday pale and rubbing his temples when he thought Kakashi wasn't looking...

"Nothing."

Gaara raises an eyebrow.

"We don't know where Obito is or what he's doing," Kakashi says. "And Neji and I are both restricted to the village. The only person conveniently in the village right now is Kabuto, and we don't want to warn Orochimaru off."

Gaara nods, the dignity of it only slightly ruined by his twitching. "Because you want to know where he will strike."

"Approximately. It's better than guessing in the dark."

"Hmm," Gaara says. He is subtly leading Kakashi towards what must be the temporary Suna housing. "And Neji?"

Kicking himself for not thinking to say something sooner, Kakashi starts to reply. Then nods at something behind Gaara. "Ask him yourself."

Neji is doing an adequate job looking like he just happened to be walking in this direction. Though since he's supposed to be training with Gai right now, that story won't hold up if anyone bothers to challenge it.

Gaara makes no such effort. He goes straight for Neji, in a stumbling half-run, and essentially falls into his arms.

Thankfully there aren't many people about, and with any luck that looked like a genuine fall. And maybe it was; Gaara doesn't seem very steady on his feet.

"I am pleased you are well," Gaara says.

"And I, you," Neji says.

Kakashi pretends to be invisible.

“I wasn’t sure you would want to see me,” Gaara says.

Neji makes a pained face.

Kakashi tries harder to be invisible. This is feeling very personal, and he feels very much like an intruder.

Gaara stands on his own two feet, smoothing his clothing unnecessarily. There’s a long minute of intense eye contact.

Okay, Kakashi can’t deal with this. “We should get out of the street,” he says.

They duck into an unfinished house, part of one of the Sandaime’s expansion projects. The visiting competitors are located near them, to remind them that Konoha is prospering and growing.

It’s still not really private, and there will definitely be questions if the three of them are caught alone together, but there will never be a better opportunity to speak frankly. “Sasuke will not be participating in the exam,” Kakashi says. “But that information shouldn’t be released until today. Hopefully that will give us an opportunity to find Orochimaru. And if not, try to keep the events of the exam as close to memory as possible, to draw him out. After all, Sasuke will still be here in the village, so there’s no reason to think he’ll abandon his invasion plan.”

“I am the invasion plan,” Gaara says. “And I won’t be a part of the destruction of this village.”

There’s no room for negotiation in that tone. “Understandable,” Kakashi says. He can’t exactly throw stones, since taking his team out of the exam is a huge divergence. “We only need to maintain the timeline up until the invasion begins and Orochimaru reveals himself. Just don’t tell anyone your plans.”

Gaara nods. “No one speaks to me, anyway.”

There’s a brief, intensely uncomfortable silence.

“Shouldn’t Sasuke participate then?” Neji asks, hesitantly. “If we mean to preserve the timeline, I mean?”

“No,” Kakashi says, as implacable as Gaara. “We can always find Orochimaru again if we have to, but if Sasuke takes the curse mark again, it will be too late. He’s already wavering even without that influence.”

“You would know best,” Neji says, and doesn’t mention it again. “I know I have to win my fight in the prelims, but... it’s alright if I’m a bit less of a... well, a bit less of a complete dick, right?”

Kakashi coughs into his hand. "I'm sure that will be fine. Naruto's not participating, so there's no need for that epic showdown the two of you had."

Neji flushes. "Yeah, I had a lot to be ashamed of about in those exams. It is only the kindness and grace of Naruto and Hinata-sama that redeemed me."

"I too would prefer a different outcome to my fight," Gaara says.

That's right, he'd almost killed Lee the first time around. Kakashi feels sick.

"Lee will never give up," Neji says. "He will keep fighting until he is so seriously injured that he cannot move. And that will take a lot longer than you might think."

Gaara's face twists in a grimace. "My control is not... ideal, at the time. I don't know how much I can hurt him before I am unable to stop."

There's a pained silence.

"You could forfeit?" Neji offers.

Gaara looks to be seriously considering it.

"This may all be moot," Kakashi says. "There's no guarantee that the matchups will be the same, with a different number of competitors."

The other two blink, shocked.

"I hadn't thought of that," Neji says. He gives Gaara a narrow-eyed look. "Your jutsu is as problematic for Tenten as your sister's, you should beat her easily. And if you get Hinata... she will give up."

"She didn't the first time," Kakashi says, as gently as possible.

Neji still flinches like he's been struck. "That was different. She was trying... she wanted to *help* me," he says. "With Gaara... the circumstances are completely different."

Gaara accepts that with a nod. "And you should have no trouble with any of your opponents. Except me, of course. Then I suggest you forfeit."

"We'll just hope it doesn't come to that," Kakashi says.

There doesn't seem to be anything else to do, or say.

"How is Naruto?" Gaara asks.

Except that.

"He's... annoying," Neji says.

Despite himself, Kakashi huffs in amusement. Neji smiles at him.

Gaara looks politely puzzled. And also crazy. It's an interesting look.

"He's still... very young," Kakashi says. "We just have to make sure he has the opportunity to grow into the man we know he can be."

And that sucks all the amusement right out of the moment. Kakashi tends to have that effect on people.

"Would it not be easier to simply kill Sasuke?" Gaara asks.

"It would," Kakashi says. "But Naruto wants us—wants me—to save him."

Gaara frowns. "Why?"

Kakashi honestly can't think of a single reason that the world could benefit from Sasuke's continued presence in it.

But Neji is there to pick up the slack. "When you love someone, you give them tremendous power over you. Naruto will—would have—done anything, forgiven anything, to keep Sasuke alive, to preserve the chance to one day redeem him."

"It's because Naruto is an orphan," Kakashi adds.

The other two look at him.

"Not just an orphan, but a shunned orphan. Some people—though not, admittedly, many ninja, especially those of us who survived the war—are able to form bonds that can survive even death. But Naruto is not one of them. He bonded so quickly and intensely with Sasuke that that relationship became an integral part of his sense of self. He believes that, without Sasuke, he can't exist."

They're still staring.

Kakashi shrinks a little. "I've spent most of my adult life in therapy," he says defensively.

"So saving Sasuke might not even be in Naruto's best interest," Neji says. "He just thinks it is. And it's the future version of him that believes this, not even the one in this time."

"The bond may not be as intense yet," Kakashi allows.

"But if you made a promise to Naruto," Gaara says, "then you have to keep it."

Kakashi spreads his hands in a gesture of helplessness. This is the exact dilemma he struggles with every day.

"We do owe Naruto everything," Neji says. "And I suppose Sasuke hasn't done anything yet besides be completely insufferable."

"I still want to understand Naruto," Gaara says. "If Sasuke hurt so many people, why would anyone forgive him?"

“Your situation is completely different from Sasuke’s,” Neji says. “Sasuke made his own choices; you are literally possessed.”

“It’s the same,” Gaara insists.

“Naruto forgives him because he loves him,” Kakashi says. “In a terribly unhealthy, codependent sort of way.”

“It’s always about love,” Gaara says. He touches the kanji carved into his forehead.

The conversation is depressing enough that Kakashi thinks he might as well go and break the news about the exam to Sasuke. He’s in the right mood for it, at least. He and Neji leave Gaara to his own devices, and the two of them try to think of an excuse for their tardiness ridiculous enough that Gai might actually believe it.

~\*~

“What’s this?” Sasuke demands.

Kakashi lets out a weary sigh. He just wants to get this part over with.

“Those idiots are enrolled in the chuunin exam, but not me!?”

‘Those idiots’ are Team Gai. ‘That idiot’ is Naruto. Sakura isn’t worthy of a name.

And people think this self-centered child is ready to be a chuunin?

“They have been genin more than a year longer than you,” Kakashi reminds him.

“Sign me up,” Sasuke says.

“Me too!” Naruto shouts. Neither of them even look at him.

“No.”

“Yes!”

“You’re not ready.”

“I have to get stronger!”

“None of you are ready.”

“I am so!” Naruto interrupts again.

“So don’t sign the others up, just me, I can—”

“No!”

He’s so loud and sharp that Sasuke is startled into finally shutting his mouth, and the other two seem to shrink, instinctively trying to hide. Sasuke’s mouth twists down in disdain.

“I don’t know what your problem is,” Sasuke says, which is so ludicrous coming from *Sasuke* that Kakashi wants to laugh. “First you can’t be bothered to show up for anything on time, then you show but you’re just checked out.”

Kakashi knows that his punctuality has been making Gai nervous, but he can’t bring himself to fall back on old habits. That was Obito’s thing, after all. And it just seems like too much trouble, to think of an excuse.

But it isn’t any of Sasuke’s business. “And what’s your point?” Kakashi asks, sounding cool and distant to his own ears. Across the field, Gai pauses in collecting the permission forms from his team.

“I don’t know why you’re sabotaging my career—” Sasuke begins.

This time Kakashi does laugh, and it grates in his throat. “Not everything is about you and your *career*, you arrogant little brat.”

He’s dimly aware that Naruto and Sakura are backing away, but the only significance it has to him is that they are further away from danger. Further away from Sasuke.

Sasuke sneers. “You’re deliberately holding me back,” he accuses.

“The only thing holding you back is you, you and your over-inflated ego, your obsession with revenge.”

Sasuke turns white, then red. “My ‘obsession’ gives me the drive to succeed, unlike *them*” he waves vaguely in the direction of his teammates “and it’s not ego when I can back it up. Even if you won’t teach me, I can still learn.”

And then he steps back, and performs some handsigns. White chakra gathers around his hand.

The white chakra of Chidori.

Kakashi *screams*. He won’t let Sasuke hurt Naruto, not now, not ever again.

He doesn’t think to go for a jutsu, not like it would have worked anyway, and he runs at Sasuke with all the speed of an elite jounin, braces his feet, drives his elbow into his nose, drives the bone right up into his brain, instant death...

A hand glowing with chakra intercepts his strike millimeters from Sasuke’s face.

He screams again, backfists whoever is interfering without taking his eye off the real threat, and sweeps Sasuke’s legs out from under him, following him to the ground, crushing his hand with his knee on the way. So he thinks he can use Kakashi’s own technique against Konoha again? Not if Kakashi has anything to say about it.

Someone kicks him from behind, he ignores it, tries to punch Sasuke, has that stupid fucking vision of Rin again, he wasn’t even using the Chidori, what the actual fuck, slaps him instead, because he has to do something and his body *won’t fucking cooperate* Naruto is *right there*

and he could *die*, and he's screaming at Sasuke, words this time, that he won't let him kill anyone, not ever again...

That's when Gai knocks him unconscious.

Kakashi doesn't actually remember that part, they tell him when he wakes up in ANBU medical. In the private rooms. Under 24-hour, eyes-on watch.

Fuck.

~\*~

For once Kakashi's psych file—so substantial it's actually two files, a unique privilege, his psychiatrist informs him, with typical ANBU humor—is helping him. Normally, a jounin trying to kill a Konoha genin for any reason, let alone the precious last Uchiha, would be grounds for discharge at the very least.

But Kakashi is a head-case, and everyone knows it, and the village is mostly shouldering the blame for not paying more attention to Kakashi's erratic behavior. He's done being a jounin-sensei, obviously, but that's probably best for everyone.

Kakashi is still useful to the village, one of the strongest of the jounin and possessing one-third of the remaining Sharingan eyes, so they're going to try and piece him back together again.

The general consensus is that Sasuke, being an Uchiha, was too triggering, not to mention the eerie parallels between this and the first Team Seven, which was itself compared frequently to Team Sannin. Two utter disasters.

Kakashi wonders if he should have noticed earlier that he's cast in the same light as Orochimaru and Sasuke in these scenarios. Is that really what he looks like from the outside? And, worse, is Kakashi's own belief that he is protecting his comrades mirrored in Sasuke? Or Orochimaru?

"They'll be given another jounin-sensei," the Hokage says. He came to apologize personally.

He was the one who pushed through Kakashi's nomination to jounin-sensei, despite the protests of nearly everyone in the village, Kakashi included, so technically he probably deserves some of the blame for this.

But it isn't fair to expect him to see just how much of a mess Kakashi is.

There's a Yamanaka in ANBU, who got tapped to take a stroll through Kakashi's psyche.

He pulled back after barely twenty seconds, then threw up all over himself and Kakashi, which, that hasn't helped Kakashi's case any. Though at least no one seems to know about the time travel.

"Your team is fine," the Hokage says, soothingly, when Kakashi just stares silently out the imitation window. "And the Hyuuga boy's nose was barely broken."

He manages a half-shrug.

“And who knows, maybe they won’t need a jounin-sensei.”

That gets Kakashi’s attention. “What.”

“Well, you were obviously... troubled... and perhaps not making the best decisions, so I took it upon myself to nominate Team Seven for the chuunin exams.”

Kakashi screams wordlessly until someone comes and sedates him.

~\*~

Someone is shaking him.

Kakashi’s head feels foggy, some kind of drug, he thinks. Has he been captured?

He lurches upright, one hand reaching for a kunai that isn’t there, and finds himself face to face with the Sandaime Hokage.

There’s a moment of disorientation, because he remembers attending this man’s funeral, but then it all comes rushing back. Disaster. Time Travel. More disaster. ANBU medical.

“I apologize,” the Hokage says, reaching to unbuckle the chakra straps confining Kakashi to his bed.

Kakashi can’t think of anything he’s done so far that might get him released. He actually expected to have to wait until he could plead his case to Tsunade.

“You were right,” the Hokage says, low and urgent.

Kakashi’s heart sinks. That statement has never preceded good news. Not in his experience.

“Orochimaru has infiltrated the chuunin exams.”

Kakashi hadn’t said anything about that. Had he?

“Sasuke is missing.”

The world shifts on its axis.

“Breathe,” the Hokage is saying.

Kakashi is sitting on his bed, reclining really, and his breath is coming too shallow and too fast. He clenches his hands into fists and forces himself to count seconds. He is out of time to prepare, and he has to be ready *now*.

“When did he leave?” he croaks.

The Hokage frowns. “Leave? We think Orochimaru took him.”

Ha, Kakashi thinks. He'd hardly need to. Fuck, he thought he had more time! Somehow he's made everything worse, *again*.

"What's the situation?" Kakashi asks. Maybe an open-ended question will get information faster. Sloppy, making assumptions like that.

"It's the first day of the exam," the Hokage says. "The candidates entered the Forest of Death at two this afternoon, and it's now five."

Kakashi frowns. Last time, they hadn't learned about Orochimaru's presence until the bodies of the grass ninja were found, and they didn't know he was specifically after Sasuke until Anko's report, which shouldn't be until tomorrow morning. What changed?

"We were alerted to an issue when, well..." the Hokage breaks off, shaking his head, and Kakashi wants to drag the answer out of him because this is agony. They didn't find bodies, did they? Is his team...?

"Is... is Naruto... are he and Sakura...?" Kakashi can't even say it.

"Sakura is perfectly fine, just a bit shaken," the Hokage says quickly. "Orochimaru must have thought her beneath his notice."

That's a relief. Wait... "...and Naruto?"

The Hokage sighs, still not. Fucking. Answering. "Orochimaru has done... something... to him. He is in a coma, and we can't wake him. Our working theory is that, whatever it is, since it didn't kill him outright, his healing factor should set him right eventually."

The fuck kind of theory is that!? "It doesn't sound like either of them were in a position to go for help," Kakashi says, instead of the dozens of less helpful but more satisfying things he'd prefer to say.

"Well, it appears that the Hidden Sand, well, it appears they smuggled a *Jinchuuriki* into the exam," the Hokage says, thoroughly embarrassed by the lapse in security.

Also a bit hypocritical, since he personally enrolled Naruto in the exam.

"What does that have to do with Orochimaru?" Kakashi asks. He pales. Has *Gaara* died?

"They're not working together," the Hokage hastens to assure him. "We were alerted to an issue when a routine patrol observed the Shukaku loose in the Forest. When we tracked its location, we found Naruto and Sakura, unconscious, with no sign of Sasuke. It was... clearly Orochimaru's work."

Kakashi has to fight off a highly inappropriate urge to laugh. Well, that's certainly one way to get everyone's attention.

"We have so far been unable to contain the Shukaku," the Hokage says. "It has... disappeared, somewhere, and if anyone knows what the Jinchuuriki looks like, they aren't talking. We're cancelling the exam, of course, and we're in the process of recalling all the

teams, but not everyone has been accounted for yet, and the village is full of visitors that need to be watched, in case they see this as an opportunity to take advantage of our weakness.”

“So you want me to go after Sasuke,” Kakashi says.

“Yes.” The Hokage has the grace to look a little embarrassed. “You said you were concerned about Sasuke, and I did not pay enough attention. If he has indeed left of his own free will... I fear what might happen.”

You should, Kakashi thinks grimly.

## Chapter 4

It's easy enough to find where the Shukaku manifested. Even in an area renowned for its dangerous, oversized creatures, the Shukaku makes an impression on the landscape.

He wars with himself, wondering if he summons his pack if they'll actually listen to him. Pakkun often has ideas about what is good for Kakashi that conflict with Kakashi's own, and confronting one of the Sannin when he can't use any jutsu isn't the smartest thing Kakashi's ever done.

Or maybe they resent him for ignoring them, and won't *want* to answer.

He spends far too long debating this, and almost jumps out of his skin when there's a rustle in the bushes.

It's Team Gai.

"Yosh!" Lee exclaims, eyeing the destruction with great enthusiasm.

Kakashi can't actually go on a mission with him, not after *forgetting* him and abandoning him to Obito's clutches. He can't bear it. He *can't*.

Neji strikes his chakra points from behind, one-two-three, and Lee sags to the forest floor, unconscious.

Tenten gets as far as a shocked "Neji—" before she joins her teammate.

"I tried to lose them back by one of the patrols, but they wouldn't have it," Neji says, grimacing. "Do you know any genjutsu?"

"I know over a thousand jutsu," Kakashi jokes weakly, beyond grateful that Neji responded to Gaara's signal as well. The concealment genjutsu, with a tag that will let any Konoha ANBU see right through it, actually doesn't have any traumatic memories associated with it and Kakashi manages without incident.

Kakashi stares at the leafy canopy above him. What does it say about him that his service in ANBU is some of the least traumatizing times of his life?

Neji gently lays his two teammates among the roots of one of the great trees, then turns away without further hesitation. "What's going on? Obviously it must be something big."

"Sasuke has decided to leave early," Kakashi says.

"That little shit," Neji says.

"Which way did they go?"

Neji eyes him. Kakashi is one of the best trackers in Konoha. But he doesn't say anything, just activates his Byakugan. "That way."

They run.

This time it's Orochimaru himself they're up against, instead of Minions #1-4, and there's no guarantee they aren't also around somewhere. Kakashi was only present for the very end of this mission the last time around, and doesn't remember anything except that no one died and Sasuke left. And he's not one hundred percent certain about the first part.

"Can you see them?" Kakashi asks.

"Barely. Sasuke is already inside that same coffin as last time. Orochimaru is carrying it."

Coffin? It probably doesn't matter. "Something surprises you about that?"

"I suppose Orochimaru never struck me as the sort who carried things himself, not when he could make someone else do it for him."

"I didn't know him well," Kakashi says.

They run in silence for a time.

"He's outpacing us," Neji says.

"Not much we can do about that," Kakashi says. "If we burn ourselves out trying to catch him, he'll just kill us."

"He's just going to kill us anyway," Neji says. "Why are we going after him? It's not like Sasuke wants, or deserves, a rescue."

"I promised Naruto," Kakashi reminds him.

Neji rolls his eyes. "I'm not Gaara, you'll have to do better than that."

"And right now, Sasuke is weak. If we leave him under Orochimaru's control, he will be that much harder to destroy later."

Neji nods, accepting that. "And if we do catch them, we could make his death look like an accident."

"There's also that."

Nothing interesting happens for a while, and then they see someone running—more of a fast walk, really—along the ground.

It's Gaara.

In wordless agreement, they drop out of the trees.

Gaara looks awful.

“Are you... alright?” Neji asks, touching his shoulder.

Gaara flinches away.

“Full transformation... takes a lot out of me,” he rasps. “And I’m... not as strong as I remember.”

Kakashi is struck once again by how terribly small and young Gaara is now, so different from the Kazekage he will one day be.

“I’ll carry you,” Neji says.

Gaara doesn’t protest, which is frightening all on its own, and they’re soon on their way again. The three of them together, trying to ensure that the world *has* a future.

Kakashi reminds himself that this is why they’re here in the first place.

“I think I killed people,” Gaara whispers into Neji’s hair. “How many candidates did Konoha have in the exam?”

~\*~

They actually catch up with Orochimaru.

Or, rather, Orochimaru decides that he’s curious what brought this group together, or he wants to mess with their heads, or whatever passes for logic in that head of his.

He’s lounging on a tree branch, not even attempting to guard the coffin. Kakashi would call it overconfidence, but it’s probably justified in this instance. They will have to be very clever to outwit this Sannin.

The coffin is also smoking slightly. Kakashi’s not sure if that’s meant to happen, but he can’t exactly ask in front of Orochimaru.

“Give Sasuke back,” Kakashi says.

“I didn’t take him,” Orochimaru says. “Except in the literal sense. He chose to leave.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Neji says. “He’s still a Konoha ninja.”

“By that definition, so am I.”

Gaara climbs off Neji’s back to stand on his own two feet. “Sasuke does not understand the consequences of his actions,” he says. “Konoha is the right place for him.”

“You are much more interesting than I first imagined,” Orochimaru says. “It’s a pity that Jinchuuriki are unsuitable as vessels.”

“Don’t even think about it,” Neji says, stepping between the two.

Orochimaru’s tongue flicks out, tasting the air. “Very interesting indeed.”

Kakashi slices through the branch Orochimaru is standing on, but the Sannin leaps easily to another branch, snatching up the barrel with a prehensile tongue.

Ew.

“You, however, are the same troublesome brat you’ve always been,” Orochimaru says, with narrowed eyes.

“If you want to take Sasuke, you’ll have to go through me,” Kakashi says.

“Us,” Neji says.

Gaara attempts to encase the coffin in sand.

Orochimaru rolls his eyes. “This is all very tedious, but I suppose if you insist.”

He summons an enormous snake.

Gaara throws a sand barrier up around all of them, and the snake spits curses and sand as its first strike is deflected. A ribbon of sand spirals out and up, and Neji runs along it without hesitation, the next part of the path forming under his feet as he goes.

Only Kakashi is close enough to see the strain in Gaara’s eyes.

“Can you do this?” he asks.

“I don’t see that there’s any choice,” Gaara says.

Well, that’s not exactly reassuring.

Orochimaru ignores Neji, diving into the ground.

Kakashi leaps for the coffin, but it disappears after Orochimaru before he can reach it.

Traveling through the earth with a solid object that one is only tenuously in contact with? Kakashi wants to know how he managed *that* jutsu.

“What’s the plan?” Neji asks.

“Same as always,” Kakashi says, scanning the forest for any sign of Orochimaru. Whatever this jutsu, he will eventually have to come up or else Sasuke will suffocate. Probably. “We spent a year trying to keep Naruto out of enemy hands. We only need to protect Sasuke for one day.”

Neji blinks. “Can we use the same strategy?”

Kakashi curses himself for being ten kinds of fool. “I didn’t think to leave a marker in the village,” he says. It was so *obvious*. They could have had Sasuke back already!

“Surely there must be some left over,” Neji says. “You said that the marks never fade.”

“It doesn’t really work that way,” Kakashi says. “They’ll still be there, unless the surface they were scribed on has been damaged or destroyed, but you have to know where you’re going. Going to Mt. Myoboku was... a lot riskier than I let on at the time.”

“But it worked,” Neji says practically. “And it looks like we’ll have to risk it again. Would you like me to seal your tenketsu now or later?”

“Now,” Kakashi says. “We may not have the opportunity later.”

“It may disrupt your ability to use jutsu,” Neji warns, even as he moves to obey.

“It doesn’t matter,” Kakashi says.

“It’s really not good for your chakra network to be repeatedly disrupted like this,” Neji says conversationally, even while his hands move in swift, precise strikes. “But none of us are likely to live long enough for that to be an issue.”

“The power of positive thinking,” Kakashi says dryly, shaking out his arm after Neji is finished. It feels like so much deadweight.

“It’s done,” Neji says unnecessarily. “I’ll tell Gaara the plan; you start setting up.”

Kakashi nods at the space he’d just been standing in, then begins carving Hiraishin seals into the nearest tree. Polite of Orochimaru to give them all this time to prepare. With all the practice he’s had, it’s the work of mere minutes. They have next to no chance of sneaking up on Orochimaru, so they’ll have to try to outrun him. Or in this case, out-teleport him.

Nevermind that sensei himself had never actually succeeded in picking up an object while using this technique. They’ll just have to figure it out.

“This is a good idea,” Gaara says, joining him.

“What happened to the snake?” Kakashi asks.

“It is dead,” Gaara says flatly.

A reluctant smile tugs at the corner of Kakashi’s mouth. He can’t remember the last time he smiled.

He’s missed Gaara.

“Come,” Gaara says, already moving to join Neji up in the trees.

This time they go on the offensive.

Gaara sends a veritable tsunami of sand through the forest and, more importantly, through the ground, forcing Orochimaru out into the open. Kakashi and Neji follow in its wake, taking advantage of the cover it provides.

Orochimaru dodges most of the sand, deflects the rest with his sword, and catches Kakashi's wrist in an almost delicate grip. Then he snaps it.

The flickering light of Chidori dies, and Kakashi finds himself face-to-face with the Sannin.

"There's something different about you," Orochimaru says.

Kakashi tries to break free, but for all his delicate appearance Orochimaru is inhumanly strong. So he stops fighting pointlessly, and waits for his moment.

"Where's that magnificent eye of yours?" Orochimaru asks, his own slit-pupiled eyes flickering up to Kakashi's hitai-ate. "All used up?"

Kakashi can't help flinching away a little.

"Well, now." His eerie, yellow eyes almost seem to glow; Kakashi had never noticed that before. "You know you were my inspiration? I saw what a wonderful power you had found, and I did consider taking a Sharingan for myself. But I also saw what trouble it gave you, and I knew I had to take the whole Uchiha."

"Found it!" Neji cries. "It's right in the center of that clearing, about three feet down!"

Kakashi grabs hold of two small hands, one callused and one as smooth as a child's, and jumps straight down. He holds them as close to himself as possible, because he doesn't know that jutsu of Orochimaru's (yet), and they have to go under the ground. He's not actually sure his own earth jutsu will be up to carrying two extra people with him. Though he's about to find out.

Of course, he forgot who he was dealing with. Gaara compresses the earth around them, making a narrow tunnel that appears almost as fast as gravity can pull them down, and Kakashi's earth-tunneling jutsu goes untested.

"Thanks," Kakashi says.

Gaara nods. He's sweating, which Kakashi doesn't think he's ever seen before.

They finally reach the necessary depth and—assuming Kakashi's calculations are correct—they are exactly in line with both the barrel and his Hiraishin marker.

"We're here," Neji says, peering through the earth.

Kakashi is starting to feel positively extraneous. "Grab my elbow," he tells Neji, who is on his left side.

"Are you losing feeling in your arm?" Neji asks. "Let me check your chakra network."

"Later," Kakashi says.

There's a tremor in the ground, like Orochimaru, a snake, or very possibly both are on their way toward them, but they'll never catch them in time. They channel their chakra into the

Hiraishin.

People say the Hiraishin happens in an instant, that there is no interval where you are between your starting point and your destination. In Kakashi's extensive personal experience, observation aided by a stolen Sharingan, that isn't quite true. It's fast, certainly. *Nearly* instantaneous.

Nearly.

They appear on the opposite side of the clearing in a flash.

The coffin, now emitting an alarming amount of purple smoke, is on the tree branch next to them.

Orochimaru starts clapping slowly. "Most impressive."

"Are you alright?" Gaara asks.

Kakashi tries to say something, because if *Gaara* notices that something is wrong with him, he is being embarrassingly transparent.

"Oh hell," Neji says. "Did you know that was going to happen?"

Kakashi manages to mostly cover his whimper with a weak laugh. "Obviously not."

He follows Neji's gaze, forcing himself to look, and selfishly thankful that he can't see nearly as much as Neji can. Where his arm had passed through the coffin, it has been fused with the wood. The block on his chakra network keeps him from completely feeling it, for which he is eternally grateful. What he can feel is bad enough.

At least this totally validates his theory about the Hiraishin.

"So are we going?" Gaara asks.

Right. They're supposed to be taking Sasuke back to the village, not standing around and gawking like idiots.

Kakashi thinks he might be going into shock.

And then, because Sasuke is the most contrary person ever to exist, he chooses that exact moment to forcefully exit the barrel.

Gaara and Neji both jump back and shield themselves the instant the barrel starts to explode, and to Gaara's credit he makes some effort to shield Kakashi as well. Seeing as the barrel is attached to Kakashi's body, this is only somewhat successful.

At least he doesn't seem to have absorbed any of Sasuke's body. That's a little more like Orochimaru than Kakashi is strictly comfortable with.

His left arm is a bloody, partly wooden mess, and Kakashi resolutely decides to just pretend it doesn't exist.

"Can you wrap my wrist?" he asks.

Neji re-wraps the bandages around Kakashi's right wrist, giving him enough support to use it, and by the time he's done he feels a little less like he's about to throw up.

By this time, Sasuke is on his feet, the curse mark crawling across his body, eyes strangely colored and filled with madness.

He throws himself at Gaara, most likely because Gaara just happened to be closest, and the two are soon weaving through the trees, blasting each other with raw power.

Orochimaru smirks and casually leans against a tree trunk. Then disappears into it.

Has he mastered the mokuton?

Before Kakashi can give this frightening possibility the attention it deserves, the ground beneath his tree explodes and a huge snake emerges.

"That's Manda," Kakashi says, jumping back quickly. "The boss snake."

"So we have to deal with this snake first," Neji says calmly, leaping through the trees beside Kakashi as the massive snake makes a good effort at leveling the forest.

"Manda isn't the sort of being one ignores," Kakashi allows.

He almost runs into Neji's back when the boy stops suddenly, then screams as bandages wrap around the ruins of his left arm. There's a moment, when the limb is pulled tightly against his side, where he almost faints, but he manages to stay upright.

Held in place against his body instead of flopping uselessly, it's marginally less agonizing. And certainly less likely to catch on things. He thinks, if he strains, he can even manage to make handsigns.

"Thanks," he says.

"It's Lee's technique," Neji says with a shrug.

The problem with fighting Manda, besides him being over a hundred feet of coiled death topped with poisonous fangs, is his sheer size. Sure, you can hit him, but what good does it do? It's like kicking a mountain.

Neji jumps onto his back, dodging the thrashing coils, and leaving smoking footprints everywhere he goes. Kakashi isn't quite sure what he's doing, but he trusts Neji to think of something.

As for himself, Kakashi fires up his Chidori again, managing not to fall to pieces and be completely useless for a change, and runs along the snake's massive side and tears out a huge

chunk. He unexpectedly runs out of snake, and only a quick grab by Neji saves him from an embarrassing fall.

“Are you fighting with your eyes closed?” Neji asks.

“Yes.”

“...why?”

“So I know that nothing I see is real.”

Neji must decide not to ask, because he just goes back to whatever he was doing. Kakashi continues tearing bits out of the snake, on the theory that enough small wounds can collectively prove significant, but makes more of an effort to pay attention. Except to Rin’s accusing face, which he fiercely pretends not to notice.

His progress is interrupted by a high-pitched, rage-filled scream.

Gaara.

Opening his eye, Kakashi races to investigate.

It’s obvious what must have happened. Sasuke, unfortunately, isn’t an idiot, and he took basic chakra element classes at the Academy like everyone else. Chidori is just as effective against Gaara in this timeline as the last.

Neji and Kakashi jump down, sling one of Gaara’s arms over their shoulders, and retreat to the trees, where they immediately give Gaara some space.

Gaara leans over, clutching his bleeding shoulder in one hand and viciously yanking at his hair with the other. He’s muttering to himself, and the sand curled around his gourd looks entirely too much like Shukaku’s tail for Kakashi’s peace of mind.

“You can do this,” Neji says, resting a hand on a shoulder that’s not nearly as scrawny as it was a few seconds ago.

Manda’s tail crashes through a tree only a few feet away.

“I’ll go... fight them,” Kakashi says.

Neji scoffs. “Don’t be ridiculous. Gaara can fight the snake. It won’t matter if he loses control.”

“I won’t,” Gaara says, through gritted teeth. “I am strong enough.”

Flaming shuriken take off a few inches of Kakashi’s hair, effectively ending the argument.

Sasuke is waiting for him at the base of the tree. “Nice look, sensei.”

Kakashi snuffs out the last few embers, and he absolutely could not care less about whether his hair is a mess. "Let's do this."

There's a clarity that comes with fighting Sasuke, a rightness to it. He doesn't have to pretend to like or trust him, and he knows with absolute certainty that he's going to break his last promise to Naruto so he can keep his larger promise. In order for the world to get its happy ending, Sasuke has to die.

This is the moment that Tsunade-hime would say it's time to put all your chips in.

Kakashi pushes up his hitai-ate, and the stolen Sharingan spins into the Mangekyou.

Sasuke freezes, the curse seal actually receding slightly in his shock.

There's no fear or regret or anger, no overwhelming memories of Obito, no crippling visions of Rin. It might just be the blood loss talking, but Kakashi doesn't think he's ever felt so in-tune with this foreign power as he does now. Like Obito approves of his saving the world.

Maybe he'll bring up this moment later when he's trying to convince Obito to let him save the world.

Sasuke has got a hold of himself, or at least fully embraced the power of the curse seal once more, and he has an almost childishly pointed look on his face as he fires up a Chidori, like he's daring Kakashi to comment.

He doesn't, unless firing up a Chidori of his own counts.

They run at each other, and collide with a burst of electricity that levels the few remaining trees for twenty feet in every direction.

Sasuke's hand is scorched. He can copy the technique, but he doesn't really *understand* it, and he doesn't have Kakashi's affinity for lightning. It's Obito's borrowed power that gives Kakashi the speed to use this technique in battle, but it's his blood that lets him safely hold lightning in his hands.

They exchange a flurry of blows, first unarmed, then with kunai. Sasuke whips out that over-sized shuriken he's so fond of, not to throw, but to give him extra leverage against Kakashi's superior size and strength.

It won't be enough.

Most people claim that Kakashi doesn't have any signature jutsu. It's in the name: Sharingan no Kakashi, the Man Who Mastered a Thousand Jutsu. Those slightly more informed name Chidori, or his summoning technique. But if anyone ever asked Kakashi (they don't), it's that he *lies*. He never throws one punch when he can feint first, he never attacks head-on when he can come in from the side, and he never fights as himself when he can use a Shadow Clone.

Now, against Sasuke's Sharingan, all of his usual tricks are useless. But he'd have to be blind and far less of an experienced veteran than he is not to see the way Sasuke is carefully looking away from his Mangekyou, making sure that he doesn't make eye contact.

Because, of course, he doesn't understand where the real danger comes from.

So while Kakashi fights with feet, fist, and weapons with half his attention (Sasuke is arguably the most skilled genin in his age group, but he's still a *genin*), he prepares his Kamui.

"You're not taking me seriously," Sasuke says, breaking off his attack.

Well, if he wants to *talk*, that frees up even more of Kakashi's attention to prepare his technique. He's never actually used it in this body before, and the chakra pathways are not yet established. He still needs another minute.

"Why do you always do that!?" Sasuke shouts, spitting in rage.

"Really, you're going to put this on me?" Kakashi asks. His voice comes out a little distant, given his preoccupation, but given how much that seems to be annoying Sasuke it's fine.

"When you've been caught red-handed deserting the village with one of its most notorious missing-nin?"

Sasuke is taken aback for a moment—apparently he didn't expect them to realize he'd left voluntarily just yet—but he rallies quickly. "What choice did I have?"

"That you even have to ask that question proves that you didn't listen to a damn thing I taught you," Kakashi says. "You could have chosen your village, your comrades, the people who care about you! How many of them have already died for you? How many more will?"

"No one cares about me!" Sasuke screams.

"Of course they do!" Kakashi finds himself shouting back.

"I won't let them!"

"You can't control how people feel about you!"

There are little flames dancing at the tips of Sasuke's fingers, so intense are his feelings. "You don't understand, you don't want to understand! Everyone I love, everyone who loves me, they die! I destroy everything I touch! If he thinks for one second that I'm moving on, that I'm learning to care about someone else, he'll find them and kill them! Why can't anyone else see that!?"

Kakashi's concentration slips, and he loses his grip on his technique. He is so completely shocked by this turn in the fight that he can't do anything but stand there with his mouth open like a damn cow.

"I have no life, no comrades, nothing, not so long as that man exists in this world! But now I'm on a team, and no matter what I do or say Sakura and Naruto—" his voice actually fucking *cracks* "—they *care*! And they're so utterly incapable of hiding their emotions and such unbelievably pathetic ninja he'll kill them in a *second*, can't you *see*!?"

Kakashi feels paralyzed. Now he remembers what he'd been thinking the first time around, before years of fighting Sasuke clouded his perceptions. That Sasuke was a desperate, damaged kid, and maybe he didn't do a good job helping him the first time around, but at least he tried. And now he's trying to kill him? What the actual fuck is he doing?

"No one will believe me," Sasuke is saying. "No one will help me. So I have to be the one to stop him. But before I can do that, I have to be stronger! And maybe once the world is safe from that man, maybe I won't get to live in it, but at least... at least those stupid, stubborn idiots will! I'll do whatever it takes! Anything!"

"Sasuke—" Kakashi croaks.

Sasuke stops ranting, and a cruel smile crosses his face. It's one hundred percent Orochimaru, nothing of how Sasuke really is or feels, easy to see if one bothers to open their eyes.

Maybe it's not too late. "Sasuke—"

"No! Fuck you! You hate me, and I hate you, too! How dare you use that eye against me!? Me, an Uchiha! You're nothing but a pathetic copy!"

Sasuke snarls, fires up another Chidori. This one is bigger, brighter, an entirely unnecessary display of flashiness that is all Sasuke, enough that the curse mark starts to recede as Sasuke's own personality reasserts itself. He runs straight at Kakashi.

Kakashi doesn't know what to do. Everything he's done so far has been wrong. If he fights back, he'll only make Sasuke angrier, prolong this painful confrontation. If he drags him back to Konoha, he won't be trusted, he'll just run again. And if he kills him, now, he'll never be able to live with himself.

So he does nothing.

There is a certain poetic justice to him being killed by the Chidori, after all.

Sasuke is too angry to realize that Kakashi doesn't intend to fight back, or maybe he's too young, so he's less than a foot away before Kakashi sees the shock dawning in his eyes.

He doesn't close his own, doesn't give himself the luxury of hiding from the consequences of his choices.

The Chidori burns through his shirt, sends little shocks down his arm, scorches his chest.

And stops.

Kakashi blinks. What?

Sasuke is staring blankly back at him.

What?

And then, slowly, Sasuke collapses to the ground.

Kakashi goes to catch him, bites back a scream as he tries to reach out with his right arm, then follows Sasuke to the ground, reaching with his left instead, and turns Sasuke over.

He isn't breathing.

Kakashi fires a shot of electricity directly into Sasuke's chest. His body jerks, but his heart doesn't restart.

He tries again.

Nothing.

Again.

If he keeps this up, he's going to blow through his entire chakra reserve.

And just like that, the realization dawns. Sasuke didn't know, or didn't care, that an S-level technique like the Chidori can critically drain your chakra. Kakashi should have realized the significance of the curse mark receding. It wasn't emotional; Sasuke had already used up all his own chakra and was drawing on the last of Orochimaru's.

Even if he could get Sasuke's heart started, Kakashi doesn't have the kind of specialized equipment here to support a body so completely drained of resources.

He's dead.

Sasuke's dead.

He might have sat there all day, just staring numbly at Sasuke's body, but a massive shockwave of malevolent chakra forces him automatically to his feet, his training taking over.

The Shukaku is loose. Again.

The others must be in trouble. He can't give up yet.

He takes the time to move Sasuke's body into the shelter of one of the still-standing trees, for what little protection that can provide.

"Oh, dear," Orochimaru says. He comes right up next to Kakashi, reaches out and touches Sasuke's cheek. "He didn't survive the transformation after all."

If Kakashi felt conflicted about killing Sasuke, he has no such feelings about Orochimaru. In its usual contrary fashion, his chakra slips away every time he reaches for it. He wonders, if he just turned around and punched Orochimaru, it would be such a shock he'd forget to block it.

Orochimaru shrugs. "Oh, well."

Kakashi's no match for him in his current condition (or any condition, really), can't summon the will to move for some pointless last stand, and Orochimaru doesn't seem inclined to

attack, so the seconds stretch on awkwardly as they both stand there side-by-side, looking at Sasuke's corpse.

A half dozen ancient trees meet their end as an enormous tanuki and an equally enormous snake roll by, locked in mortal combat.

"I suppose I will have to revisit my plans for the brother," Orochimaru says.

"Ha," Kakashi says.

Then Orochimaru just leaves, and eventually Kakashi shakes himself out of his stupor. Two teammates still alive. Two teammates who still need him.

He's not sure what, if anything, he can contribute to the battle of monsters raging through the forest.

Which is fortunate, because he goes barely ten yards before he stumbles over Neji.

He's been run through with a sword. The hows and whys of it hardly matter.

Kakashi drops to his knees beside the body. There's such a hole in his chest that Kakashi can see the bloody grass through it. His hand flutters uselessly, not sure where to even begin healing such a wound.

Not that it would make a difference, of course. Neji probably died almost instantly. Maybe not even Sakura could have saved him.

Kakashi shifts slightly, smearing more blood over his uniform.

Well, if it's already bloody, anyway...

He strips off his shirt, ripping the sleeve so he doesn't have to deal with his useless right arm, folds it into a square the way Sakura taught him, and puts pressure on the wound.

He's still sitting there when Gaara crawls into the small clearing. There's exhaustion in every line of his body, but also a grim determination.

It's almost dark now, but Kakashi doesn't think it's just the light casting such dark shadows across Gaara's face.

The Jinchuuriki has to stop and rest twice before he reaches the tree stump nearest Kakashi. He painstakingly props himself up in a sitting position, and makes a clumsy grab for Neji's closest hand.

Kakashi reaches over and joins their hands.

"Orochimaru killed him," Gaara says.

"Sasuke died," Kakashi says, then immediately regrets it. "Sorry. I'm not... it's not fair to equate the two events, I know how much Neji means to you, to us..."

"I understand," Gaara says, interrupting him. "Sasuke was lost in the darkness, and he died there. It's a terrible thing."

They sit and watch the shadows grow.

"When I died—" Gaara says, then pauses.

Kakashi startles. The chakra block has worn off, and his entire left side is a solid block of pain, but he suspects that he'd prefer to dwell on that than whatever Gaara has to say.

"When I died, the people of Suna had just started to accept me," Gaara says. "There were no other choices for Kazekage, so the elder council had to appoint me. They believed that I was a dangerous weapon that had to be contained, and most hoped that I would fail quickly and rid the world of my existence. The openness of their hostility eased, over the years, and there were some people who wouldn't run as soon as they saw me, but... Well. My brother and sister made an effort to include me in their lives, at least, not that I knew how to reciprocate. And of course, there was always Naruto. So when I died, I knew I wasn't totally alone."

He pauses again.

"But it wasn't until I came to life again that I knew how much things had changed. Two villages came to save me, a crowd cheered as they welcomed me home, Chiyo-baa-sama died so I could live. I wanted to be someone loved by others, and now I was."

"You're a great Kazekage," Kakashi says, totally inadequately.

"That Sasuke should have to die, feeling as I did before I came to Konoha... I would not wish that fate on anyone."

"What are we going to do now?" Kakashi asks, because he thinks that might actually be a tiny bit less difficult to think about than their current conversation.

Gaara refuses to get on board with the topic change. "I wanted others to love me, because I assumed that I would just love anyone who went to the trouble of caring for me. But I've never experienced this... loss. Most of my people survived the war, safe in hiding, and there's no way of knowing Temari and Kankurou's fate. The closest is when I learned that my mother hated me, but even then, I never knew her, I only lost the idea of her love."

"Itachi... Itachi is going to go apeshit. We have to tell him, get him to understand. Or possibly relocate the village," Kakashi says, equally determined to avoid talking through whatever emotional epiphany Gaara is having.

"Neji did not die in darkness," Gaara says. "He was not alone. I saw him fall, I caught him. I told him I loved him before he died."

Okay, Kakashi can't interrupt that. Even he's not that selfish.

"There is nothing worse, I can see now," Gaara says. "Then to die unloved. So it is fortunate, in a way, that Neji died first."

“Huh?”

“Well,” Gaara says, “he doesn’t love me. He told me that he had no love left, after what happened in Konoha. I don’t blame him. He was always honest with me.”

Scratch that, literally anything is better than talking about this. “Perhaps at this point it would be best to leave our respective villages and hunt down the Akatsuki,” Kakashi says, even though he’s far from certain that he could even stand up right now.

“I think I can understand now why Naruto did not want this mission,” Gaara says. “And I can understand Sasuke a little bit. Before, I couldn’t imagine rejecting any offer of acceptance. His refusal to accept Naruto or Sakura was incomprehensible to me. But now I see. I love Neji, and because of that, I am now in unbearable pain. I do not want to live in a world without him.”

Kakashi has no idea what Gaara is going to do at this point. Maybe he’ll kill himself, or maybe he’ll go mad and destroy the world. If it’s the latter, well... Kakashi is the closest, so at least he’ll be the first to go.

There’s something crawling over Gaara’s skin, and for a horrible moment Kakashi thinks it might be a curse seal, but no, it’s so much worse.

It’s the time travel seal.

“There’s one copy we didn’t destroy,” Gaara says calmly.

“No,” Kakashi says.

“I am only sorry you have to bear this burden alone.”

“No!”

Gaara presses Neji’s cool hand against his cheek. “We will meet again. I love you.”

Kakashi remembers, with an almost physical jolt, what Gaara’s idea of a meaningful death is. “Well, you know... I... I love you.”

Gaara smiles, his own smile, now that the Shukaku is exhausted and quiescent. “You do not. You are like Neji; you cannot love anyone. But I appreciate that you want to.”

And Kakashi dies.

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