bitter promises bleed true

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by Araived

Summary

Hitoshi will live his dream in the light, showing the world exactly what he can become. Kakashi will support him from the shadows, doing everything in his power to give his little brother what he deserves.

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Family is everything, but unfortunately it's a lesson Hatake Kakashi learned too late. So when he's given a second chance, reborn as the twin brother of Shinsou Hitoshi, he vows to do absolutely anything to protect his twin.

Hitoshi loves his brother, he really does. He's brilliant, and caring, and strong… but one thing he insists he's not, is a hero. What does that mean for Hitoshi? What does that mean for the world?

In this world of heroes and villains, is family enough?

Notes

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Crossposted from Ao3.

Chapter 1: Childhood

Family. Kakashi knows family.

It's big, calloused hands giving him his first blade. It's taking his mask off at the dinner table, a hand running through his hair, a calm voice gently correcting his footwork.

Even though it's been years since he's had one, he still remembers it well. In Konoha, clan, *family,* is everything. The Konoha branch of the Hatake clan was the very last of their people. Kakashi and his father… they were the only ones that remained. Mentor and student, father and son. That's what they were. Kakashi's father had been everything to him.

Family. It's…

A shining blade, tears, a promise. Hateful words, blood painting the floor.

Afterwards, he had Minato-sensei. There was his team, darting in and out of the darkness of his life, like little slivers of light. So bright, yet so quickly extinguished. There was Gai, and Tenzou, his precious kouhai. And his adorable genin, his fierce and shining students. He loved them all, of course, even if he never would have admitted it out loud. He loved them.

But. Family.

Naruto called Sasuke his brother. Minato and Kushina told him they viewed him as a son. Family, though. It's something else. Something so powerful, so intrinsic to his very being. Impossible to describe, but there was a difference.

Kakashi had idolised his father. Back in the early days of his youth, he'd practically seen him as a god of a man, a perfect shinobi who could do no wrong. The illusion was later broken, but during those days? He'd have done anything, believed anything.

In his darkest moments, Kakashi hated his father. With Obito's words ringing in his ears, he had finally understood why his father had done what he'd done, going back and saving his teammates, even if it resulted in the start of a war. But what about the rest of it? Even with the things he'd said, family was family. How could Sakumo abandon him?

Hateful words, a promise.

If family is anything, it's duty. It's unconditional love and support; it's sacrifice. It's a vow to do anything for them, to protect them, to keep their dreams alive. Family comes before anything, family comes before yourself.

Ah, family. Kakashi knows it well.

–

Kakashi is born as Shinsou Shiro, son to Kasumi and Yoichi and elder twin to Hitoshi. He's never been a brother before, and he's initially highly alarmed at the thought. Him? Caring for a child? A small, breakable, puffy-cheeked child, who was only capable of stumbling around and shaking his fists?

He'd taken on babysitting missions, of course, but he'd always been in the guard position, looking for threats from the window, or leaving his genin to do the work while he read Icha Icha on the rooftop. And while he'd often taken shifts on Naruto guard duty, there had been no interaction.

And now he's a brother?

Kakashi quickly realizes that he has to step up. Kasumi and Yoichi may be his new blood-related relatives, but *they're* certainly not family. They were barely fit for existing in society, never mind raising two children. His nights are spent huddled in the corner of the tiny bedroom, blanket tucked around Hitoshi's small form as their parents screamed and smashed bottles in the next room over.

He spends a lot of time with his brother this way. Hitoshi has wide, round eyes, and fluffy, purple hair. His cheeks are pink and rosy, and his tiny hand automatically goes to grasp Kakashi's whenever he's scared. Whenever he does it, Kakashi feels like a bolt of lightning has just swept through his body. A familiar feeling, but something about this is different. It's not ozone and pain, a Chidori grasped in his palm, ripping through his skin. Instead, it's the soft crackle and spark of lightning chakra, a warm glow in his core and in his heart.

There's no chakra in this world, but he feels it nonetheless.

Kasumi and Yoichi are neglectful, so Kakashi does his best. He listens to the radio; he searches for books to read. Kakashi makes sure to talk to Hitoshi often, recounting lighter stories of Konoha and some of Team Seven's more fun adventures. Hitoshi's not very good at talking yet, but he does listen, drifting along to Kakashi's soft-spoken words, and patting his face when he gets excited.

"They're my team and I love them," he says one night. It's easy to talk about it somehow, here in the warmth with Hitoshi nuzzled up at his side. "They're my team and I left them."

Hitoshi looks up at him with big, liquid eyes and gently curls his pudgy fingers around Kakashi's wrist.

"Kashi-nii," he squeaks out.

And there's the lightning again, fuzzy and insistent. It's a strange feeling. It brings with it a certain pang, a desire for action, the taste of salty warmth and desperation in his mouth.

He breathes in, and he lets go.

"That's right," Kakashi says. "I'm your brother. I'm *family.* It's me, Kakashi. Shinsou Kakashi."

Hitoshi’s hands. They’re so soft.

Kakashi gets on his knees. He takes Hitoshi’s hands in his own, holds them in a tight grip. “Hitoshi,” he says. “Hitoshi.”

Kakashi makes a promise.

–

This new world is a very strange one with no shinobi and no chakra. Instead of chakra, there is instead quirks, some form of strange kekkei-genkai. Status in society seems to be highly determined by quirk type, and it’s often passed down through families.

Shinsou Kasumi’s quirk is able to disrupt thought. Not highly dangerous, but still very disturbing. Kakashi doesn’t enjoy being on the receiving end of it. Yoichi’s quirk though… it’s a form of emotion manipulation. Toggling their hormones, a sudden chill of fear and breathlessness. Kakashi makes sure to keep Hitoshi well out of the way.

As for Kakashi’s quirk? He’s seen himself in the mirror. While his one eye is purple, and his face is different, smoothed and chubby compared to the leaner appearance of his former body, he still has his bright silver hair. He also still has Obito’s Sharingan, blood red and spinning in his left eye socket. He’s not quite sure how it made the trip, but it’s here, and Kakashi’s reluctantly relieved. Even though he’s accepted this new world as his own, he’s not fully ready to give up his past just yet. There’s a reason he’s still calling himself Kakashi, after all.

Even if his quirk is most likely the Sharingan, he doesn’t intend on using it just yet. Kasumi and Yoichi are already cautious around him. He doesn’t act like a normal child, he knows that, but there’s nothing he can do about it. He’s too busy studying and learning about his new environment. That, and trying to teach Hitoshi. He has a brother now, and he’s going to do everything in his power to protect him. This involves training, both mental and physical. Kakashi makes sure to keep his mind stimulated, encouraging early reading and more advanced trains of thought. He also runs through the easier katas, gently pushing Hitoshi to stretch and keep himself healthy.

On his own time, Kakashi works on his own fitness. He makes sure to do it out of Hitoshi’s line of sight, lest his brother ends up copying him and overworking himself. Even then, Hitoshi seems to have imprinted on him, constantly following him around and vying for his attention. It isn’t irritating, but it is concerning.

Hitoshi looks at him like he’s hung the moon. And Kakashi, well. When has Kakashi ever been any form of a reliable role model?

Tenzou had admired him. Kakashi had never treated him like a proper kohai. He’d gotten him out of Root only to stick him in ANBU. He’d ignored him; he’d brushed aside all Tenzou’s concerns and turned on him when he was only trying to help.

Still, Tenzou’s dedication had never waned. Irritated and desperate sometimes, but the loyalty and resolve was in his eyes. Kakashi could see it.

“You might want to find a new senpai,” Kakashi had said one day, while Tenzou was complaining about paying for dinner. He made sure to keep his tone light and teasing. “I’m sure you can go and catch a better one out there.”

However well disguised, Tenzou still caught the edge to his words. “You’re *my* senpai,” he said, turning towards him and locking eye contact. “I would never want someone else.”

The words dripped with heartfelt emotion. Kakashi barely avoided shuddering. He pulled out his well-worn copy of Icha Icha in an attempt at hiding his discomfort. “Ah. Really.”

“Really,” Tenzou repeated earnestly. “I mean it, Kakashi-senpai.”

Yes, Tenzou was like that. Earnest and loyal, believing in him despite his many flaws. It’s different with Hitoshi though. Hitoshi isn’t even able to see his flaws. He loves him without reservation, and in Kakashi’s opinion, it’s downright worrisome.

He accepts it anyways, though. Receiving unconditional love from someone who doesn’t know any better makes him feel slightly guilty, but he still takes it. It’s far from the worst thing he’s ever done.

Kakashi’s not a good person, and he’s certainly not a good role model. He does his best though. It’s his *brother*. Of course he does his best.

He can only hope it will be enough.

–

Kakashi’s new face disturbs him. He copes by getting his hands on a box of medical masks. Apparently, this is the last straw. His parents are fed up with his strange silences, his old eyes and adult behaviour. It’s not a surprise to him when they finally snap.

It is to Hitoshi though. His little brother stumbles into the room, panic and anger on his face. “Stop it!” He demands. His hands are balled up into tight fists, and his knees quiver, but he stands tall in defense of Kakashi. “Why are you saying stuff like that about *my brother?”*

Kakashi moves to reassure him, but Yoichi stomps in close, sending the pressure in the room skyrocketing.

“You little brat,” he growls. “Don’t tell me what to–”

His eyes glaze over.

Hitoshi’s still flinching back, eyes closed. *“G-get away,”* he whispers weakly.

Mutely, Yoichi does as ordered, shambling slowly towards the other side of the room.

Hitoshi opens his eyes a crack, and gapes. “I- I-” He turns towards Kakashi, in panic. “I don’t know what’s happening!”

“It’s your quirk,” Kakashi says. Some form of genjutsu? Mind control. He places a steady hand on Hitoshi’s shoulder. “Stay calm, okay? Everything’s going to be fine. Just breathe.”

Hitoshi takes a shuddering breath in.

“That’s right,” Kakashi encourages. “Just like that.”

The next breath comes out as a shaky hiss, and with that, the control snaps. Yoichi whirls around, teeth bared, and the heavy feeling immediately pushes back down over all of them. Kakashi pushes Hitoshi behind him, settling lightly on his feet. He’s been training, sure, but his body is weak and he has no chakra. If they get into a physical fight here, he is definitely at a disadvantage.

“What the hell, *you*–”

Kakashi exhales and lets his Sharingan spin.

When Yoichi continues to move forward, it’s only to quietly take his place on the couch. He doesn’t grab or shout, simply takes the remote and sedately begins flipping through the channels. He eventually lands on a sports channel, settling in to watch it intently with the volume turned down low.

“...Kakashi?” Hitoshi asks, voice small.

Kakashi presses his eye closed, and grants Hitoshi a pat on the head. “See?” He says calmly. “Everything’s just fine.”

From the corner of the room, Kasumi lets out a short burst of hysterical laughter, before cutting it off abruptly. “I can’t believe it,” she spits. “Both of you. I can’t have anything normal, no, you’re both *villains*–”

She turns and stalks out of the room, slamming the bathroom door closed behind her.

Hitoshi tugs on his shirt. “Nii-chan, did I do something wrong?” His lip wobbles, and he looks like he’s about to cry.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” Kakashi says firmly. “We’re going to figure this out. I’ll figure this out.”

And magically, that’s enough to wipe the tears from his eyes. He looks up at Kakashi with nothing but trust, and believes him completely. “Okay, nii-chan,” he whispers, and smiles a small, gap-toothed grin.

He trusts *Kakashi.* He believes in *Kakashi.*

Kakashi is trying his best. Please, please, let it be enough.

–

They visit the quirk specialist later that day. Kasumi takes them both, and they spend the entire drive there in tense, frigid silence. Even Hitoshi can tell something is wrong. As much as Kakashi would like to keep him oblivious, it's impossible to hide Kasumi's fear and disgust.

The staff at the specialist's office are much of the same. Once they determine that Hitoshi's quirk works through asking questions, all of them refuse to answer his brother at all. Kakashi does his best to keep his spirits up, ruffling his hair and pointing out the colourful cat posters on the walls. It works, but only slightly. Hitoshi is sufficiently distracted, but when Kakashi's own quirk comes up, things quickly get worse.

If Hitoshi's quirk made them distrustful, Kakashi's quirk causes them outright terror. None of them can figure out exactly how it works. Kakashi tries to sell them on a story of illusions and a type of distraction field produced with prolonged eye contact, but he's not sure if they fully buy it. Genjutsu encompasses so many things. It's a complete manipulation of the mind, an extremely powerful ability in this world. It's not flashy or strong, but it is terrifying.

Best to keep things quiet, then. It's always good to have an extra kunai in the holster. All he knows is that if they discover his full capabilities, it would end in disaster.

Either way, they treat both him and Hitoshi with suspicion. The secretary calls out to them as they pass by. "Aren't you two just a perfect pair of little villains?" Hitoshi's head droops, even as Kakashi pins her with a sharp glare. She stiffens, but keeps her fake, plastic smile glued to her lips.

"I don't want to be a villain," Hitoshi confides to him once they get home, nestled in their blanket fort once more. "I'm not going to be one, right?"

"You won't," Kakashi assures him.

Hitoshi believes him. Without reservation, Hitoshi believes him. This absolute trust, this limitless love. This boy. *His brother.*

It's something Kakashi needs to protect.

"I love you, nii-chan," Hitoshi mumbles, and drifts off to sleep.

Something to protect indeed.

Chapter 2: Primary

Hitoshi hates school. Don't get him wrong, he loves learning. But school itself? Even though Kakashi tries his best to hide it from him, Hitoshi's not stupid. Everyone hates him. The teachers, his fellow students, even the janitors. They all hate him.

It's all because of his stupid quirk. *Brainwash*, that's what they've named it. Hitoshi wishes he had something cool like an elemental ability, fire, or lightning even. Kakashi talks about lightning powers all the time. Wouldn't it be great if he could open his hands and let lightning bolts come flying out? Then he'd have friends for sure. Real friends, not just the weird squirrelly ones who only come over to toss the ball with him after Kakashi's swooped in to have a hushed conversation with them in the corner of the play yard.

He doesn't like his quirk, but Kakashi does. He says it's interesting and useful, and then proceeds to run Hitoshi through a bunch of different scenarios where it's situationally advantageous. It's the only thing that's prevented him from avoiding its use entirely.

"Don't listen to them," Kakashi instructs, as they walk towards their usual spot nestled in the copse of trees at the very back of the park. "People fear what they can't understand. You're not a monster and you're not a villain, Hitoshi. All you need is practice."

His brother is always right, so it does make him feel better. Still, he wishes more people could be like Kakashi.

That would be difficult, though. Kakashi is one of a kind. He's super smart and he knows everything, even more than all the adults he's ever met. He has a bunch of cool talents, everything from knife handling to lock picking. And he's also insanely good at fighting.

"Keep your hands up," Kakashi orders. "And watch your punches. You're overreaching again."

Hitoshi obediently shuffles back into position. He shifts his weight and steps into it, throwing another punch. "Like that, Kashi-nii?"

"Exactly like that." Kakashi smiles at him brightly, eyes crinkling over the edge of his mask. "You're progressing very quickly. Good job, Hitoshi."

Hitoshi beams. It's true. Before, he was only allowed to learn katas on the side and do his runs and stretches, but now he gets to spar! He could practically be a hero already.

They continue for a little bit, until Kakashi tells him to go play on the play structure while he goes on to do weapons practice on his own.

"But I can do weapons too," Hitoshi protests. "Teach me how to throw knives like you!"

"You have to learn how to properly handle the knife I gave you before you learn how to throw," Kakashi chides.

Hitoshi immediately pulls out his prized blade, nearly cutting himself in his excitement. Kakashi slams a hand over his, in alarm.

“I’ll practice every day!” Hitoshi promises. “I’ll learn super fast, and then you can teach me, Kashi-nii!” He’s not Kakashi-level good, but if he practices really hard, then he’ll definitely get it in no time.

“Maa, there’s no rush,” Kakashi tells him. He holds his hand and delicately removes the knife from Hitoshi’s lax fingers. The next words are more serious, heterochromatic eyes fixed on his own. “This is your childhood, Hitoshi. You should enjoy it.”

Hitoshi looks at his brother and his solemn eyes, and silently nods.

“Good!” Kakashi rocks back up on his heels brightly. “Off you go, then!” He shoos Hitoshi off towards the play structure. “Why don’t you try out the monkey bars? See how fast you can do them!”

The monkey bars sound fun. He hops up towards the first platform, and stands on the tips of his toes but doesn’t quite manage to reach the first rings. It’s okay though, he knows what to do. Hitoshi wraps his arms around the side of the pole and shimmies up the support, gripping with his hands, then scooching up with his feet just the way Kakashi had shown him. From there, he manages to get his hands on the bars, and completes three circuits, before finally dropping to the ground in exhaustion.

Three times was pretty good. And he was super fast too! He’ll have to show Kakashi. He looks over to where his brother is most likely throwing knives from behind the thick cover of the bushes.

His childhood, huh.

“But what about you?” Hitoshi asks quietly, but his brother isn’t there to respond.

–

Everyone knows that Kakashi is smart. Like, really smart. But it’s perfectly normal, not weird or creepy like everyone else always says. It’s *Kakashi*. He’s just like that.

Nobody else seems to understand though. Everyone hates Hitoshi, but Kakashi is a whole other story. They hate him too, but more than that, they’re completely creeped out. His brother isn’t even scary! Sure, he could probably kill a man if he tried, but he also gives really good hugs and talks in a funny voice when he wants to be annoying. Hitoshi can’t see how that would ever be scary. Everyone else is probably just jealous! That’s why they make up mean things, like that Kakashi is using his quirk on them or is cheating on his tests.

“He glared at me yesterday,” Hamasaki-chan says from the desk across from him. It’s almost the end of class, and his classmates are slacking off by gossiping instead of finishing their worksheets. “His red eye is so creepy! I thought I was going to *die*.”

“I know!” Tanaka-kun responds. “And when it starts spinning like that…” He gives an exaggerated shudder.

Why are you making things up? Hitoshi wants to demand, but he’s not allowed to ask questions in class, so he just scowls.

Hamasaki-chan leans forward, eyes brushing past Hitoshi with a mean glint shining through. “Guess what? Sasaki-chan saw him on the teacher’s computer once.”

“What do you think he was doing?”

Hamasaki-chan tosses her hair. “*I* think he’s changing his grades. He’s a total cheater; that’s the only way he can always get the best grades in class all the time.”

Hitoshi sends an anguished look Kakashi’s way, but his brother either doesn’t hear it, or is just ignoring everything. He usually tells Hitoshi to let things go, but how can he just sit around and listen to this ridiculousness?

The chimes begin to sound.

“You’re wrong!” Hitoshi says loudly, getting to his feet as his classmates start packing their stuff away. “Kakashi’s not a cheater!”

Tanaka-kun huffs. “Well, how come he always gets 100’s when he’s such a slacker, huh?”

“Cuz he’s smart.” Hitoshi huffs. “Smarter than you!”

The boy bristles. “Hey! I’m not dumb, you’re dumb. And you’re both future villains, so there!”

Hitoshi sneers. “And what are you going to be when you grow up, a human trash can?”

“Shinsou-kun!” His teacher snaps. Her heels click against the hardwood floor as she hurries over. “That was unacceptable. You know you’re not allowed to ask questions in class.”

“Class is over,” he protests. He clenches his fists, nails biting into his palms.

Her expression twists. “Stay here. Everyone else is free to leave.”

“They were saying horrible things about Kakashi-nii!”

“Don’t talk to me,” she orders, voice quietly furious. “Just stop talking and wait right there.” She looks at the rest of her students, who all quickly finish packing and scurry out the door.

All except for Kakashi, who lazily throws the last of his folders into his bag and then saunters up next to Hitoshi’s side.

“Is there a problem, Sensei?”

Her lips thin. “Wait outside, Shinsou-kun.”

“If there’s an issue you need to talk to Hitoshi about, you can talk to me as well.” Kakashi shoves his hands into his pockets.

“Your brother behaved inappropriately, and there will be consequences for that,” their teacher snarls. “There are rules, rules that you will follow. *Wait outside*.”

Hitoshi inhales sharply. Consequences. A sharp frisson of fear travels down his spine.

“Ah.” Kakashi straightens out of his usual slumped posture. “I see. Hm. Hitoshi, I’m going to ask you to wait outside, okay?”

“Wait outside?” He echoes nervously. Is Kakashi telling him to disobey their teacher?

She stares down at them coldly. “I told you to leave. This is your last warning.”

“Hitoshi,” Kakashi says patiently. “You trust me, right? Go wait outside, I’ll take care of this.”

He nods. Of course he trusts his brother. Hitoshi turns to leave, but hesitates at the doorway, giving the two of them one last glance. His teacher’s face is tight and pinched, but Kakashi looks back at him, gaze full of utter confidence. It makes him feel safe. Like everything’s going to be just fine.

He leaves them to it.

The talk is difficult to hear. It’s terse and short, all hushed voices and sharply drawn breaths. When Kakashi comes out, all he gets is a short glimpse of his teacher’s face, completely white as she stares down at numerous slips of paper in her hands. Then the door swings shut, and he can’t see inside any longer.

“Is it… okay?” He asks tentatively.

“Everything’s just fine.” Kakashi says. He takes Hitoshi’s hand. “Just fine. Let’s go home.”

Kakashi says it’s fine, so it must be true. They walk home hand in hand.

–

Kakashi isn’t scary. He *isn’t.* But what happens the week after their seventh birthday… He can maybe understand why some people might think he is.

He can’t even remember how the villain had gotten in. It was all crumbling walls and panicked screams, Hitoshi holding his breath tight in order to prevent choked sobs from tumbling out. Calm, one second, and pure terror the next, Hitoshi hadn’t known what to do as the villain had shoved through the door, light glinting off his deadly talons.

Kakashi had. Kakashi always knows what to do.

His brother pushes him back towards the rest of his classmates. “Don’t worry, Hitoshi, just stay calm,” he orders. He stalks forward, grabbing the metal leg of a chair, and his hands are

perfectly steady. His eyes gleam, cool and collected, and he plants his feet against the floor. Calm breaths, centred weight – he looks like he's back in the park, about to gracefully dance through yet another kata.

But this isn't practice.

His desk is broken. It's shattered now, cracked in two from the force of Kakashi's rough landing. Hitoshi distantly wonders if they'll be forced to pay for the damage. The villain's kneeling, forced to grip onto the end of the pole protruding from his chest. And then it's ripped out, and he has no more support. The man slumps to the ground.

And at the front of the classroom…

Kakashi. Always Kakashi. There is blood coating his hands. There is blood soaking through his uniform. There is blood pooling on the floor.

There is just *so much blood*.

His brother's hands are still raised, even as he drops the chair leg, letting it fall to the ground with a crash. His nose twitches and his eyebrows are furrowed, but his eyes are completely blank. No horror, no regret.

For a single second, Hitoshi looks at his brother and wonders if he truly knows him at all.

And then Kakashi turns to him; the light re-enters his eyes, and even with the bleeding corpse on the floor, it's like everything is alright with the world once more.

"See? I told you not to worry."

–

Everyone is still crying when the heroes burst inside. Hamasaki-chan is wailing, loud, messy sobs that send gobs of mucus streaming down her chin. Hitoshi isn't exactly sure how he feels himself. On one hand, it was terrifying. That villain had looked at them all without a speck of mercy in his eyes, and Hitoshi had known he wouldn't have been able to do a thing. He could be dead right now, dead and bleeding out on the floor as everyone carefully tried their best to ignore his fallen corpse.

But he's not. Dead, that is. And while his eyes are a bit teary, it's just from that initial burst of heart-stopping fear and adrenaline. He's not *scared* scared anymore. Kakashi's here. Kakashi's safe and whole, and protected him like he always does. Sure, he killed someone, and Hitoshi's kind of upset about it, but they're *okay*. Everyone's still okay.

One of the heroes rushes up to his brother, face a mask of frantic concern. "It's going to be okay," she says, desperation coating her voice as she pats him down, tugging at his shirt.

It's true that Kakashi hadn't gotten stabbed or anything, but he was thrown back into that desk. Is he really hurt? "Kashi-nii?" Hitoshi asks anxiously, approaching his brother. He nearly stumbles over the splintered debris in his haste, too worried to care about desk slivers and viscous crimson staining his sneakers.

It’s their teacher that sets his fears to rest.

“He’s not hurt,” she says, usual pinched rage transformed into something else. Her eyes are glazed and her whole body is trembling. “That’s not his blood, it’s the villain’s. The boy– he- he *killed him*.”

The hero draws back, arms automatically coming up in alarm. “*What?* No…”

She looks at Hitoshi’s brother like he’s something to fear. She looks at him like he’s the *villain*.

And so do the police when they come to take Kakashi away to the station. Hitoshi clings desperately to his brother’s side until they’re forced to part when Kakashi is dragged into a solo interrogation. They can’t honestly be accusing Kakashi of murder, can they? It’s nonsense and completely ridiculous. The chair rattles with Hitoshi’s jiggling leg, as he sits sullenly in the dimly lit hallway.

“This won’t take too long,” Tamakawa says. His face is a cat head, soft and fluffy. “Don’t worry.”

It isn’t Kakashi saying it, gaze certain and reassuring. No, it’s a stranger in a stuffy suit, with Kakashi locked away down the hall while Hitoshi has to sit here all by himself on this crooked and uncomfortable chair. He turns away.

The man sighs. “You aren’t in trouble, Shinsou-kun.”

“What about Kakashi?” It’s his first time speaking since they’ve arrived at the station.

“Kakashi?”

“Shinsou Shiro,” he amends. “My brother.”

It’s hard to read cat expressions, but it looks like he’s grimacing. “That’s a little more complicated.”

“It’s not complicated,” a gruff voice interrupts. There’s another man striding down the corridor, expression sharp and severe. “The boy broke the quirk usage law and murdered someone.”

“Matsuda…” Tamakawa says softly.

Matsuda turns towards Hitoshi. “Your brother will be going to a child guidance centre for unauthorized quirk use. It’s for his own safety.”

What? Hitoshi narrows his eyes. “Kakashi didn’t even use his quirk!”

“There was an eyewitness.”

“*I’m* an eyewitness,” Hitoshi retorts, “and I know he didn’t use it.”

The man crosses his arms. “You’re hardly an unbiased witness.”

Hitoshi wants to tear his hair out. He struggles to keep his voice calm, but it starts picking up despite his best efforts. “When he’s using his quirk his eye starts spinning, which *didn’t happen*, and the villain wasn’t even acting like he was under genjutsu. And nobody likes us anyways, so of course–”

“That’s enough,” Matsuda snaps. “Shinsou Shiro is going to the child guidance centre, and you are going home. Your parents are here to pick you up.”

“He did it to protect us, and he wasn’t using his quirk!” Hitoshi’s standing up now, hands clenched into tight fists. “Why can’t you just go do an actual investigation and find out the real truth?”

“Your brother was wrong,” Matsuda says sharply, “and it would do you well not to follow in his footsteps–”

“*Shut up.*”

–

“They told me not to be like you,” Hitoshi says quietly. They sit side by side in a dull grey room, bars stretched across the only window. “They said you were wrong to do what you did.”

Kakashi isn’t even looking at him. He’s turned towards the window, eyes shuttered.

“Kakashi,” Hitoshi says.

His brother sighs. “It’s true that this society thinks what I did was murder. But Hitoshi – you’ve done all my thought exercises. Tell me, what would have happened if I had done nothing?”

The blanket is thin and linty. Hitoshi picks at the ragged edges. “They said the heroes would have saved us without any deaths.” His voice is small and uncertain.

“They arrived approximately two minutes after the incident. That’s two extra minutes for the villain to have freely acted. Try again. What would have happened?”

He’s only ever heard this tone of voice a few times before. A small hole grows in the side of the blanket as Hitoshi’s fingernails rip the threads apart.

He’s done thought exercises like this before. Battle and tactics and strategy – Kakashi had always made it fun. This isn’t fun.

“He would have really hurt or killed us.” Hitoshi whispers. “If you had done nothing – I could be dead. We could both be dead.”

Hitoshi’s mind drifts back to the classroom, but this time it’s not his own body staining the dusty floors. Bright silver hair, tired heterochromatic eyes, no, this is his brother, lifeless and

still. Hitoshi's gut is churning. With a sudden flash of insight, he knows now that he'd do absolutely anything to prevent this vision from coming true.

"That's right," Kakashi nods. "That villain would not have been talked down. He saw us all as targets, and taking him out as quickly and efficiently as possible was the only way to minimize casualties."

Hitoshi nods silently, eyes back on the greying fabric.

"Hitoshi," Kakashi says, and Hitoshi looks up. His brother is looking at him now, eyes fierce, and protective, and so, so warm. "You don't stand by and let people die. Even more than that, when the people you love are in danger, you protect them. You protect them with everything you have."

People you love. *You protect them*. Hitoshi engraves these words into his soul.

Kakashi's body loosens, and even though they're the same height, he drops a heavy hand on Hitoshi's head. "Ah, good."

They lapse back into silence, but it's a more comfortable one, this time. A few more minutes pass by before his brother speaks up once more.

"You didn't have to come with me, you know."

Hitoshi had been drifting off. He blinks sleepily and tries to sit back up. "What?"

"You didn't have to use your quirk. This isn't a good place to be, and now illegal quirk use is on your record."

He blinks again. Did Kakashi even have to ask? Did he not understand?

"You're my brother," Hitoshi says simply. "I love you."

"Oh, Hitoshi," his brother sighs longsufferingly. He sounds tired and achy, but still somehow content. "Whatever am I going to do with you?"

Hitoshi doesn't say anything back, he just curls in closer. The room is hard and cold, and the mere rags posing as sheets do nothing to ward off the chill, but Kakashi is as warm as ever.

Chapter 3

Kakashi learns very quickly that the so-called child guidance centre is absolutely no place for a child.

It starts with Hitoshi, wide-eyed and horrified, struggling to fall in line with the beaten-down stream of empty-eyed children. They're forbidden from using their quirks, and are punished harshly for the vaguest implication of quirk usage. Hitoshi isn't even allowed to talk to their caretakers. He's forced to hold his tongue from morning until night, and too often, Kakashi will see him hesitating to speak his mind even when there is no one else around.

Kakashi is forced to wear an eyepatch. It's not like he minds. It's even a relief sometimes, an old reminder of what he used to have. Painful, yes, sharp jolts of homesickness and guilt stinging against his breastbone, but familiar nonetheless. He takes the fabric in his hands and makes sure Hitoshi can see only his carefree grin as he slides it over his Sharingan.

The other children are wary. The adults, certainly, they're the ones who have his records after all. They fear the shinobi stuck in the child's body that radiates a certain danger their minds can't seem to handle. But the children… They don't know exactly what happened, but they still pick up on it, acting with quiet hostility in an effort to stay on top. Kakashi can't blame them – this is a miserable place, and it's all they can do to get what little they can.

Wait, no. Nevermind. He can blame them after all, because for what reason could they possibly have for picking on his precious brother? Just as they fear Kakashi, they fear Hitoshi as well. It doesn't make any sense. He may have grown out of his soft fingers and rosy cheeks, but Hitoshi is still the bright and loving boy he's always known.

Kakashi's the one with the too-old eyes and ice struck through his heart. He can't drag Hitoshi down with him.

He tries to turn things around during his therapy sessions. Wearing a mask is easy, the difficult part is picking the right one. Solemn and silent doesn't seem to be working, so he needs to try something else. They're intimidated by the serious behaviour and shinobi-style reports so…

He pulls out his best.

"First, why don't we get to know each other better?" The therapist suggests, head tilted and body language open. "Would you tell me a bit about yourself, Shinsou-kun?"

Kakashi leans back into his chair, one arm draped across the back, and the other propped under his chin. "Maa, why not? I like eggplant miso and dogs. I dislike… people interrupting my reading. My hobbies include peaceful meditation, and my dream is to become a loyal and unassuming citizen of Japan." He makes sure to throw in a beatific smile, even though it's hidden beneath his mask.

“I… see,” Chinen-sensei says slowly. “You know, you’re more cheerful than I expected you to be.”

“I’m just revelling in the newfound inner peace that therapy brings,” Kakashi assures her.

She blinks. “We haven’t even started yet.”

“Ah, well best to get an early start, ne?”

Papers rustle as his therapist turns around to bring out some files. He hears her mutter under her breath, “They didn’t say you’d be like *this.*”

Ah, trolling. How he’s missed it. It just brings so much joy to his cold, dead heart.

She readjusts herself in her seat. “Well, I’m glad you’re happy to be here. Is there anything in particular you’d like to talk about?”

“Anything, hm?” Kakashi taps a finger against his mask in mock thoughtfulness. “There’s not a lot of excitement to be had around here, but I suppose something did happen earlier this morning.”

“Oh?”

“I personally witnessed a bit of a struggle this morning. There was a fight and they were really going at it. I had to pull them apart and give them a stern talking to.”

“A fight?” Chinen’s eyes widen. “That should be reported. Did you tell anyone?”

Kakashi’s mask does a good job at hiding his smile. “Ah, no, no, I had it all under control. It’s hardly my first time handling such things, you know.”

Her face pales. Oops. It would seem that he’d inadvertently reminded her of the actual reason he was here. That hadn’t been his intention.

“You stopped the fight,” she repeats. Her hands are still open, but her tone is slightly more wary than it had been initially. “How exactly did you do that?”

“I just picked them up.” Kakashi says. “They were very small. I named them Naruto and Sasuke.”

“…You named them?”

“They were very cute ants,” Kakashi adds helpfully.

He watches with satisfied glee as several emotions flash across her face. Disbelief, exasperation, regret… Ah, he really has missed this.

“If that’s all,” she finally says, eyes slightly disapproving, “is there any other topic that you think we should talk about?”

“Well, actually…” He draws the word out for as long as he possibly can before shutting her down. “No.”

“Really?”

“If you’re interested, I have a list of trees ranked from best to worst defence against giant fireballs,” Kakashi suggests. It’s actually Tenzou’s list. They’d gone out for drinks after a team mission, and his kouhai had gotten drunk and rambled on and on about it. Kakashi doesn’t even know why he still remembers it.

“*Actually*,” his therapist interrupts, “I have something I think we should talk about.”

Kakashi shakes his head mournfully. “No one ever wants to hear about the trees.”

She presses on. “I think we should talk about what happened at your school.”

“Ah, that.”

“Yes. That.”

“Well why didn’t you say so earlier?” Kakashi asks lightly. “I’m sure there’s plenty to talk about. Lots of enriching therapeutic material.”

Her lips are pursed now, and she looks down at him sternly. “I hope you’re taking this seriously. These sessions are for your benefit, and they won’t help you if you don’t let them.”

“I’ve never been more serious,” he reassures her, but she doesn’t seem to be convinced.

Chinen sighs. “Can you walk me through your thought process during the incident? What were you thinking about?”

What had he been thinking? In truth, nothing of importance. It had been a simple assessment and an even simpler decision before he’d acted. But that was hardly a civilian sort of thing. Kakashi casts his mind about. What are nice, normal, non-shinobi and non-murderous types of thoughts to be thinking about?

He’d never really interacted with that many civilians. That was normally only reserved for bodyguarding missions, which involved looking after a procession of whiny and over-anxious clients. He isn’t quite sure if he could pull that off.

What else? There was Sakura. Early, genin-days Sakura who lived with civilian parents and hadn’t been fully submerged into shinobi life just yet.

“My thought process…” Kakashi says slowly. “My uniform was completely destroyed. It got stained all over, and I never would have been able to wash it out.” That was a lie. Kakashi’s quite talented at washing blood out of fabric. “But it was ripped too. And uniforms are expensive! Imagine if I had to buy a new one, that would have been at least four books down the drain!”

“Oh. Books.” Her voice is slightly fainter than before. “What, ah, books?”

“Maa, I really shouldn’t say.” Kakashi fans his face and giggles obnoxiously.

A little over the top, maybe, but Kakashi thinks he’s nailing this. Non-shinobi, non-murderous, completely normal, if slightly infuriating civilian persona is a success! For the final touch, he makes a show of widening his eyes. “And of course, afterwards, I took some time to reflect. I have since learned the error of my ways. I understand now that I was wrong to act as I did, being a simple civilian, and that I should have let the heroes handle it to dispose of the villain in safer and more effective ways.”

Kakashi finally looks back up. Chinen-sensei’s face is completely white, and she’s clutching tightly to her papers like he’s about to rip them out of her hands. Her eyes are wide and her muscles are completely locked up.

Ah. Perhaps his innocent civilian act needs a bit of work after all.

–

Everything starts and ends with Hitoshi. After the disastrous but still highly amusing therapy session, things go from bad to worse. It’s not *all* Kakashi’s fault. Sure people are as intimidated by him as ever, but it’s the other children that are the problem. They get it into their heads that they can blame Hitoshi for stepping out of line, and the next thing they know, their caretakers want to put a muzzle on him.

A *muzzle.*

And Kakashi, well. Kakashi refuses to stand for it. So they’re getting out of here. He never should have let Hitoshi come at all, but it’s too late now, which means that Kakashi will just have to work with what he has.

So he joins the Yakuza.

Well, doesn’t *join* exactly, but he does start seeking out any and all opportunities to make money, and working as a surprisingly effective errand boy and info broker does manage to net him some cash. It’s not his fault they’re unprepared for a seven-year-old with excellent stealth skills who knows how to work the underground. He uses it to his advantage. Soon, he’s amassed enough money to buy a tiny, cruddy apartment just off the side of the red-light district.

“I have a surprise for you,” he tells his brother one day. “Bring all your things and follow me.”

Hitoshi looks curious but doesn’t argue, so they pack up their meager amount of shared items side by side in silence. There’s not much – a few uniforms, socks and shoes, a book, a toothbrush. All of it goes onto their backs in their worn and ragged knapsacks.

They sneak out the back corner of the yard behind the shed. Kakashi easily scales the concrete wall, and he’s proud to watch Hitoshi do the same, requiring only a tug of assistance when his strap gets caught.

The drab grey building with its bolted doors and barred windows fades out behind him. He doesn't spare it a single glance back.

As they continue walking, their surroundings become progressively sketchier. Wide, busy streets transform into narrow alleyways and cracked, dented sidewalks. Groups of narrow-eyed individuals gather on street corners, sending them suspicious glances. Houses transform into rickety apartments with collapsing staircases and heavily graffitied walls.

"Hey!" A man calls, leaning towards them. "What are a pair of kids like you doing out here by yourselves?" He's a tall, balding individual with a muscled body and spiralling tattoos down his arms. His expression isn't particularly vicious, but all the same, Kakashi leisurely lifts his shirt sleeve to reveal the curling dragon adorning the thin leather strap around his wrist. A gift from one of his contacts. The man's eyes widen, and he lets them pass without any further questioning.

Kakashi leads them further in, before stopping at a stout apartment with crumbling foundations and a dusty beige entrance.

"Here we are," he says cheerfully.

"What?" Hitoshi looks up at the building, then back at him. "What are we doing?"

Kakashi doesn't answer, but he does step up to the door and give it two sharp knocks.

There's the sound of purposeful footsteps approaching, and Kakashi backs away from the entrance. The door swings open to reveal an older woman with thinning hair and a pinched face.

"Good, you're here," she bites out. "You're late."

Kakashi nearly laughs. He's maybe fifteen minutes late at the very most. That's *nothing*. Still, he needs this place, and not many people would rent a room to a pair of seven-year-olds, so it's maybe best to play nice for now.

"We'd like to see the place," Kakashi tells her.

She eyes him sharply before stepping back to let them inside. "Follow me," she orders. "It's just up the stairs."

They're slow to climb the stairs, trailing after her as she leans heavily on the railing. Kakashi takes the time to better observe the place. There are another couple of apartment rooms at the bottom, but he doesn't expect the residents to be too much of a problem. When he was last here to scope it out, he'd only seen a pair of young adults and a rather anxious-looking older man. Hardly a major threat.

The construction is old and shoddy, but it's all he can afford for now, and at least it doesn't look like it will break apart from right under his feet. Dirty, yes, but still better than the child guidance centre. And while the smell isn't the best, he doesn't have his Hatake-sensitive nose anymore, so he can cope.

The light at the top of the steps flickers on jerkily as they stand at the top of the landing. The woman struggles for the key, then inserts it into the lock, light blinking back off as she does so. Kakashi idly taps the side of the wall. It sounds somewhat hollow.

When she finally gets the door open, they get a good look at their future home. Dust specks swirl lazily in the faint beams of sunlight streaming through the side window. The hallway is tight and cramped, and Kakashi has to creep around the strangely placed wall to view the singular bedroom and tiny kitchen. There's a bathroom and a small space pushed up next to the kitchen counter that could maybe hold a chair or two.

It's not great.

But there's a rusty fire escape and a good window as an emergency exit. It's away from their abusive guardians, it's private and secluded, and it's not a *complete* wreck.

Kakashi can make this work.

"Ah, this looks good." He reaches into his knapsack and sets it down on the floor, unfolding the clothing to reveal a massive wad of cash. He deposits it into the landlady's hand. "Thank you. We'll be moving in."

The woman flicks through the top few bills and then looks back up. "I see. Make sure to keep quiet on weekends, no pets, and rent should be deposited monthly. If that's all?"

"That's all," Kakashi agrees.

She gives him a tight smile and exits the room, closing the door behind her.

Hitoshi finally speaks, looking around the apartment in wonderment. "We're moving in? We're leaving the centre for good?"

"That's right!" Kakashi says brightly. "I decided it's about time we leave that place. We'll be living together now, just us. More time to spend with your favourite brother, ne?"

"You're my only brother," Hitoshi says. His eyes are slightly teary, and Kakashi does a double take to look at him more closely. Is something wrong? The apartment is bad, but it's not *that* terrible, is it?

"We'll clean up," Kakashi reassures him. "I know it's, ah… rough, but it will look better once we do some cleaning."

"It's not that," Hitoshi says. "It's… That was a lot of money."

"Don't worry about the money," Kakashi immediately responds. "I have it handled."

His brother stares up at him for a long second. "You won't tell me, will you."

"Ah, well, it's for me to know and you to… not find out!" Kakashi drops the playfulness. "Hitoshi, you don't need to worry about it. We have a place now, and everything is just fine, okay?"

“...Okay,” Hitoshi says. “You say it’s fine, so- so everything is good.” He nods determinedly. “I guess we have to do some cleaning.” The lights flicker as he walks towards the countertop and traces his fingers through the dust. “A lot of cleaning.” He sneezes.

“Nothing but the best for my little brother!”

Kakashi leans down to prod at the floorboards, and catches the loud creaking of someone running across them to collide with his back. “Oof!”

Two arms wrap around his chest.

“Ah, Hitoshi?” He awkwardly tries to turn his head. “What’s this for?”

The arms squeeze even tighter. Fluffy, purple hair tickles the back of his neck. Kakashi barely picks up the faintest of mumbles as Hitoshi nuzzles in closer.

“What’s that?”

“Thank you,” his brother says. “Thank you, Kashi-nii.”

Kakashi tries to play it off. It’s not like Hitoshi even knows what he’s been doing, and with any luck, he’ll never find out. “It’s no problem,” he says. “Just doing my part.”

“No,” Hitoshi interrupts. He drops the embrace and lets Kakashi turn around to face him. “*Thank you*.”

His eyes are so insistent, and although Kakashi knows his brother cares for him, he can’t help but be caught off guard by the utter emotion and adoration found in his eyes. He looks at him pleadingly, like he wants him to understand. He looks at him like he’s saying, *I love you*.

Kakashi breathes out, and ruffles his brother’s soft curls. “Of course,” he says simply. “Anytime.”

I love you too.

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