

Our Nightmares

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"We don't always remember our dreams, but they're there anyways." Iruka isn't a sound sleeper. Kakashi reflects.

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Why his class was learning about dreams, I have no idea. Most likely the discussion began on sleep, maybe as an element of healthy self-maintenance, and spiraled off-topic; I've watched him teach enough to know he lets them get away with that too much. He's easily distracted, which is why he doesn't like me hanging around while he's trying to hold a class. I still do, of course, but I'm subtle about it. On this particular day he was perfectly at ease while he spoke, an assurance he hadn't noticed me lingering in the hall, and only faltered to think as he answered a question or two.

"The truth is...everyone dreams, every night. It's what lets you feel rested in the morning, and it helps you sort out your thoughts. We don't always remember our dreams, but they're there anyways."

It's true, and I know it is, because I forget most of mine.

His, I always remember.

Maybe it's because he's so open about it. Because he's had next to no field experience, and never learned how to sleep silently. Maybe it's because I can't help but wake at his slightest stirrings, still unused to knowing I'm not alone there, still carrying the reflexes that are burned into me. Maybe it's just because he's so goddamn beautiful when he sleeps soundly, which isn't all that often. One way or another, he dreams, and I can't forget that.

I remember the first time that woke me up. We'd been sleeping together for a week, maybe less - in the sense both euphemistic and literal, because when he inevitably dozed off almost as soon as I'd pulled away, he always did so clinging to my arm. I could have broken away, I'm sure, but he was so stubborn in that grip that I didn't try very hard. It was kind of cute, for something so firmly in opposition to my usual tendencies. And staying with him was just...easy. Always has been.

Sleeping was a different story. The last time I fell asleep beside anyone on a regular basis was in my ANBU squad, and that kind of sleep isn't so much sleep as a long blink, senses permanently sharpened and true rest something allotted only between missions. It was all I could do not to wake at every little shift he made beside me, nuzzling into my shoulder or rolling over with a yawn or whatever it may have been. Any hopes of that were dispelled when those subtle rearrangements gave way to a squirming nearer and more startling.

I was wide awake almost instantly, and found him burrowing into my side, looking for all the world like he was trying to just hide inside me. He might have been speaking, but all I caught was mumbled distress, underscored by the clear pain the filtering moonlight picked out on his expression.

I have nightmares. We all do, and the more humanity someone gives up in exchange for the life of a shinobi, the worse those become. Iruka was only a chuunin, and a particularly peaceful sort at that, weapon of choice more often a marking pen than a kunai.

He shouldn't have had so much anguish.

Maybe for one night it wouldn't have been such an oddity. He has his share of bad memories, ones anyone who knows him is well versed in. An occasional midnight terror, mixed in with the easier dreams he says we all need to have, would have been unremarkable.

It wasn't occasional. We kept sleeping together - we have been for months now, it must be nearing a year - and the nightmares are nearly constant. Five, maybe six nights of every ten that I share his bed, I wake to his aching cries or restless tossing. Maybe my numbers are skewed, because - mercifully, I know - I forget many of my own. But they seem less frequent than his, and understanding why remains an ongoing struggle.

It comes naturally that I'm learning more about him with time, that as we've gotten inexplicably closer he's opened more of himself to my curiosity, and I - for reasons I have to argue with myself, wondering if I'm losing my sanity - have taken all the liberties I've been afforded. He's more than he looks like, when you get close. The epitome of average at first glance, another leaf on a broad tree, but complex on a level that's been taking me by surprise since all this started.

Some of it's his past, which he shares with an ease that would bewilder most. The way some people talk when they've had too much to drink, honest and open and seeming desperate for someone to listen - he speaks that way over ramen, walking home from the academy, laying about in bed on a Sunday morning. He stammers, and he fumbles for words sometimes, but when he gets going they tend to simply burble out with a startling unhesitance. There are hitches, when the topic turns to hard memories - the loss of his parents, a wound mostly healed but never to really fade, or his childhood loneliness - but as soon as the topic's something easier the words flow once more, and he tells stories of a world I've never lived in. He talks about the way he and his father used to set the table but never put anything in its proper place, or the time his old genin team went on a survival-practice mission in the forests and ended up hopelessly lost, and how *bad* the plants they relied on for sustenance tasted, even if they did have a lot of nutrients...

He tells great stories. They ramble, and there are rarely morals and only occasionally points to them, but they're absolutely real. And purely Iruka.

There are stories he won't tell, stories that only come out in those nightmares - memories his mind keeps him safe from, in his waking hours, but can't hold back when consciousness has slipped away. Some are the kind we all have, of failed missions and wounded friends - I couldn't count the number of times I've closed my eyes only to be greeted by a stubborn pout, eyes dark and young and perpetually watering behind their orange shield. Those, he talks about when I wake him. I offered to listen the first time it happened, because that seemed like the right thing to do; by now the invitation is assumed, and he'll let the memories spill out, leaning into my chest and talking till he can fall asleep again.

Some he doesn't speak about even then, and those are the ones that chill me to the core, because the sounds I'm awakened by on those nights are utterly broken - the cries of something deeply and profoundly wounded. He pleads, begs the demons of his mind to stop, it hurts, it hurts too much---

He wakes up wide-eyed, tears rushing down his cheeks, and won't let me hold him till he's calmed down. If I touch him too soon, he recoils; if I ask what it was, he shakes his head hastily, doesn't want to talk about it, swears he's fine. He'll never tell me what those nightmares are about, not consciously, but Mizuki's name has slipped amidst those desperate midnight sobs enough times to leave little to the imagination. Maybe he knows I've figured it out, maybe not; in the end, he lets me tuck him into my arms, kiss his forehead, whisper for him to go back to sleep, and we don't talk about it again. Not till the next time it happens, at least, and that's all either of us can manage.

Some of it's his present, which comes as no surprise, because Iruka is among the most alive shinobi I've ever met. Part of that I can account to his rank, and his long-standing status based here at a tame, permanent job. We all die slowly, from the moment we first get the headbands that mark our allegiance to home and a life traded for its defense, and the stronger we get the less of ourselves remain. But even

for a chuunin, and a teacher at that, he remains remarkably human, as real as the stories he tells and the smiles he flashes my way when he doesn't think anyone's looking. It's beautiful, and it's hard to watch, because there's a reason the strongest are also the least feeling. When you let yourself live, when you experience things as wholeheartedly as he does, there are few middles. There are highs, the sheer exuberance I saw in him at the last graduation, or the time I snuck a cake into his refrigerator on his birthday. And there are lows, terrible lows - I see him pacing, nearly tearing out his hair in the infirmary, waiting for news on Naruto's condition; I see the time my own mission came back weeks later than expected and he couldn't seem to decide whether he was going to yell at me for worrying him or cling to me to make sure I wouldn't disappear again.

When that's what's troubling him, he wakes with a start, eyes flashing through the room to make sure everything's as it should be. Those dreams, he will talk to me about, and I rarely need to say anything to reassure him. Just getting the words out seems to be remedy enough for him, and once he's shared what's making him anxious he'll go back to sleep, tugging my arm around him and drifting off to a quieter rest till the morning comes. It's optimism, I think, that makes that work the way it does - part of that humanity he still holds onto is a fundamental hope, a belief that if he just closes his eyes for now, things will be better in the morning. It's a little scary, being involved with someone like that, because the more sincere a heart is, the easier it is to break. I can't pull myself away, though, and neither has he, so all I can do is be careful and try my damndest not to do any serious damage.

More fundamentally than he is an optimist, Iruka is a realist, so sometimes that hopeful nature falters, and so some of it's his future. Those dreams, even ill-tinted, are thankfully the least violent of the set, and seem to cause the least injury. He wakes up worrying, combing his hands through hair we've usually already disheveled and quietly sorting out his thoughts. It surprises me, that even with the stress I can see in him during the day there's some left to spill over into sleep; he is too much of a worrier by nature, and sometimes bears an uncomfortable resemblance to a much younger me. On those nights there isn't much I can do, and we'll talk it out till he smiles and tells me he doesn't want to keep me up any more. He won't be swayed at that point, and so I lay there and close my eyes and listen to him breathe till I know he's resting again.

I guess my attention faltered - maybe I shifted, moved enough to catch the periphery of his vision - because suddenly his attention had flickered from the student he was addressing to me, offering a curious blink and a reproachful glance. I wasn't supposed to be here, said that look. Too much of a distraction; he was already blushing, flustered by my presence, and I hadn't said a word. There was a grin slipping into that expression, though, tiny but present, and I found myself smiling back in quiet acknowledgment before wandering off to complete the errand I'd been in the middle of before that unplanned bit of spying. He speaks without talking too, and by now I could translate that amused glint in his eye as permission to meet up later. Maybe we'd have a drink, probably dinner - he's quite an accomplished cook, believe it or not - and almost definitely we'd end up in his bed, falling asleep mutually spent.

I love it when predictions like that come true. He's nestled at my side now, cheeks still flushed, and he's murmuring something; I'm not sure what, because already I'm dozing off myself, senses drifting away from the bedroom and the warmth pressed up against me, away from the darkness and the soft voice...

Where that bedroom was, there are cliffsides, boulders at all sides; the warmth is gone, and the darkness is gone, and in the harsh light of a day that seems to have come too soon, someone is screaming. Someone young, voice still a child's, anguished and breathless - and there is dust, rubble, metal glinting in the sun... There is blood, too much blood, running down my cheek... my hands are covered in it...

But they aren't, and when I look again all that's covering my hands is a pair softer than my own, less callused by weaponry, palms closed around mine as if to cease their shaking. Iruka is sitting up beside me, and when I look over that hold tightens in a reassuring squeeze, his eyes ceasing their survey of my form to find my on.

"You were having a nightmare," he murmurs softly, and in the pale glow liting through the window I can see the concern etched onto his features. I have to take his word, because already I'm forgetting it; he doesn't know that, and his thumb traces the back of my hand, words carefully forceless. "Do you want to talk about it?"

This is not supposed to happen. In ANBU, on an A-rank mission, you have to disappear when you sleep. Breathing becomes silent, the body is stilled beyond any detection of life - toss and turn too much, and you may never wake up again. I am allowed my nightmares, as anyone is, but the moment they become visible is the moment an uncrossable line has been overstepped.

And yet there is a startling lack of surprise on Iruka's face, a simple understanding that shouldn't be there. He isn't shocked to see me dreaming, just sympathetic, watching my eyes for a response.

"We don't always remember our dreams, but they're there anyways."

How many nights has he soothed me out of nightmares I never recalled?

There are enough things wrong with this picture to spawn anxieties I've never had to face before, enough disparities between what I thought things were and what they are shaping up to be that I remain shaken. He can't know why, but he's stroking my hand again, and the touch is so warm...

"I'm okay," I say. Iruka scrutinizes my expression, looking through me, refusing to be lied to. He isn't, and when he deems this confirmed he smiles and lays back down, tugging me to follow.

"Then go back to sleep." Already he's tucked himself at my side again, and he's holding onto my arm as if nothing happened, pressing a sleepy kiss to my shoulder as his eyes close.

I don't know if I want to sleep. I know I don't want to dream again, to be visible like that, even to him. I know there are too many things on my mind, there are questions that have been born and things that are going unsaid that perhaps shouldn't. And I know that if I fall asleep with so much to think about, the way he often does, I may end up slipping again into the same nightmares I thought it was only my place to ease him out of.

I wonder when this came to be, and at what point I started to dream the way he does, honest and helpless. It can't be long ago; this has never happened on a mission, and I can't remember the last time I woke in my own bed from such dreams, alone with only the night and its quiet. And that makes sense, because in the end it's all instinct - silence is survival, is protection in a dangerous world. Being too alive will get you killed.

These revelations raise mysteries of their own, and a curious suggestion is creeping into my thoughts, a half-formed wondering about what it means that here, if only in my sleep, I can be a little bit human. I'm laying in his bed, and he's got his arm draped over me, and I'm sleeping not like a shinobi but like a *person*, and I can't shake the feeling that this means something. But it's still the middle of the night, and fatigue is tugging me away from it all, enticing me back towards sleep. I'm murmuring something, and I'm not sure what, but he doesn't seem to mind, and I see him smile before my eyes fall shut.

When we somehow end up talking about it, weeks later, he murmurs softly that I have a lot of nightmares; in my surprise I point out that he's the same, which I know he knows. But he blinks as if he's surprised, smiles, and combs a hand through his hair with a shrug.

“I forget most of mine,” he says, and his tone turns gentler. “Yours, I always remember.”