Claws Amidst the Cracks

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/12644355.

Rating: Explicit
Archive Warning: Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category: Gen, Multi
Fandom: Naruto

Character: Original Female Character(s), Uchiha Sasuke, Dai-nana-han | Team 7 (Naruto), Hatake Kakashi, Uzumaki Naruto, Haruno Sakura, Uchiha Itachi, Sannin (Naruto), Tsunade (Naruto), Akatsuki (Naruto), Hoshigaki Kisame, Tobi (Naruto), Konan (Naruto), Nagato | Pain, Rookie Nine (Naruto), Konoha 11, Konoha 12, Suna no Sankyoudai | Sand Siblings

Additional Tags: Dark, Angst, Fluff and Angst, Rape/Non-con Elements, She dies violently, And being reborn in the first place isn't easy, Village Politics, Mental Health Issues, Morally Ambiguous Character, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, Emotional Reliance, Panic Attacks, She hates being touched, It's a trust thing, Gender Issues, Misgendering, She thinks of herself as 'she', Others do not, It Gets Better, Nail Polish, Trust Issues, Identity Issues, So much identity issues, Because she's Sasuke and she's not, it's a long road, BAMF Dai-nana-han | Team 7 (Naruto), Itachi Loves Sasuke, Team 7 is possessive of Sasuke, that's... canon, Team as Family, Team Bonding, Protective Hatake Kakashi, Protective Uchiha Itachi, Aftermath of Torture, Rape Aftermath, Unhealthy Coping Mechanisms, Kisame adopts all the Uchihas, Protective Hoshigaki Kisame, eventually, There's a lot of gritty stuff so heed the tags, Body Dysphoria, Trans Character, Bisexual Female Character, Complicated Relationships, all around, Codependency, Author has an unconventional way of looking at intimacy, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence

Series: Part 1 of The Messy Reality of Waking Up, Part 1 of CATC
Collections: Reincarnation and Transmigration
Stats: Published: 2017-11-06 Updated: 2018-07-20 Chapters: 24/? Words: 104232

Claws Amidst the Cracks

by Undead Artist (UndeadArtist)

Summary

She wakes up in a massacre, drool and blood dripping down the front of her shirt as she
stares emptily at the two dead bodies before her.

A part of her mind is screaming, howling at the memories of countless deaths carved into it and the burning betrayal of his brother.

The other is sobbing hysterically at the memory of hands that took and took until there wasn’t anything left to take.

It takes her months to come to terms with the fact that she’s not dead but alive and trapped in the body of a six-year-old little boy whose brother had massacred his entire family. She feels disconnected from the world she’s awaken in, where children are being taught to kill and she’s living in the same house the boy saw his family be slaughtered and no one seems to care.

Being reborn isn't fun.

Being reborn as Uchiha Sasuke is a mess and a half.
Waking Up

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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- It takes her months to come to terms with the fact that she’s not dead but alive and trapped in the body of a six year old little boy whose brother had massacred his entire family.

She’s followed by men and women in masks who can do impossible things and lifts her easily onto their hips when she gets too out of it and carries her home to the empty complex that had been cleaned off the blood and bodies but not the memories. They never speak with her and their hands are clinical and professional before they step away and vanish as quickly as they had arrived.

They call her ‘Sasuke’ in the Academy that’s teaching children to kill and she’s being followed by whispers and squeals and pitying eyes.

When she’s mentally aware enough to realize they’ve basically left a six year old to the wind without anyone to take care of her it’s been nearly a year.

- Her memories are strange.

She remembers twenty-seven years as her and she remember’s six years as him.

It mixes, mashes and morphs until she just… is.

At the Academy she’s silent – spending most of the time staring out the window and tuning out the information she’s already read through during hours of nothing in an empty house.

She sleeps badly, waking up in the middle of the nights to train until her muscles trembles and her breath is rasp and collapses in a heap, too tired to think.

She wakes up every morning with the knowledge that there is a man out there who wants her dead.

- She saves up her money and on the day the boy turns eight she drags every single furniture out of the house and dumps them into one of the many countless empty ones that surround her. The only room she doesn’t touch is the room of his brother.

She buys a ridiculously large L-shaped sofa that, once installed, takes up almost the entirety of the living room. In the space it frames she adds a low table and a television beside a roof-high shelf. She
buys enough pillows and blankets to content a small army.

The bed she buys ends up becoming entirely for show as she stops heading up the stairs to sleep.

The table before the couch becomes both dining table and desk, piling up with paper, books and scrolls that are haphazardly pushed away to make space for food as she turns on her new VHS player and allows the dullness of the flickering pictures to dull the aching emptiness in the house until she crashes due to exhaustion.

She never replaces the mirrors.

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She doesn’t know if it’s because she’s Uchiha or because of the massacre but there’s a strange sort of leeway given to her behaviour – almost as if it’s expected.

She’s oddly popular among the kids despite her standoffish silence – whispers of admiration, giggling and confessions that make her sink deeper into her jacket with dark eyes.

She knows all three Academy standard jutsus with three years left to graduation and scours the compound for abandoned scrolls on jutsus. Learns to walk up walls and glide over water under the moon with water spinning lazily through the air alongside her.

Her hair grows until it falls down her chest with a soft sort of curl to the ends. It’s a guilty self-indulgence that has no place in the shinobi life but she can’t get herself to cut it.

She ties it back during spars and secures her hoodie with a tightening of chakra and decides she’s allowed.

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At twelve she graduates top of the class.

She doesn’t feel much of anything as she accepts the headband.

On the way home she buys herself a thick blue jacket with a grey hood and painstakingly stitches the fan of the boy onto the back and secures the hitai-ate to the right sleeve. It’s large enough that she can easily slip her hands into the sleeves and duck her chin into the high-raised collar when she zips it all the way up.

Falls asleep as the sun rises outside the window.

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She’s not prepared for the feeling of chapped lips on her own.

She’s not sure who is more startled by her reaction – Naruto or herself - as she twists and suplexes him clean off the table he’d crouched on to get into her face.

Her heart is pounding too hard and too loud as she shoves her hands in the pocket of her jacket to hide their trembling as Umino yells loudly for order.

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“My name is Uchiha Sasuke,” it feels strange to say it out loud and she studiously avoids the lingering eye of her new sensei. “I like… sleeping.” She hunkers deeper into her jacket as she stares
down at her hands. “My dream…” she licks her lips. “My dream is to turn twenty-eight.” She tucks her hands away with a shrug. “My hobbies are… drawing, I suppose.”

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She doesn’t feel anything in particular for her new team.

Uzumaki is loud, mischievous and lonely and Haruno is insecure, childish and violent. They’re both lying claim on her in their own ways, as rival and love interest, and it makes her skin crawl on a good day as she sinks deeper into her jacket and dares them to come near her.

D-Rank missions are repetitive, almost mechanical at times, and their new teacher is chronically late by three hours every morning and doesn’t seem inclined to teach them much of anything.

She trains harder, doing sit-ups and crunches until her shirt is wet from perspiration and runs hard and fast around the village until she’s gasping and trembling and stumbling to a stop with her legs on fire.

She arrives twenty minutes before Kakashi, flops down and immediately goes to sleep.

She’s abstractedly aware that Haruno and Uzumaki are building some sort of rapport with each other from hours with no-one but the other for company. She wonders if it’s Hatake’s plan all along as she takes in their comradery from across the clearing with empty eyes.

He talks about ‘teamwork’ and how important it is.

She stares at the ceiling of a house occupied by dead people and raises her hand up above her, squinting at pale flesh and too short fingers.

She doesn’t understand.

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She stares down at the dead Demon Brother, absently aware of Hatake’s eyes lingering on her form even as he interrogates their client. Uzumaki is shooting her frightening looks and Haruno is strangely quiet.

She doesn’t feel much at all and she wonders, not for the first time, if there isn’t something wrong with her.

If dying and waking up somehow robbed her of something crucial.

She’s both surprised and not when Hatake settles down beside her on the branch she picked for her watch that night.

When the boy was six his entire family was murdered before his eyes and he was sent home to a compound filled with ghosts without any sort of emotional support. The ANBU had been cool and clinical and the people who pressed her for all information were blurry figures with unsympathetic eyes buried into the depths of her memories.

But Hatake takes his place beside her with a sigh that gets swept away by the wind.

“First kill, huh?” He’s a tall man in his mid-twenties and his hair is wild and gravity defining, its colour catching the moonlight creeping through the trees. She feels small beside him and sinks low into her jacket, drawing her shoulders up defensively as she stares out into the darkness. “How are
“What are you holding up?”

It’s the first time anyone has ever asked her that since dying and for a second something strange and thick curls inside of her.

“I’m fine,” she says slowly.

Kakashi looks at her for a long moment. “It’s alright not to be, you know?” His body language is lax, his head tilted slightly to bask in the moon. “We might be shinobi but we are human, too.”

She hasn’t felt very human since she died. She wakes up expecting white bones and rotten skin or the beeping on whatever machine is keeping her alive in one world and hallucinating another.

Sometimes she dreams she’s buried in a coffin underground and wakes with her nails scraped raw on the wall and a sob stuck in her throat.

She draws her knees to her chest.

“I’m fine,” she repeats more firmly - because being anything but fine just isn’t an option.

He sighs, dragging a hand through his silver hair. “Okay,” he says and she’s aware of his eye burning into the back of her neck as she stares into the darkness. “I’m here if you change your mind,” he promises gently before he slips away.

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Zabuza is a terrifying man and Sasuke feels strange watching him.

She feels the KI that sweeps through the mist, the hoarse voice that follows and promises pain as it counts out their weaknesses. Is distantly aware of Uzumaki frozen in place in Haruno taking a frightened step backwards as she spreads her senses, automatically curling her chakra around the signature of the man to track him.

The day she woke up in this world it had been with the pounding memory of a hand around his throat and warped eyes digging into his own, burning the death of hundreds into his brain.

It feels as vivid as any other memory of her own and the feeling of KI isn’t new but there is something strange in her chest as she absently tracks the killer in the mist.

She died at twenty-seven, two days before her birthday, in her apartment by the hands of someone she’d thought she’d loved.

The first thing he’d done was break her jaw and shove a ball gag into her mouth to prevent her screaming. He’d cut her Achilles tendons to prevent her from running and chained her on the floor like a dog, beating her back and blue, laughing as he crushing her fingers.

He’d been so angry - it had practically reeked off him as he brutalized her over and over again until there just wasn’t anything left.

Zabuza’s KI isn’t like his brother’s piercing violence or her ex-boyfriends mad savageness. Instead it sort of creeps upon her, like the mist, almost like a ghostly sort of promise of death and she finds herself surprisingly clear headed as she reaches out and yanks Uzumaki out of the way of the water clone materializing behind him.

Hatake says something about protecting them and not letting anyone harm them before getting
caught up in a water prison technique and Uzumaki and Haruno refuses to leave when he tells them to.

There is something strange about watching the blond snatch his headband back, grinning and wiping blood from the corner of his mouth before looking to Sasuke. As if her not backing him up just doesn’t cross his mind as Haruno takes up a defensive position in front of their client, her green eyes narrowed in bravado.

She throws the shuriken and pushes against it, whip-like, sending it careening towards Zabuza at double the speed as she anchors her feet against the ground with chakra.

There is something… satisfying… about seeing Zabuza’s eyes widen as Uzumaki explodes from the transformation with a smirk as the swords man lurches back to avoid getting hit and Hatake is released in an explosion of water that splashes around him.

Before Uzumaki can crash against the water and leave him vulnerable to Zabuza, Sasuke reaches out and clenches her hand on his signature and yanks hard. The blond collides with her and Sasuke braces the impact with chakra anchored feet and makes sure the boy is steady before quickly stepping back and aside.

She shoves her hands into her pockets and sinks her chin into her jacket as Uzumaki turns to her with big blue eyes and a hesitant sort of smile.

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She doesn’t know what to feel when Haruno and Uzumaki team up to get their chakra exhausted teacher half-supported with one arm thrown over a shoulder each after the fake Hunter-nin made away with Zabuza’s dead body. Her mind is still spinning with the reveal of the Sharingan and there’s a muted sort of buzz creeping through her brain.

“Why don’t you take point?” Haruno says with something in her eyes Sasuke doesn’t understand.

“Yeah!” Uzumaki grunts under the weight of their teacher. “Leave this to us!” He gives her a thumbs-up.

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Sasuke dislikes their client, Tazuna. He’s a man who reeks of the sake he drinks and he’s blunt and harsh and large. He’s a civilian and he’s weak compared to herself but she still avoids him the best she can and refuses point-blank to engage in any sort of conversation with him.

“Your hair is so pretty.” Tsunami is nothing like her father and Sasuke stills as gentle, soft hands catches a curl of her hair at dinner. “You must be taking really good care of it,” she muses as Sasuke stares at her. “It’s unusual to see men with long hair.” She tucks it behind her ear, gentle like. “It suits you.”

“Thank you,” she grunts, feeling strange as her hand flexes around her chopsticks and lowers her eyes to her food, suddenly not feeling very hungry at all.

She realises both Haruno and Uzumaki are staring at her and makes an excuse to check up on their sensei.

Hatake is sleeping soundly from exhaustion and Sasuke pulls her knees to her chest as she stares at the rise and fall of his ribcage as he breathes. Her team mates had stripped him off his shirt and bandaged up his ribs with bruise healing cream, leaving only the mask that covers his nose down to
his collarbones and his boxers.

The room is silent, the voices from below muted by the door.

“I am not a boy,” she tells him.

“I already know the tree-walking,” Sasuke tells Hatake who is slumping tiredly on his crutches and both Haruno and Uzumaki whips around on her in surprise. “Water-walking too,” she adds, because she might as well get it out there.

“Who taught you?” Hatake’s eye is a dark sort of grey that makes her think of storm clouds when they’re caught by the soft light creeping through the canopy.

“I taught myself.” Sasuke sinks deeper into the collar of her jacket and offers no further explanation even when Hatake raises his only visible eyebrow.

He hums, shooing away the other two as he contemplates his third student. “That technique you used to get Naruto out of the water – can you describe it to me?”

Sasuke glances at the blond who is clearly struggling while Sakura presses her palm flat against the tree to measure her chakra output.

“I just locked onto his signature and yanked,” she shrugs. Everything around her has a… feeling. Everything from the rocks on the ground and the fish in the seas and the crickets playing in the grass. The larger the chakra expanse was the brighter they appeared to her. Naruto was nearly blinding with his intensity – something lurking deep in the expanse of his chakra, like an infinite stretch of power.

She realises Hatake is staring at her in surprise and looks up to meet his gaze. “Is that not normal?”

“It’s a handy skill,” he says instead of answering. “Is it limited to just living things?”

Sasuke reaches out and draws a pretty stone from the pool of water that lands with a smack into her palm and she turns her hand and holds it up for viewing. “I can’t push heavy things unless I anchor myself and trying to pull myself to a feather would just sent it into the palm of my hand,” she explains idly. “It’s why I pushed chakra into my feet before drawing Naruto towards me. He might be lighter than me but only by a kilo or two and it would have sent us both careening.”

It is the same concept that sends her shooting into the air if she pushes against the ground – the mass off the earth wasn’t about to be moved by her and the force had to go somewhere so naturally it slammed back into her. She’d broken three ribs the first time she attempted it.

“It reminds me of the Nara’s shadow technique,” Hatake murmurs as Sasuke drops the stone to the ground. “At least the concept of it. You don’t happen to have an excess of either yin or yang chakra?”

“My spiritual energy is nearly double that of my physical,” she says quietly.

Hatake studies her for a moment and she stares stubbornly away.

Apparently she has two chakra affinities – lightning and water. He ends up teaching her the Hidden
Mist technique Zabuza used on them since she can easily track through it.

Haruno masters the tree-walking exercise and spends two days walking up and down the tree to expand her chakra storage while reading a scroll Hatake had gifted her with. Uzumaki badgers her about it but she remains strangely tight-lipped and contemplative.

On the second day Uzumaki reaches the top of the tree and they join her on guard duty at the bridge where she’d been carefully spreading mist around the area and the feet of the workers to practice and prevent any hostile eyes from watching them.

The splatter of blood and scream of Uzumaki rings in her ear as her body lurches backwards and off the bridge with a sickening squelch and blood that splatters in a wide arc from the sword that tears her open from shoulder to hip before she crashes into the water.

She doesn’t know why she did it. She’s not supposed to feel anything for these people. But Naruto… he hadn’t deserved to die.

Not like that.

She wakes to lips against hers and her body twisting desperately as it spews salt water and blood from her lungs and coughs miserably. Panic heaves her chest up and down and she struggles against the arm that presses against her ribcage and into flat expanse of a chest against her back.

“Sssh, it’s okay – it’s okay.”

Hands press against her chest and her hands scrabbles against the person who holds her, her fingers curling into the fabric of their sleeves and wrenching desperately as she snarls, half-sobs, pleading wretchedly as her heels scrabble against the ground and someone pushes down on her thighs-

She wakes with a start, her blanket pooling into her lap as she sits up, clutching at her beating heart and forcing her breathing to calm. The pain registers with a wince and she realises someone had bandaged up nearly the entirety of her torso, the white wraps going up and around her left right shoulder, covering the edge of the scar that traces all the way down to her right hip.

Remembers Zabuza’s sword splitting her open.

Realises she didn’t expect to wake up again.

“You’re awake.” The door creaks as Hatake closes it behind himself, his only revealed eye unreadable as he slowly steps closer and folds down by her legs. He’s holding a bowl of rice and a glass of water, the later which he holds out expectantly.

“I don’t like being handed things.” Her throat is raw and she suppresses a wince at the rasp of it. Hatake doesn’t comment, merely places it on the ground where she scoops it up gratefully and takes a long, careful swallow.

“Both Zabuza and Haku are dead,” he tells her eventually as he pushes the bowl and the spoon closer to her. “The bridge will be finished by the end of the week.”
“Naruto?” She chews carefully on the soft rice that taste faintly of plum sauce.

“He’s fine.” Hatake studies her. “Sakura, too.”

She nods without commenting and silence settles over them, broken only by the clink of the spoon as she eats. The plum is a strange addition but oddly pleasant and her throat doesn’t feel as bad when she places it aside, half-finished.

“The massacre.” She tenses. “Did you talk to anyone about it afterwards?”

Her brows furrow. “They wanted to know what happened,” she says eventually, curling into herself and feeling naked with only a t-shirt over her bandages. “Kept asking me to describe it.” Over and over again as the boy inside of her sobbed wretchedly. “Wanted to know why he did it.” He didn’t know, he didn’t understand why his Nii-san would-

“Did… anything else happen that night?” She stills, her fingers curled into her blanket and her eyes darting up to lock with the dark grey of her teacher.

“You panicked when we tried to heal you,” he continues when she doesn’t answer. “Sobbing and pleading for us to stop touching you.” Something cold slithers down her spine. “You wear too big clothes to avoid any accidental contact even during sparring-“

“Don’t.” Something wet drops onto the back of her hand. “Don’t ask me that.” Her breath quivers and she blinks against her blurry vision. “Please.” She quivers, her eyes squeezed shut.

There’s a moment of nothing, broken by a rustle in the silence and something dropping onto her head.

She reaches up automatically, her fingers curling into the soft fabric of her sensei’s shirt and shakes as she scrambles to pull it over her head, her hands disappearing in the sleeves and it’s long enough to pull nearly all the way to her knees, her hands clumsy and desperate before she wraps her arms around her legs and pulls them against her chest as she hunches over them.

“It wasn’t your fault,” he tells her.

But it was.

She had let him into her life, had allowed him to hold her, had laughed with him, made love with him. Had blushed and laughed as they shared ice cream on the ferries wheel. Had pushed up to her toes to meet his lips in the first clumsy kiss outside her apartment and-

“It wasn’t your fault,” he repeats the words firmly and she presses her hand over her mouth as tears splashes against her knees and she chokes on a sob as she shakes her head desperately in denial.

“It wasn’t your fault.”

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Naruto stands up so violently his chair clatters to the floor and Sasuke pauses in the doorway. She’s still wearing Kakashi’s sweater, her hair is a mess and it hurts to even breathe. Her eyes are brimmed with red despite the cold water and she doesn’t even want to contemplate what picture she’s making as she takes a slow step forward and sinks into the closest chair in relief.

Sakura is eerily still, her knuckles clenched against the wooden spoon she’d been stirring the stew with and Naruto’s palms are flat and still against the table.
The blond seems to realise what a picture he’s making because he scrambles to straighten the chair up and practically falls into it. “Sasuke.” The word sounds odd coming from the blond who calls her ‘teme’ with relish. “Are you… I mean, have you…” He takes a deep breath. “Are you okay?” He practically chokes on the words, going red the second they’re out his mouth.

She stares at him, caught off guard as he ducks his head and fiddles with his shirt. In the background Sakura pulls out another bowl to add to the two already resting on the counter and stars spooning the stew into them.

“I’m… fine,” she says slowly. “Kakashi-sensei says I have to take it easy until we get back to Konoha and can look at it properly but there’s no inflammation,” she adds because the silence feels strange.

“That’s good.” Naruto’s shoulder slumps with relief and then immediately looks embarrassed by his reaction and yanks the bowl Sakura places onto the table with more force than is necessary, spilling hot stew on his fingers with a hiss.

Sakura pushes the third towards her and there’s something strange in her eyes, a tremble in her fingers. “I’m glad you’re alright,” she says, her voice quiet, almost ashamed as she yanks her hand back and shoves it into her lap.

Lunch is a strange, quiet affair that leaves her confused.

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Hours before they’re supposed to leave Sasuke is curled up and reading on the front porch when something flumps into her lap, startling her.

She lifts it, realises in surprise that it’s her jacket and that someone has bothered to stitch up the large tear in it after Zabuza’s sword. It’s clumsy and the thread is darker than the blue of the fabric itself.

“It got ruined because of me,” Naruto says, refusing to look at her.

She pulls it over Kakashi’s sweater and zips it all the way up to her chin. “Thank you,” she says, something strange and warm in her chest as she sinks into its familiar comfort.

He huffs, slumping down against the wall on the opposite side of the door.

Sakura joins them a few minutes later, settling shoulder to shoulder with Naruto.

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It feels strange to step back into the compound after nights of soft snores and whispers in the dark. There’s no muttering Sakura manoeuvring away from Naruto in her sleep. No crackling bonfire in the night or the radiating heat of her sleeping sensei within brushing distance of her hand in the small guest room.

She turns on a movie to fill the silence. Makes herself the biggest pizza to date and changes into sweat pants, a too large hoodie and thick polka dot socks before flumping down on the couch.

Restarts the movie as she shoves a large piece of pizza into her mouth, barely tasting it as the hot crust burns her tongue.

Drops it to the plate and stares down at her hands in her lap with furrowed brows.
For once, Sasuke arrives at the same time as her team mates and ignore their startled looks as she shrugs off her jacket before dropping into the first stretch with nary a hello.

She listens absently to their voices as she stretches back, her palms pressing flat against the ground as she pulls her legs up and into the air and folds one hand against her back and starts making one-armed push-ups.

“Is this what you do every morning?” Sakura calls out.

“Hn,” he offers noncomitically with a grunt as she pushes against the ground, shifting arm and continuing with the other.

“Well! I am not getting shown up by the teme!” Naruto puffs and pushes himself into a hasty handstand, overcompensating and sprawls with a yelp that makes Sakura snort with laughter. Their voices filter into a pleasant background noise as they settle into their own stretches under loud debate and ribbing.

“Your nails-“ Sasuke startles at the gasp, shifting her eyes to stare at Sakura who is gaping at her feet.

Flushes.

She usually wear closed-toed boots to allow her just this one indulgence and she shifts to cover the chipped blue paint, the other reaching for the shoes she’d been removing as they stepped into the client’s house.

“It looks good on you.” She stills, startled, locking up into green eyes as Sakura folds down before her with a grin. “I thought I was the only one who liked a bit of colour.” There’s no judgement in her voice as she carefully tugs the shoe from Sasuke’s unresisting grip and places them aside.

Sasuke stares at the chipped paint that matches her jacket, her mouth firmly tucked down and behind the cover of her jacket collar.

“W-would you like to-“ she stumbles on the words, her cheeks red and a hand curling into the fabric of her pants. “Maybe come over some day and-“ she struggles for words that won’t come, her throat thick as her cheeks get progressively redder with mortification.

“I’d love that.” Sakura’s voice is strangely gentle. “How about tomorrow? We can watch a movie and all. Make it a thing,” she suggests.

Sasuke nods, refusing to look at her.

Naruto catches onto the plans when they leave for the Uchiha Compound, together, without him, and promptly invites himself along.

She’s initially cautious but Sakura’s eyes are warm and his are hopeful and she reluctantly agrees.

Sasuke makes a pizza while Sakura paints Naruto’s nails an alternate between orange and green and he shows them off proudly, toes wiggling as he bites into the piping hot crust and practically chokes.
on the juice to combat the heat.

Both are impressed by her VHS collection and spend a long time going back and forth over what to watch.

“‘You have a lot of samurai movies,’” Sakura admires, picking up one of the older issues in black and white with a weeping warrior on the front page as Naruto hugs at least five princess movies to his chest, starry eyed.

Sasuke finally suggests that they can watch one each and save the others for another night, completely missing the grinning looks of hope exchanged behind her back and the quiet high-five as she digs for the popcorn she bought for the occasion.

Sakura asks if she can do Sasuke’s nails and she’s quiet for a very long time before agreeing as Naruto cues up the movie and drops down – nabbing at least five pillows and two blankets to cuddle down with relish.

“We should make it a slumber party next time,” he says, picking up the green blanket with angrily squawking ducks and immediately claiming it as his own, smothering it out happily in his lap. “This couch is big enough for all of us.” Even with his legs stretched out before him only the heels of his feet dangle over the edge of it.

Sasuke folds up in her favourite corner and Sakura settles beside Naruto with a bottle of purple paint.

On the screen the movie opens with a scene of a crying geisha folded over the dead body of her lover. Naruto makes a tiny little gasp and crams a handful of buttered popcorn into his mouth as he gets swept up into the plot.

Sasuke very carefully stretches out and puts her right foot into Sakura’s lap and tenses as hands cradles her foot. But Sakura is gentle – a soft hum as she removes the old coat with careful swipes with the cotton ball and Sasuke finds herself slowly relaxing as she loses herself in the movie.

One foot is exchanged for the other and when Sakura is done and Sasuke makes to remove her feet Sakura gives her pants a little tug until she’s lying half-curl into the corner with both her feet in the pinkette’s lap, one hand gently resting against her ankle.

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Kakashi hands them the papers for the Chuunin Exam three weeks later.

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“We should have like a… thing,” Sakura says the day before the exams. They’re at Sasuke’s house again, re-watching a movie about a samurai princess that has become the unanimous favourite among the three. She’s wearing shorts and a long red shirt that nearly cover them.

“Thing?” Naruto is sprawled on his back, the bowl of popcorn balanced on his chest, his legs thrown over the back of the couch. He’s in orange shorts and a green t-shirt with a strange walrus shaped hat on his head that neither of his team mates dare to ask about.

They’re all crowded up together, Sasuke’s legs folded up with her thigh resting alongside Naruto’s arm and Sakura is slumped against the blond that, more often than not, ends up in the middle of them with the other two sort of gravitating towards him.

“Something that immediately identifies us as Team Seven,” she clarifies.
Sasuke nearly chokes on a handful of popcorn when the perfect idea crosses her mind and nearly elbows the bowl off Naruto’s chest when she sits up abruptly in her hurry to share.

- 

Kakashi stares at them.

“What-“ his voice is strangled and Naruto laughs, nearly collapsing against Sakura who is pressing her hand against her mouth to muffle her giggling.

All three of them are wearing perfect replicas of the half-mask that covers their sensei’s mouth.

“It was Sasuke’s idea.” Naruto heroically fights back his laughter as Kakashi shoots their broody team mate a betrayed look.

He gives up trying to contain his laughter when Sasuke raises his fingers into a sideways V by his eyes and deadpans. “Go Team Kakashi.”

- 

Sasuke steps in front of Sakura and glares at Lee who looks surprised at the look she levels on him, teeth bared in a snarl.

“She said no,” Sasuke growls, chest rumbling with the force of it. “Respect it.”

Sakura’s hand pushes against her lower back and tangles in the fabric of her jacket and Lee takes a step backwards, her sharingan flaring to life as he opens his mouth to protest.

Lee’s team mates step forward to play damage control before the situation can escalate and Sasuke ignores the thoughtful eyes of the girl as she glares at the boy whose body language is setting her teeth on edge.

“Thank you,” Sakura whispers as they leave Team 9 behind them and Sasuke fights the tension in her shoulders and shudders as Naruto and Sakura carefully flanks her the rest of the way.

Kakashi pauses her outside the door, crouching down to look her in the eye and Sasuke feels the strangest urge to push forward and closer as he reaches forward, studying her carefully before his hand lands on her shoulders with a soft squeeze.

“I’ll be watching,” he tells her, and there’s a promise in his words and the warmth of his large hand.

- 

It’s strange seeing their old classmates again and they’re… louder… than Sasuke remember them.

Sakura carefully places herself between Sasuke and her blonde rival and Sasuke ends up taking a step closer to Naruto, uncomfortable with the attention.

Inuzuka is goading Naruto who looks annoyed but not overly defensive and both Nara and Akimichi has drifted closer to the duo as well. She vaguely recalls the four of them dodging out of the classroom with Umino’s furious yell hot on their heels.

Hyuuga is pushing her fingers together and glancing shyly at her blond team mate and Sasuke feels an irrational pang of possessiveness flash through her, glancing away from Aburame who raises his glasses as she shoves her hands into the pockets of her jacket, white-knuckled and uncomfortable.
She startles when Sakura sidles up beside her, their shoulders brushing and Sasuke supresses the urge to tangle their hands together again as the pinkette smiles in reassurance.

Realises that several of their old classmates are staring at them with various forms of surprise, confusion and contemplation, especially as Naruto drapes himself over both their shoulders and challenges the entire room with a daring grin.

- 

Morino’s fierce glare scans over them and Sasuke carefully avoids his eyes, her skin crawling.

Sasuke has done enough tests in her life to recognise that the entire thing is just to test their capability to cheat – it’s all in the wording and rules.

She also knows that she can answer all the questions with some simple equations after scanning through them and shrugs before doing just that.

She ends up being the first to finish and spends the rest of the hour pretending to nap.

- 

Sasuke finds herself fascinated by the woman who stands daringly at the front of the classroom in a fishnet shirt and beige trench coat that flares behind her and challenging eyes, not folding for a second under the unimpressed look of her superior.

She feels…

Hm.

- 

The second part of the exams are a catastrophe.

She reaches out and snags her chakra into Sakura and hooks her feet to the tree as she yanks her unconscious team mate up and towards her and ends up pushing against the tree and snagging her half-way as Orochimaru’s neck lengthens like some mutant snake, teeth bared.

They collide, hard, and she wraps her arms the other girl and yanks them both down towards the earth and then left, her feet skidding as she bends her chakra to send them swooping along the branch and then violently up mid-movement as she flares her chakra desperately in search of Naruto, the two tomoes blooming into three in her left eye as adrenaline and a savage sort of fear burns dangerous through her body.

It’s a dangerous and uncoordinated way too move and she has to pull violently to swerve around the speed of the Sannin that hunts them with a raspy sort of voice and a smile that sets every nerve inside of her body into a mind-numbing sort of terror that threatens to send her straight into a panic attack.

She reaches blindly for Naruto who burns as brightly as a scorching sun.

She crashes into the blond who wraps his legs around her waist and hooks one arm around her and the other around Sakura without question and Sasuke suddenly has four limbs to manuver as Naruto hangs onto her back aand Sasuke sends them careening high above the treetops with a crack as her chest caves from the pressure of the too violent push.

Naruto must have caught sight of one of the proctors because he cries the code for INTRUDER and flares his chakra in a wide-arc for attention and Sasuke’s vision is a white hot field of panic and
horror as the savageness of Orochimaru’s chakra registers just meters away from them, his eyes hungry in a way that makes everything inside of her turn to ice.

“SASUKE!” Naruto’s roar burns through her and she reaches blindly for any sort of familiarity and snags the dark chakra of the Nara clan and yanks them so hard that the world blurs around them and her arm snaps and caves as they crashes into the forest floor, Naruto and Sakura lurching off her from the sheer force of it as she curls instinctively to protect her head, trembling as she gasps the name of her blond team mate.

Naruto ignores the three shocked genins, wobbling as he drags himself onto his feet, Sakura’s unconscious body pressed against his chest.

Naruto gasps out her name and Sasuke focuses everything that she is onto his voice as she struggles onto her feet, wobbling, her breath too quick and desperate as she seeks him out blindly through the terror.

“Naruto-“

He snaps out the INTRUDER-CODE and Nara’s face turns grim as Yamanaka and Akimichi straighten to attention.

“Hand Sakura to me,” Ino tells Naruto quietly, her eyes lingering on the dark haired boy who is quickly crashing into a panic attack. “I don’t know what’s going on here but Sasuke-kun clearly needs you.”

Sasuke had always been someone untouchable. The fate of his clan, the massacre done by his brother’s hand and being left the only survivor – the blushing shy boy with dimpled smile had turned into a shell of himself afterwards, closing himself off to everyone with a complete 180 of everything he’d been.

Her father had told her it was to be expected. That the massacre was a tremendous sort of trauma and when she attempted to reach out she found only a deep sort of terrifying darkness staring back at her.

This was… not that Sasuke.

This Sasuke is reaching out for Naruto who kneels down, his body language open as he reaches out but doesn’t actually initiate the touch before Sasuke lurches towards him, grip white-knuckled as fingers curl into the back of Naruto’s jacket and Sasuke presses his head against Naruto’s chest. Naruto doesn’t hesitate for another moment, his fingers glides into the long hair of the raven and presses him closer, bending his head and murmuring softly as he enfolds the other.

Ino crouches with Sakura’s back against her chest as Chouji finishes checking her over, frowning. “Concussion,” he says grimly. “A bad one – nearly cracked her head open.” Ino isn’t surprised, warm blood is dripping against her bare stomach and her old friend is completely out for the count.

Shikamaru takes a step closer to the blond who is looks up sharply, recognising the seriousness of the situation even as he cradles Sasuke against his chest. “Some strange creeper attacked Sasuke,” he says shortly. “I was separated by a large snake summoning that ate me and when I managed to escape it was to have an unconscious Sakura and Sasuke crash into me.”

“It was Orochimaru.” Sasuke’s breath trembles on the word and there’s a wild sort of terror in his eyes that sets Shikamaru on edge.

“The Sannin?” Ino asks in shock. “What did he want?”
“Me,” Sasuke rasps, pressing closer to Naruto who looks abjectly shocked but burns with
determination as he pulls the other closer with a fierce sort of protectiveness.

Everyone in the clearing recognises what it means for someone like Sasuke, who lashed out violently
at being touched, to actually seek physical contact for comfort and Shikamaru feels something sick
crawl down his spine at lost look in the younger boy’s eyes.

Whatever the Sannin had wanted from their classmate it had pushed past every wall the boy kept
between himself and the world and it could mean nothing good.

- They’ve hidden themselves underground as per procedure. Both Naruto and Sasuke had identified
the Uchiha has the primary objective of the intruder which means they have to keep him safe.

Sasuke has gone mute, curled up with his ankle pressed against Naruto’s leg and his hand entwined
with Sakura’s who Ino had settled against the blond’s shoulder while her team took guard. It’s a tense
sort of wait and Shikamaru remains alert as he pushes out his shadows, spreading them out in hopes
of catching anyone approaching them.

He wishes, absently, for Kiba or Shino. The Inuzuka’s sensitive nose and hearing or the Aburame’s
kikais would have been much less chakra leeching. Neither Ino nor Chouji was much help for
tracking – one had a pin-point precision for when the enemy had been found and the other is a
heavy-hitter.

His shadow jutsu wasn’t very optional either but they needed some sort of awareness on what was
going on outside and the forest was more shadow than sun light so it wasn’t as bad as it could have
been.

“They’ll come find us as soon as the Intruder has been located and dealt with,” he says quietly as
Chouji sidles up beside him to avoid interrupting the strange silence of team 7. It’s been nearly three
hours now but a threat as significant as the Sannin could mean hours of waiting before anyone
officially picks them up to avoid drawing attention towards them. It’s very much an unsure situation
and he sighs as he scratches the back of his neck. “So troublesome.”

“This would be so much easier if Hinata was here,” Ino complains, tense as a bowstring as she glares
up at the ceiling. “We’re basically sitting ducks in here.”

Sasuke stirs, looking up. There’s faint tremors running through his frame and Shikamaru knows
even to categorize it under early signs of shock and there’s a muddled sort of confusion that’s
likely a side-effect of it. “Hyuuga is 850 meters to our east,” he says very quietly, so buried into his
jacket he’s practically swallowed by it. “Aburame and Inuzuka are both with her,” he adds as team
10 swivels around to stare at him. “As is the dog,” he tacks on and Naruto reaches out and waits until
Sasuke blinks and untangles his hand from the sleeping pinkette and reaches out to weave their
fingers together.

He doesn’t really seem to truly register the world around him and Shikamaru is worried at the
potential of a panic attack. Naruto had clearly helped ward off the worst of it but he knows there’s
only a matter of time before Sasuke crashes completely, no matter how much he struggles against it.

They’re really not equipped to deal with any of this.

Still, he’s inclined to trust the information Sasuke supplied despite his state since Naruto looks
unsurprised and weighs the risk in his mind. Ino is correct on the fact that they’re basically live bait
and their best defence against a rough Sannin and whatever potential backup and backup plans he
might have waiting was to run.

Every single second counted in this sort of situation.

“Are they moving away from us or closer?” This time, when he focuses, he recognises the flare of
spiritual chakra from the younger boy with sharp surprise and files it away for later.

“750,” Sasuke reports quietly.

Shikamaru exchanges a look with his teammates. “You think they’re tracking us?”

“Not unlikely,” he acknowledges. “I wouldn’t put it beside Shino to have tagged one of us with his
kikai before the start and Kiba’s nose is sharp.”

“Unlike his brain,” Ino mutters and Naruto snorts from where he’s listening in.

Even Naruto knows that the most tactical person in the room is Shikamaru and he’s content to
relegate the planning to the other while he keeps an eye on his teammates.

He doesn’t like that Sakura still hasn’t woken up but that isn’t unusual – there’d been plenty of
concussions at the academy during spars and accidents. He’s more concerned by Sasuke’s state.

He could still recall the shock of Sasuke’s first panic attack on the bridge those weeks ago – the
horror of watching the quiet boy completely break into a mindless state of panic as Kakashi-sensei
told them to push down, to hold him, even as Sasuke pleaded heart-wrenchingly at being touched,
sobbing and clawing desperately as Sakura’s trembling hands poured the blood coagulating powder
into his wounds and pushed with his ruined shirt to stem the blood.

It had been slick and messy and terrifying and he’d felt like a monster at the pure, undiluted terror
and it had nearly set him off right into Kyuubi as Sasuke slammed into him with the same sort wild
look and a limp Sakura clutched desperately in his arms.

He squeezes the trembling hand weaved tight into his own, feeling helpless.

“200,” Sasuke reports and Shikamaru closes his eyes, shadows climbing up the walls to greet the last
of the Rookie 9.

Kiba’s face is grim as he squeezes into the underground cave, Hinata’s face nervous as she follows
with a quiet greeting and Shino nods at them.

“We were snagged up by one of the proctors and told to keep an eye out for him.” Kiba jerks his
head in Sasuke’s direction. “Flashed us the INTRUDER-CODE and all.” There’s a quiet demand
for information in his tone.

Team 10 quickly fills in the blanks with frequent glances at the team in the corner and Kiba huffs
quietly.

“Shino, spread your kikai,” he commands finally and Shikamaru watches in fascination as the small
kikai crawls out from the other’s body to squeeze themselves out with a quiet of buzz as some of
them took to the sky. “We’ll take guard,” he tells Shikamaru seriously before glancing at Hinata who
nods and flares her kekkei genkai after one last lingering look at the blond of Team 7.

Shikamaru wonders if it was really necessary considering the 360 vision of her kekkei genkai but
they were all aware and pretending not to be aware of the crush the Hyuuga harbour for Naruto
and kept that thought firmly to himself.

“Sakura-” Naruto’s gasp of relief zeroes every eye onto her stirring firm and she blinks blurrily up at her blond team mate who looks close to tears.

“Naruto-? What are-“ Her eyes widened, “Sasuke!” she gasps in panic. “Orochimaru-“

“I’m here.” Sasuke moves for the first time since he’d slumped down against the wall with a sort of gutted relief that makes Shikamaru feel like he’s watching something intensely private and has to suppress the urge to avert his eyes. Because he’s still threat assessing and Sasuke’s state of mind and capability to function is high-priority at the moment.

He exchanges a look with Ino as Chouji settles down between them as a silent sort of guardian, ready to act if either signals it.

The younger boy is cradling his broken arm against his chest and there’s a ginger sort of way to his movement that makes Shikamaru guess at least two broken ribs under the ridiculously large jacket.

Naruto presses his lips close to her ear and says something quietly while helping her sit up and Sakura’s eyes narrow with a sharpness that struggles through the muddy effect of the concussion and gives the room a brief check before dismissing them as a secondary priority.

Shikamaru hears Ino give a slight huff beside him but it lacks any sort of real irritation.

They’re all aware of just how off the normally stand-offish boy is acting and both Kiba and Shino had turned surreptitiously to keep an eye on the situation. Hinata doesn’t need to move a single inch and is the least awkward person in studying the on-goings.

“Sasuke.” Her attention is completely focused on the Uchiha survivor now, reaching out behind her to give the blond a comforting squeeze at the ankle and pull herself upright as she settles with her back against the knee Naruto draws up behind her back to anchor her. “Sasuke, can you look at me-“

“He wanted my body.” There is a complete and utter wretchedness in his face as he practically vomits the truth out, as if he’d just been waiting for Sakura to be awake and hear it. “He-“ And there’s something beyond horror in his eyes as he locks into Sakura for something and Naruto has gone white at the implication behind the two of them. “He was-“ But his tongue won’t form the words-

Doesn’t need to because Sakura has clearly picked up what none of them has and is reaching out and touching without waiting for the cue Naruto had watched for. Her hand cups the chin of the Uchiha survivor and forces him to meet her eyes. “I know,” she says and he shudders as she presses their foreheads together, Naruto watching them both with a desperate sort of protectiveness. “I’m sorry.”

Sasuke opens his mouth, closes it. Swallows thickly and then gives a jerky sort of nod. Sakura studies him for a moment longer before her body relaxes back against Naruto who immediately hauls her closer to prevent her from slumping down on the ground.

Shikamaru absently registers Ino’s noise of abject shock as Sakura makes no move to protest but actually settles against the blond with a soft noise of relief.

“Just wait ‘til Kakashi-sensei gets here,” Naruto says, something light in his tone now that both his team mates are accounted for. “Remember Zabuza?”

Sakura snorts. “Instant kill.” She made a little lazy slash over her throat.
Shikamaru tunes them out.

Team 7 is giving him the worst headache to date.

- Kurenai is the first to track them down, the word of warning barely out of team 8’s mouths before the jounin is slithering down into the hole, a quiet sort of intensity as she takes in the situation.

The SAFE code is rattled and the tension in the room vanishes like a great gust of relief as Team 8 immediately sidles up beside their teacher. “You have all been passed into the next stage of the exam,” Kurenai says after listening to Shikamaru’s debrief. “Asuma are right behind me and Hatake is moving to meet you at the tower.” This she addresses to Team 7.

Sakura is secured to Asuma’s back after a brief exchange between her and Kurenai and she gives a comforting smile to her two remaining team mates before Asuma spirits her away along with the entirety of Team 8 and Team 10.

Naruto remains, tired but a steady comfort beside Sasuke who is still clutching his arm and ribs and trembles on his feet.

Kurenai studies the blond for a moment before she crouches down before the Uchiha survivor who looks so much like his brother with the long hair and yet nothing like him at all. “Sakura-san said you would be more comfortable being carried by me than Asuma,” she says finally.

She doesn’t like the implications of that statement. Doesn’t like that something like that had happened to a boy who hadn’t even hit puberty, in his hometown, and that no-one had taken the time to notice it or help him which had to be the case if the remaining trauma was this severe. Had it happened during the massacre? She doesn’t even want to contemplate the twisted, sick direction of that thought.

Makes a mental note to check in on Hatake before the end of the week.

“Sasuke.” It’s the Kyuubi Jinchuuriki who speaks up, clearly having remained behind for this exact reason. “The quicker we get to the tower the quicker we can meet up with Kakashi-sensei.”

Sasuke stares at the ground, his breathing harsh.

“I’ll be right here,” he continues, unconcerned by the lack of answer. “You’re practically dead on your feat. I know I am and I was only dodging a snake.” His tone is light. “I bet Sakura is going to be furious once she gets that concussion healed up. You know how much she hates getting dragged around – she’ll be beating us into the ground for weeks.” He fakes a shudder. “Not to mention Kakashi-sensei. We’ll be doing survival drills ‘til we’re blue, dattebayo.”

Surprisingly, something softens in the broody boy. “I’m fine, Naruto,” he says, stepping forward.

The blond boy sticks his tongue out as Kurenai crouches down and allows the Uchiha to climb into her back and awkwardly encircle her neck with his unbroken arm as her hands settles under the bend of his knees instead of back against his rump which was less straining.

His muscles are tense and his heartbeat too hard against her back as he simultaneously holds onto her while avoiding as much contact as physically possible.

Uzumaki watches her carefully with a baleful sharpness under his carefree grin as he teases his teammate and Kurenai might have taken offense if she wasn’t both amused and impressed by his gutsy dedication.
Her mind is a mess.

She clings to Naruto because he’s safesafesafe and then Sakura is finally there and everything is a blur or words and feelings, a fight against the roar in her soul that laps at her knees, waiting to pull her back under.

Sakura centers her – pulls her up from the hole that’s threatening to swallow her up and she clings to the words of her team mate, the sight of his orange clad back as he leads the way through the forest.

There.

Not leaving, not leaving, not leaving.

Jonah’s grinning face is dancing at the edge of her vision and she feels like a leaf in the wind, stumbling off Kurenai with a sick sort of wretchedness as she curls her hand into the back of Naruto’s jacket and clings blindly because the world is a blur and the roar in her ears are drowning out the noise around her.

And then there’s silence and Sakura is there, pink against white as she stumbles towards her and sinks down on the ground beside the bed because she can’t she can’t she can’t –

She clutches her hands over her ears and hides her face in her knees.

He had-

He was going to-

Her nails digs into her cheeks and she chokes on the memories. Of eating rotten food from a dog bowl when the hunger got too much, lapping at her own blood to soothe the dryness of her throat. Can practically feel the thick heavy collar around her throat and her broken jaw straining against the gag in her mouth as he pushes her into the rug and brutalizes her. Tears and claws and laughs as glass tears her from the inside and he fucks her with blood slickening her passages and she can’t, she can’t-

“He told her, over and over again. “Mine.”” And he wouldn’t stop until she was sobbing her agreement, too wretched, in too much pain as he left her in a pool of her own piss and blood and semen dripping off her filthy body until she couldn’t take it anymore-

“Sasuke.” She flinches backwards, her head colliding against the metal of the bed behind her as fingers brushes against her cheek and her eyes open too wide, too desperate as she breathes harshly through panic and tears.

“K-Kaka-shi-sensei-” her voice is a mess, she’s a mess, everything is a mess but Kakashi-sensei is right there and her teeth is clacking together from the quivers running amok in her body and she wants him, she wants him- finds herself reaching out and curling her hand into his shirt, barely registering the lack of vest and the stains of blood as she stares at her own hand, panting.

“I am here.” He’s crouching before her, large and there and warm beneath her hand. His breathing is calm, his eyes dark like the storms she used to love to dance beneath as lightning flashed in the clouds and rain fell upon her until she was drenched from head to toe.
She had trusted Jonah. Had kissed him as the sun rose in the morning and made love as it settled in the evening. Had toasted with beer on the small boat and shared homemade sandwiches that were stolen by his dog as they argued over who’d won in cards.

She had trusted him and he had torn her apart until there was nothing more to take.

“You are safe.”

He’d kept her alive for months. Had carved his name into her flesh as pus oozed from infected wounds during moments where she could barely twitch a finger because everything was a hot feverish mess and there was no end in sight. He’d sawed her hand off as the crushed fingers turned black and left it in her bowl to eat, laughing and humming soft nothing against her neck as she sobbed.

He used to sing to her during soft moments in their apartment, her feet tucked beneath her with a book as he thrummed his guitar beside her.

Kakashi isn’t Jonah.

He isn’t-

“I’m sorry,” she sobs because she’s a mess and everything hurts and she’s so tired of being afraid all the time. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry-“ because it wasn’t just Sasuke who died that day but **** and what remains of them both is a just bits and pieces of ill-fitted scraps that she fumbles to keep together.

“Come here.” Kakashi doesn’t move and Sasuke stares at him through blurry tears sobs as she pushes towards him, her heart stuttering inside her chest as a large gentle arm presses against her back and pulls her closer, allowing her to disappear into the warmth of his embrace, so very careful of her broken ribs and arm that dangles uselessly by her side as he hums gently, his breath warm against her ear.

Orange and red settle beside them and Sasuke cries and cries and cries until her throat is raw and she’s too tired to stay awake for even a moment longer.

-“He shouldn’t be out in the field.”

“He doesn’t have anything else.” Kakashi flips a page in his book. “If you take Naruto and Sakura away from him and leave him alone in that large empty compound there won’t be anything left to pick up.” His dark eye lift to meet hers. “You know as well as I do that the council wouldn’t accept that last Uchiha to just fade away into nothingness.”

And that’s the crux of the matter. Kakashi hadn’t been given a choice on passing his kids. The Kyuubi Jinchuuriki, the last Uchiha and the brightest civilian to pass through the academy since… ages.

Sasuke’s mental state is… bad. The kind of bad that should have stuck him right alongside a Yamanaka to sort it out. But by his own admission he’d been offered no help, no one to talk to save the interrogation following the massacre.

Six years old and alone without any sort of support.

Kakashi had at least had Minato and Kushina. He couldn’t-
And it wasn’t just the massacre and he didn’t know how bad it was – doesn’t know the details of what sent his student spiralling into such a messy state of mind that he hardly knew up from down.

Doesn’t know the first thing about trying to fix it.

The Sandaime… Kakashi drags a hand through his hair, cautious of the direction of his thoughts and dismissing them.

“Was it your idea?”

He glances at her and her mouth twitches as she reaches up, as if to pull at an invisible seam. “The masks.”

Kakashi gives her a look.

“Asuma and I have a bet you see-“

His face practically flatlines.

- 

The second part of the second exam goes something like this:

Sasuke nearly crushes his opponent clean against the wall when the boy attempts to wind himself around her with extended limbs, breaking a fair few bones and terrifying just about half of her audience at the severity of it.

Sakura gets matched up against the puppeteer of the Sand who throws his hands up and surrenders before she can get her hands on him.

Naruto gets matched up against Tenten of team 9 from the year group just ahead of them and narrowly avoids getting himself turned into a pincushion before triumphing.

Rock Lee has both his legs crushed before his sensei Maito Gai interferes and gets sent to the hospital alongside Hyuuga Hinata who is beaten to near death by her cousin with Naruto swearing revenge with a bloody grin.

Those who pass it for the third part of the exam are the following:

Hyuuga Neji Vs. Uzumaki Naruto

Temari Vs. Nara Shikamaru

Haruno Sakura Vs. Misumi Tsurugi

Uchiha Sasuke Vs. Gaara

- 

Since there was a chance of the three of them getting paired up to meet each other in the third exam as they progressed Team Kakashi had been split for the month up to the exam.

Sakura had saluted them off with a grin and Naruto had vanished away on his own adventure with a gleam in his eyes and a promise he’d be alright. Consequently, Sasuke had been left to the behest of their sensei.
Their, apparently, insane sensei who was currently forcing her to climb a mountain with one hand, the one she’d broken in the exam in a cast and her chakra completely cut off.

“I have noticed,” Kakashi says cheerily, not even looking bothered some ten meters above her, "that you very rarely bother to activate your Sharingan.”

Sasuke grunts as she snags another rock, her nails protesting against the rough treatment as they scrape against the surface. “It’s not like you do it either,” she pants.

“I’m also several ranks about you.” Kakashi sprung the last bit, his hand snagging the flat edge and twisting so he landed elegantly with his legs dangling as he stared down at her. “But don’t worry!” he says loudly against the wind. “You’ll get there some day!”

Sasuke swears under her breath.

- 

The chidori is loud and violent and strangely pretty in its violence.

“At your level, it’s not a good technique to rely on.” Kakashi says as she strains to keep the lightning going, the chirping loud and excited. “But you’re going up against someone who claims to have the ‘ultimate defence’ which means you’re going to need something with a bit of… punch.”

“Three times then,” she says after a moment. “It’s probably smarter to stick with two, though.” Sasuke closes her fist, letting the lightning fade away.

Kakashi reaches out to ruffle her hair. “That’s why I like you.” He fluffed the hair on her head, snagging a long stretch of the strands and gave a little hum. “And you really need to get this trimmed.”

She shoots him a long, offended look.

“You really haven’t been taking care of those split ends," he continues, unperturbed. “When where the last time you actually get this cut?”

He stares when she flushes.

“Sasuke.” He draws his kunai.

“No.” She takes a step back.

“I can’t send my cute little genin before the Daimyo of the Fire Country with years worth of split ends," he says cheerily, kunai glinting.

She turned and fled.

-

“There are certain jutsus that are actually hair related,” Kakashi muses.

They are at his apartment, his student seated on a chair in the middle of the living room, feet drawn up and resting on the pins beneath the seat.

There’s a noticeable mess on the floor after shortening the hair of his student from waist to mid-chest and Sasuke pulls what remained to spill over the right side of his neck as he habitually wore it, now with a slight more curl from the lessened weight.
“I think I picked up one or two of them,” he continues as he swept around his student. “Jiraya-sama has this one where his hair turns into pincushions.”

“Seems messy,” Sasuke offers, combing through his hair with an odd look in his eyes. “You were oddly good at that,” he says after a moment as Kakashi tidied away.

“I helped my sensei’s wife cut hers,” Kakashi says after putting everything away. “Said she didn’t trust him anywhere near her hair after he cut this chunk off in panic.” He measures out some seven inches and Sasuke huffs in amusement.

“… Is that how shinobi normally get their hair cut?” he asks after a moment as Kakashi puts on some tea.

“Hm?”

“By asking your team.”

“Maa.” Kakashi scratched his chin. “Either you pick up the skill yourself or you find someone you trust.” Sasuke makes a little ‘huh’ noise and Kakashi was getting the feeling that his poor student might actually be more socially backwards than even himself.

Even Naruto knew how to get a haircut.

Didn’t they cover this kind of stuff in the academy?

He brings the tea over to the two-seat couch and the low table before it and Sasuke pushes off of the chair and trots over to sit down beside him without complaint. Kakashi glances at him from the corner of his eye as he pours the tea and Sasuke reaches out to take three cubes of sugar. Snags a fourth and then a fifth after a brief glance at him.

Sasuke is three sips into his tea before he seems to realize the oddity of the situation and actually sat up to look around properly. “This is your apartment.”

“So it is,” Kakashi agrees, amused.

“You’ve never invited us over before,” Sasuke points out. “Everyone usually comes to the compound.”

He pauses.

“Naruto and Sakura does,” he amends, considering his own words. “You should come too. Naruto says that doings things together like a team is good.”

“Do you like it when they come over?” Kakashi asks curiously.

Sasuke had been the odd duckling of the team for a long time.

His idea of giving them three hours each morning had meant to do two things for the team:

First. Make sure they established some sort of connection that wasn’t just following his orders but as actual serving teammates.

Second. Try and lure forth some kind of independent thinking in actually doing something with the time.
It had ended up a bit of a hit and miss until after the mission to the Land of Waves.

Naruto and Sakura had built rapport with each other without actually doing anything else with the time.

Sasuke had thoroughly used the time but completely on his own.

It had been just a tiny bit exasperating to watch.

Surprisingly, it had been the odd duckling who had reached out first after Wave. Unable to truly get the words out, fumbling to get across what he wanted as shame painted his cheeks red. Kakashi had listened, ready to step in if Sakura judged him for it, but she’d been careful, gentle, in reaching back to the Uchiha survivor.

Unsurprisingly Naruto had invited himself along, had gotten his nails done in company and all three of his cute genins had watched movies together, eating one of those odd flat breads with bits of everything that Sasuke had an odd fondness for. The Uchiha heir had even been socially competent enough to pick up popcorn.

Kakashi had been so proud.

He checked in on them occasionally when they had their gatherings – just for a short while to make sure none of them were getting the short end of the stick and that they weren’t pushing the boundaries in their eagerness to get closer to the Uchiha.

But there were very little left of the girl prone to lashing out with violence and the orphan boy quick to put his foot in his mouth. Pushing, yes, sometimes overreaching, but that was natural and unavoidable with someone as broken as Sasuke was most days.

“I like it.” Sasuke draws his knees to his chest, apparently not noticing or caring that he was putting dirty feet on someone else's couch. Considering the boy appeared to live in his own couch it wasn’t that strange (his bedroom was a dusty cave that hadn’t been touched for years and Kakashi had sort of stared into it before closing the door to it gently). “Less silence.” He touches his ear briefly.

Kakashi supposed that was a fair enough answer.

It was an awfully large and empty compound for a lonely boy.

-

The chuunin exam is a mess that turns into a catastrophe.

Naruto beats Neji.

Nara Shikamaru folds against Temari.

Sakura nearly decapitates Misumi Tsurugi.

Sasuke somehow awakens a monster from drawing a little blood.

She probably doesn’t help the situation when her instinctive response to having a giant sand hand fly towards her is to push down to go up and Gaara happen to be right beneath her and consequently ends up a bit… crushed.

The genjutsu going through the audience is concerning, the sound-nin slitting their throats are a warning bell, the shield folding over their Hokage is a blaring alarm to everyone present.
They're under attack.

Two sound-jounin interferes in the arena and Sasuke anchors her feet and slams so hard that one of them gets crushed against the wall before realising what’s happening. The other is quicker and anchors her feet, becoming the heavier one as Sasuke gets slammed back and lands with a smack and a crouch on the wall as she pushes against the stone to slow mid-twist.

They watch each other.

She sees Temari and Kankuro yanking their brother along in the background but Sasuke isn’t stupid enough to take her eyes off the high-ranking adversary before her as the woman grins, flipping the kunai in her hand before launching it towards her.

Sasuke snags it easily, spinning it and launching it towards the other who quickly dodges. Sasuke thuds to the ground, twisting around the fist that lurches towards her and presses her palms against the ground and locks her legs around the arms and twists while turning on her palms to send the woman flying across the area with an extra push after Sasuke sinks down and anchors her body with enough chakra to make her bones grind in protest.

The woman splatters like a fly and Sasuke gasps as she stumbles to her feet, shaking the odd feeling of having too heavy blood and bones inside of her as she flares her chakra in a wide-arc.

Naruto is holding a pug with the softest, squishiest little pink paws Sasuke has ever seen when she lands beside her team.

It just gets messier from there.

- 

The Sandaime is dead.

It’s strange because she doesn’t feel anything for the Sandaime or particularly much for Konoha in itself but she likes her team and she doesn’t like the pain in Naruto’s eyes or the tears that drip down his face as the old leader is buried.

Their old teacher is there and Sasuke tunes him out as she stares at the coffin, trying to feel anything positive about the man but remembering only the years of nightmares after waking up in the massacre and finding absolutely nothing waiting for her but horror and loneliness and the days of interrogation when the corpses of his family hadn’t even been put into the earth.

A part of her…

A part of her is relieved.

- 

Naruto confesses to having a giant fox inside his stomach and Sakura hugs him tight after he tells them. Sasuke still isn’t good with hugs but she tries and Naruto smiles against her stiff shoulder as he gives her a squeeze back before releasing her.

He snags her hand and holds it during the movie on the small hospital television while he leans against Sakura who’s climbed up behind him, her chin against the top of his head.
Naruto introduces them to his temporary teacher who turns out to be one of the Sannin which makes him the second one they’ve met within the span of a month. He’s a tall man with long white hair and red lines dipping down from his eyes. For some reason he’s wearing a headband with the kanji for ‘Oil’ instead of any Konoha headband and while he’s large and intimidating there’s something relaxed, almost carefree about him.

“He acts like an older Naruto,” Sakura whispers as the duo approaches, bickering.

Oddly, Naruto is glaring at the man through the entire introduction and throws an arm around Sasuke’s shoulder and bares all his teeth.

Sasuke glances at Sakura in bemusement, completely missing the finger Naruto drags over his throat behind her back and the sweaty nervous look that momentarily flashes over the man’s face.

Sakura is recruited into the Hospital after the invasion (which explains the chakra scalpels during the chunin exams) and Kakashi, likewise, is busy with missions to keep up both the appearance of Konoha’s strength and keep the income coming to support the rebuilding of the village.

Appearing weak would be the same as getting invaded. The world was watching to see how Konoha would handle the pressure.

Sasuke ends up awkwardly in the middle of things as a genin without a team until Naruto stops by the compound and forcefully snags her out of her couch nest the day of his Hospital release.

“Er-, Jiraiya-sensei says we’re picking up the new Godaime.” Naruto makes an odd face at the name for a moment before shaking his head. “You’re coming too.”

Sasuke nods and snags up her clothes, changing while Naruto raided her fridge for some of the ready-to-go snacks Sasuke usually kept stocked for her movies during down-time in the village.

She’s half-way out of her hoodie and into a t-shirt when Naruto turns with both cheeks stuffed full of his favourite noodle wraps and clutching about fourteen different variants of them (the result of a long sleepless night) with a look of complete and utter adoration.

Sasuke makes a noise of amusement. “If you try to force all them down before we leave we’re going to be rolling you along,” she points out and as Naruto’s smile dims she nearly trips over her pants at the wrongness of it. “Fetch one of my sealing scrolls and we’ll bring them along instead,” she huffs, jumping awkwardly as she adjusted the pants and bending down to bandage the ends of them.

They were actual proper ninja issued pants, courtesy of Kakashi. He’d bought her them a size or two bigger to give her room to grow and then ended up showing her how to tie the ends to make sure they didn’t snag and then he’d forced her to retire her old jacket which had practically been grinded to scraps by Gaara’s sand.

He’d muttered something about having ‘a chat’ with someone when she confessed to decorating up a jacket she bought on sale on the civilian market.

The two new ones were nearly identical to her first. The same high-collar and the hood that looked like it belonged to a hoodie rather than a jacket. The fabric was thicker, sturdier, and Kakashi had chatted up the owner into adding the Uchiha fan to the back for cheap and professionally hooking the hitai-ate into the sleeve by the bolts instead of her careful sewing. It pulled in at the sleeves and waist hem to insulate in a different, less-stiff, fabric that would also keep it from slipping over her hands while keeping it oversized for her comfort. On the right-side of her chest there were now the
same sort of scroll-pockets that were on chuunin and jounin vests since she hadn’t carried a bag since her academy days.

Instead of blue this one was entirely black.

Chapter End Notes

So, uh, this happened?

This is meant as a sort of side-project that I'm adding to during moments of writersblock while hashing out stuff in my other stories.

I love rebirth stories and I am the Queen of self-indulgence when it comes to this category. My computer is practically a black hole of them so I figured I'd get a handful up and stumbling into the world.

(I had a very long weekend of nothingness and was suddenly sitting with some 30 pages in doc and, ya know? It felt like a bit of a waste to just... leave it).

Anyway, let me know what you think and I'll update when i manage to scramble some time to actually write between work and school and sleep.

Cheers!

note to author: edited 16th of april 2019. smoothed out some tense issues and added to base outline in separate doc.
She awakens in a world to the knowledge that the boy whose body she’s inhabiting is the sole survivor of a massacre at the hands of his brother.

And she remembers it.

Every single death seared into her brain by the spinning wheel of the sharingan. Countless faces caught like through the lens of a camera as Itachi tears them asunder.

She still steps around the spot on the floor where his parents had collapsed upon each other because she can see them as clearly at the day it happened. But she’s gotten used to sharing a house with dead people (she is one of them, after all).

But she also remembers the feel of his fingers colliding against his forehead in a little ‘thwack’ and a smile before the older boy vanished. Of days training together, the feel of a hand ruffling his hair, soft praise and comforting voice those evenings where Itachi slid into his room to share a story and let him cuddle closer (despite the fact that Uchiha wasn’t supposed to show emotions – wasn’t supposed to need things like fingers carding through his hair and gentle smiles).

The part of her that is still a six year old boy amidst a sea of death stirs inside of her at the sight of the man on the other side of the door.

“Naruto.” The blond cocks his head to show he’s listening. “Step back.”

Naruto does as told without question.

Sasuke sits on the bed in her too big jacket, feeling strangely small as Itachi follows Naruto into the room.

“To think that this little boy has the Kyuubi inside of him.” Another man steps in after Itachi, impossibly large and blue with jagged teeth and pin-prick eyes. He closes the door behind himself, leaving the four of them in the small room.

“Naruto-kun, you are coming with us.” Itachi’s voice is low, smooth.

“Hmm, Itachi-san. It would be annoying if he moved around. Perhaps we should cut off a leg or two.” The other man reaches back, gripping the edge of the strange sword on his back with predatory intention.

“If you don’t want him to run-“ Naruto steps closer to her. “You should just cut his tendons. Same effect, less of a mess.” She smiles emptily at the two of them, her eyes spinning lazily with the red of the sharingan.

Naruto’s hand burrows into the sleeve of her jacket.

The blue man gives her a sharp look of interest at the sight of her eyes. “The Sharingan… and he’s very similar to you... Who is he?” He shifts his entire body towards her, his attention momentarily diverted.
“My little brother.” Itachi doesn’t look at his partner or brother, his eyes focused on the blond jinchuuriki who watches him with wide blue eyes.

The shark-like man gives him a curious look. “I heard the entire Uchiha clan was killed by you.”

Naruto steps firmly in front of his teammate, teeth bared.

For the first time Itachi looks up, seeking the eyes of his quiet little brother. He’d expected rage—anger. Had prepared himself to intercept an attack the second he realised the jinchuuriki wasn’t alone in his room.

But Sasuke hasn’t moved from the bed. His legs are folded and he’s wearing a jacket that is at least three sizes too big, dwarfing him. His hair is long, Itachi realises with a start, almost as long as his own. Most of his body is covered, the zipper pulled up and even so, half his face is covered by the same half-mask that dangles around the jinchuuriki’s neck.

Hatake Kakashi’s signature wear.

“It’s been a long time… Sasuke,” he greets, troubled by the turn of events but not letting it show.

“You are here for Naruto.” It isn’t a question. “I won’t let you take him.” Despite his words there’s nothing inherently threatening about him and the lack of anger disquiets him. The reaction is… tame. Unexpected.

The blond’s eyes widen and something fierce and happy blooms across his face—something relieved and warm and determined all the same as Sasuke shifts, pressing closer to the other boy’s back in a way that speaks of trust and a closeness that is surprising for two newly-minted genin. “Don’t look into his eyes,” he warns.

“Heh,” the blond scoffs. “I’ve gone up against you enough to know that.”

Sasuke wrinkles his nose, looking fairly relaxed as he drapes himself over the blond’s back. “It was once.”

“Once was well and good enough.” The jinchuuriki looked a bit ill.

Kisame bares his teeth. “Oi, don’t you think the two of you are looking just a bit too at ease here?”

Itachi stills when Sasuke looks up and smiles without feeling, his eyes dark pools of nothing as the Sharingan blinks off. “Not at all.”

And then they were gone and a pineapple thuds to the ground in their stead.

- 

“This is a stupid idea.”

“Should we have waited for them to cut your legs off first?”

“We could have fought,” Naruto glances around, tense. “Just, you know, until Er, Jiraiya-sensei got back ‘ttbayo.”

“Itachi completely eradicated the entire Uchiha clan at thirteen,” Sasuke shoots back tightly. “That’s a lot of jounin and ANBU. We’re genin.” Naruto tightens his grip on her arm, feeling the strength of her tense muscles.
Shunshin and kawarimi were usually limited to exchanging place with something within your vision or stepping into a place of familiarity to avoid something like slamming into a tree.

Sasuke had never been limited to that particular hiccup since a flare of spiritual chakra gave her a flash of a 360 view of the world around her. The more familiar she was with something the sharper it appeared (spending years in the same classroom as the Rookie Nine and Umino, for example, made them a ringing beacon to her senses even months after graduation) and the world around her was alight with life.

The furthest she’d ever used either technique was some three hundred meters and that was with time to focus.

This was messier.

“Do think they’ll follow?” Naruto asks tightly.

“They’d be stupid not to,” Sasuke mutters back, manoeuvring past two little old ladies as she flares her chakra, snagging hold of a box of apples and switching them in a kawarimi the same breath, barely stumbling as they step out of the alley and into a busy street.

There is no point of trying to hide. Itachi’s a genjutsu master and would see through any disguise they attempted to take and they had tracked them down to the exact room number within an hour of them stepping into the town.

The best they could do was run and the best way to run was to not think about it.

She flares her chakra and leave a breeze of leaves behind them as she steps into a shunshin with barely a hitch of her breath.

“We need to leave the village,” Naruto presses, his breath ragged from being yanked along by her chakra. “Running in circles will get us nowhere. We’re already drawing too much attention.”

The small town might be a day’s throw from Konoha but two out of breath genin meant heads were turning and Sasuke clenches her teeth as she spreads her chakra in a wide arc and tore them outside the village walls.

It’s probably sheer luck that gets them as far as they do.

Sasuke twists the second her feet hit the ground and anchors one foot while pushing the blond, sinking into a low arc to avoid the enormous sword. She spins with the movement, palms against the ground, and lashes out and up while pushing and the man stumbles from the force of it, his grip tightening around the handle of his sword.

He sends her a sharp grin as she pushes away from him, her feet skidding against the ground. “That’s different,” he comments as he straightens, hefting his sword over his shoulder. “Itachi-san, you don’t mind if I play with your little brother for a bit, do you?” There is danger in the way he watches her, sharp and vicious and thirsty for blood.

Sasuke tenses as his older brother steps out from the shadows of the trees. Naruto’s back presses against her own and there’s a faint tremble in the bunched muscles.

They're both so far over their heads it's laughable.

A breath.
“I’m sorry, Naruto.”

She doesn’t look at him, the world fading around her as she breathes in and gathers up the spiritual chakra inside of her and burns it out in a volent flare that both Kisame and Itachi has to dodge the explosion of as it whips out in an arc of pure energy.

She’s aware of Naruto shouting, something flashing across her brother’s face as she snags hold of the first familiar chakra that cries out across her senses and forcefully hooks it to the blond and pushes while simultaneously twisting the signs for a shunshin and slamming it into him.

The resulting explosion sends her crashing against a tree and she slumps against it as pain burns through her senses as her tenketsu burst and she wheezes through her teeth at the force of it, her vision blackening before she even hits the ground.

When she comes to it she’s panting, her arms trembling uselessly in her lap and Itachi is crouching before her. A peculiar emotion darts momentarily through his eyes before they fade into something distant and unreadable.

Naruto is nowhere to see.

“That was foolish,” he tells her.

“Foolish little brother.”

“So you keep telling me.” She bares her teeth in a mockery of a smile.

“Where did you send him?” He didn’t look angry but he didn’t look happy either and she struggles to make sense of it.

Sasuke’s eyes darts to her brother’s partner, her body trembling against her will. “Don’t know,” she admits. “Who are you anyway?” she asks.

He raises an eyebrow at her. “Hoshigaki Kisame,” he humour, something heavy in the way he watches her.

She blinks. “Kiri no Shinobigatana Shichinin Shu,” she recalls. “We met Zabuza,” she finds herself explaining, because everything was sort of fading in and out – like a mix between a bad concussion and severe intoxication. “Nearly split me in two.” Her head flops back, baring her neck.

“Kisame.” Itachi’s attention doesn't waver from the younger Uchiha as he speaks “See if you can track down the jinchuuriki.”

The large shark-man hums. “Don’t linger too long.” He shoots the younger a last curious look before vanishing, his enormous expanse of chakra abruptly disappearing from her senses in a way that makes her blink dizzily.

Itachi shifts and she turns her attention to him and finds eyes nearly as dark as her own staring back.

She was once again at the hands of a man who wanted her dead and unable to move a single finger in defence. Her arms trembles, ruined, and her eyes are dead pools of black without a single spark of sharingan red to be seen.

“You’ve changed,” Itachi comments.

“Gee,” her breath wheezes. “It’s been six years. I wonder how that happened.”
She doesn’t want to die.

Not again.

But she doesn’t see an out of this situation.

He lifts a hand, reaching out to her with purple painted fingers and her head smacks against the tree in a full body flinch as her eyes dilate in fear.

“Don’t touch me!” she snaps, anger mixing with past horrors even as she struggles to draw air. “Don’t-“ she squeezes her eyes shut, angry at her own weakness as she trembles from two divided pair of memories that claw at her attention. “Don’t touch me,” she repeats. “I don’t like being touched. I don’t-“ she pants. “I don’t like-“

“Sasuke.”

Her mouth snaps shut.

He’s lowered his hand back down and she realises she’s curled herself awkwardly against the tree, her shoulders hunched and breath ragged even as her legs remained sprawled out before her, arms in her lap.

Embarrassment at her own weakness burns through her and her breath rasps too loudly and too jagged in her mind as she glares down at her lap.

“What happened to you?”

“Why do you care?” she demands, feeling hollow as she lifts her head to lock eyes with the other. “Why are you dragging this out?” she asks tiredly.

He doesn’t answer.

She’s not surprised, just resigned, when black spins into a three point pinwheel drenched in red.

And she’s six years old again.

“*You are not even worth killing.*”

And again.

“To see what I was capable off.”

And again.

“If you wish to kill me, hate me, detest me and survive in an unsightly way.

And again.

“Run. Run and cling to life.”

And again.

“You are not even worth killing.”

And again.
“To see what I was capable of.”

And again

“You are not even worth killing.”

And again

“To see what I was capable of.”

And again

“You are not even worth killing.”

And again

“You are not even worth killing.”

And again

”Foolish Little Brother.”

She stares up at the blonde lady when she wakes.

Rolls over and goes back to sleep.

Outside her hospital room the village roars when their new Godaime steps onto the podium.

She leans against the wall, sliding down until she’s sitting on the floor, staring.

His parents are where they always are. His father folded over his mother, blood pooling on the floor.

Mikoto is wearing the same yellow apron Sasuke had seen through his entire childhood but it’s drenched in blood. She’s flat on her back, her legs bare and her long black hair spills over the floor.

There’s blood flecked on her cheek and her eyes are wide and unseeing.

Fugaku lies across her, the Uchiha fan large and proud on his back despite the hole that goes through its middle.

“He loved you,” she tells them, hugging her legs to her chest and resting her chin on her knees. “I am so sorry.”

She buys a full body mirror and drags it home to the compound.

It takes her nearly two hours to rid her bedroom off all the dust that had been accumulating for the last couple of years. The large unused bed was still made up in the purple covers she’d bought but never even unfolded and there’s an entire wardrobe with untouched pants and piles cheap hoodies she’d worn during the academy days.
She draws the curtains shut and strips out of her jacket and shirt, tears the bandages from her ankles and kicks off her pants and finally shimmies out of her boxers as she takes a trembling step forward and opens her eyes to stare herself in the mirror.

HeShe’s thin from weeks at the hospital but corded with limber muscles from training and his her hair is long and falls on the right side of his her neck with a slight curl at the end. The long scar from Zabuza splits his her flat chest from shoulder to hip. It’s jagged and pink from field healing without chakra and aches on days when it rains.

HeShe reaches up, following his her hair from the tip of his her head down to the very end and presses a trembling hand over the flat breast.

There are scratches and scars from training and sparring and there’s three deep scars by his her hip from where Shukaku’s claws had dug into him her when its paw sent him her crashing against a tree – followed by its entire limb as it threatened to crush his her body against it.

His Her hand curls against her flesh, fingers digging into pale flesh.

“Foolish little brother.”

Her knees thuds against the floor and she bends over, vomiting.

- The sky is blue.
The clouds are white.
-
- The sky is red.
The clouds are black.
-
He is Uchiha Sasuke.
-
She is **** ******
-
His parents are where they always are. His father folded over his mother, blood pooling on the floor.
-
“Foolish little brother.”
"You are not even worth killing."
-
She closes her eyes.
Inside of her a six year old boy weeps.

“Sasuke.”

“What happened to you?”

“I killed him.”

The bodies on the floor are still, lifeless, dead and doesn’t as much as twitch.

“Sasuke.”

“I killed him.”

The bodies on the floor are still, lifeless, dead and doesn’t as much as twitch.

“What happened to you?”

“I killed him.”

The bodies on the floor are still, lifeless, dead and doesn’t as much as twitch.

“Foolish little brother.”

She presses her hands over her ears and screams.

“What happened to you?”

“What happened to you?”

“What happened to you?”

“What happened to you?”
“What happened to you?”

“Foolish little brother.”
“I can’t believe Tsunade-shishou agreed to take me on as a student!” Breathless wonder.

“I’m leaving the village for two years with Jiraiya-sama.” A sheepish grin.

“Sasuke?” She startles, drawn from her thought as she tilts her head up to stare at her sensei. “How are you doing? I know it must be strange to split up like this.”

She draws her trembling hands deeper into the sleeves of her jacket.
“I’m fine,” she lies.

Chapter End Notes

The only reason I didn't post this chapter yesterday is because I screwed up the HTML in like three places and then AO3 decided to just make it even worse and I ended up with an absolute mess of a chapter. It was horrible to clean up and I was significantly tempted to just lobby it into the trashbin on the computer and sulk.

This is an obviously shorter chapter and generally me just flushing things out before... things.

Very descriptive, I know.

I did consider mashing it in with what is becoming chapter 3 as we speak but it was an ill fit and this ended up more like I wanted it to as we open up for after-chuunin happenings and moseying towards the future. As you might have noticed from the tags both Kisame and Itachi are going to become central characters but there's a lot of little red threads to stitch together.

I actually have like nine different fic ideas spinning for the other short stories in this serie (and when I say short stories it just never ends up being what it's supposed to be because my default writing appears to be long as fuck - but I try). There's probably going to be another Naruto one, at least, maybe two (or five). No Harry Potter since I'm already dragging a large chunk of a fic there and I don't wanna mix them up by accident.

I have an unhealthy obsession with people getting misplaced. I admit it.

Anyway, hope you enjoyed the interlude and keep your eyes open for a very, very long chapter in the near future.

Cheers!
It’s Kakashi who catches her up with the situation after the Hospital.

“Apparently,” he says, seated beside her on the wall as they watch Naruto vanishing into the distance, “you sent Naruto crashing right into Inuzuka territory and nearly gave Kiba a heartattack.”

Naruto looks small beside the large Sannin. He’s not even half the height of width of the older man whose long pony-tail swishes behind him.

“He was furious,” Kakashi continues as Sasuke curls into her jacket. “And terrified for your safety.”

He’s going to be gone for three years.

He’ll be sixteen the next time Sasuke sees him.

“I was out at the hospital,” Kakashi explains plainly, “and Jiraiya still at the village you disappeared from. So he tracked down Umino-san who alerted the proper channels to send backup.”

Sasuke glances up at him and Kakashi stares back.

“It was a foolish thing to do,” he says.

She hunches deeper into her jacket with a grunt.

”Foolish little brother.”

-  

“It’ll be strange without him here.” They’re at Sasuke’s place as usual but it’s oddly empty even with the two of them. Sakura has managed to manoeuvre a twitchy Sasuke into getting her nails painted and she’s sprawled out on her back, staring up at the ceiling.

There’s a princess movie running in the background but it’s strange without Naruto’s loud enrapture in the plot and there’s something awkward in the air between them that Sasuke doesn’t understand.

She tries to relax but her muscles are twitchy and keeps cramping no matter how she fights it and Sakura’s eyes are distant and a bit sad.

“You’ll be busy though,” Sasuke says before she can bite back the words. “It’s an honour being accepted as the apprentice of the Godaime.” She aims clumsily for a smile and Sakura studies her for a moment before returning it.

“Yeah,” she says. “I thought she was going to send me through the wall when I asked her. I was so nervous.” She shivers at the memory. “You’re returning to active duty tomorrow, right?” she asks after a moment, finishing the first coat and making Sasuke's skin pebble as she blows on her foot to aid the drying.

“Yeah.” Sasuke flexes her toes, admiring the black paint before folding her leg and allowing Sakura to draw her left into her lap in its place. “My tenketsu are all healed up and the Godaime has called me to her office in the morning.”
Sakura blinks at her in surprise. “You’re not being assigned to the village clean-up then?”

Sasuke shrugs.

Most in their year had been village bound while their senseis were sent on B, A or S-rank missions depending on their skill-level. She’d dodged it by accompanying Jiraiya and Naruto and consequently getting put out of commission for three weeks after her meeting with Itachi and then another two weeks while she healed up.

Kakashi wouldn’t be returning to his sensei duties – there was no point with two of his students assigned under new Master’s and the ANBU in need of a clean-up.

They’d lost a lot of man-power during the invasion, ANBU in particular, and according to Sakura (who spent her days at the heels of the Godaime) both their sensei and team 9’s Maito Gai had been put on charge of getting the new recruits up to track. Apparently the names Hatake Kakashi and Maito Gai were something legendary within the ranks of the black-ops (Sakura had sounded disturbed by the news and Sasuke figured that it was hard to imagine Kakashi as anything but their very late, porn-reading, poor-excuser of a sensei).

Consequently there’d be double the genin teams passed from the academy as it hit autumn to help fill out the ranks and there’d be a hard-press on the orphanage to recruit more potential genin in the future. There was a lot of machinations at work and she was frankly surprised the Godaime had bothered to call her into her office at all.

The woman would be up to her ears in work for the following year or so at least.

Sakura hums as she fishes for toothpicks and two new colours, dipping the tip carefully before tracing a white half-moon on her big-toe. “I’m sure it’ll turn out alright,” she says confidently.

Sasuke choses not to comment on the fact that Sakura had already been made chunin and was on a direct track to claiming tokubetsu status as the apprentice of the most famous medic-nin in the history of the Elemental Nations while she was both without sensei and team.

- - 

Sasuke finds herself alone with the Godaime as the sun rises outside the large windows. She can sense at least two hidden ANBU above her but it’s about the closest anyone gets to being alone with the Hokage if you aren’t Naruto or someone high-ranked within individual divisions (or the council).

The woman looks tired but not overwhelmed and there’s a quiet kind of strength to her that makes it impossible to look away as she flips through the papers on her desk, a look in her eyes that Sasuke doesn’t know what to make of.

She looks like she’s in her early thirties, at most, despite being in her fifties like Jiraiya (Orochimaru hadn’t looked the age either but she doubted it was fair to judge the age of a man who spent his free time jumping between bodies).

Her hair is straw blonde and tied back in two loose pig-tails, her eyes honey brown and at the center of her forehead is a purple gem-like shape that tickles at the edges of Sasuke’s yin chakra despite how she keeps it tucked tight to her. Sasuke’s eyes linger on her red-painted nails and very obviously not on her generous chest.

The thing about being in the body of a preteen boy is that no-one will blame her for looking but they will mistake the reason behind it.
“I’m happy to see you haven’t picked up your sensei’s bad habit of being late.” Her voice is gruff but feminine and calls attention. “There’s been a bit of a debate on what to do with you,” she says, crossing her arms under her chest and leaning back to study her as Sasuke resists the urge to sink down into her jacket.

“As you’re aware,” the Godaime continues when Sasuke merely looks at her. “Our ranks has been thinned pretty drastically after the invasion which means there’s a lot of spots to be filled. As immediate tomorrow morning you are a chuunin of Konoha and you’ll be assigned to a team of three. You’ll have two days to get acquainted before I’m sending you out on your first mission.”

Sasuke stares at her and Tsunade snorts in amusement as her shoulders relax. “There were a lot of good reviews on you from both the exam and the invasion so don’t look so surprised.” Her mouth twitches as the tips of Sasuke’s ears went red. “You prioritized your team mates safety and managed to get them out of Orochimaru’s claws with only a broken arm and ribs to show from it. I could have promoted you just from that.” Her eyes glitteres with a smug sort of satisfaction. “During the invasion you and Nara Shikamaru lead a successful mission against the jinchuuriki of the Ichibi without any casualty and just a couple of weeks ago you gave yourself up to send Naruto here on the near cost of your life.”

“Congratulations on your promotion,” the woman says warmly and with clear approval.

- 

Her new team is an odd match.

They’re all chuunin but Itsumi is somewhere close to her thirties with a buzz-cut and broad grin with too many teeth. The fangs on her cheeks and her oversized bulldog-like companion Rokudou marks her as an Inuzuka and she wears pretty much standard-issue clothing with the exception of a bright yellow shirt crammed under the flak vest and rolled up to her elbows.

Akinari is eighteen, a kenjutsu user and a Nara with a lofty, sleepy sort of grin. He’s short, his hair honey blond and compared to the muscled form of Itsumo looks pretty small as Sasuke approaches them on the designated training ground.

They’re also clearly acquainted and it doesn’t take long to realize she’s the replacement of a third, likely one of the many casualties during the invasion.

“So you’re the Uchiha,” Itsuno scans her over and clearly isn’t very impressed. “Dunno what Tsunade-sama was thinking sticking you with us.”

“Cool it, ‘Sumo,” Akinari yawns. “Clearly we’ve been degraded into glorified babysitters.”

Sasuke stares at them both with dark eyes.

- 

She hadn’t actually done a lot of missions during her time at team 7.

Most of them were guard-duty D-rank, a C-rank turned A-rank and two long escort missions the weeks leading up to the chuunin exam. Itsuno and Akinari make it clear that they have been doing C-rank missions regularly for years and aren’t interested in waiting for her to catch up.

Between missions she pushes herself to new levels just to allow herself to keep up and within weeks she’s easily keeping level with them as they tear through the trees.
It’s also when C-rank become B-rank and she ignores Itsumo’s smirking face and Akinari’s judgemental eyes as they stare expectantly at her.

“You’re an Uchiha,” Akinari points out. “Surely this is easy for you.”

“You brother had no trouble killing anyone,” Itsumo says.

Sasuke anchors their target’s chakra in place and pushes so hard his head snaps and twists the entire way around, mouth open and eyes wide as he collapses onto the floor.

“Easy,” she agrees, shoving her hands into the pockets of her jacket and ignoring their startled looks.

Her body turns thirteen without her really taking into consideration the side-effects of hitting her teenage years in a male body.

Not until the morning she wakes up with something stiff between her legs and her first reaction is to vomit all over herself. She spends the morning cleaning off the evidence with desperation, teeth clenched so tight her jaw aches for days afterwards.

It gets colder.

In one world she would have turned thirty-four come the tenth of November. Instead she’s either a rotting corpse shoved into some hole, maybe butchered and scattered and fed to animals.

Jonah had kept her for almost a year without anyone taking notice and she doubts that getting rid of a body is harder than butchering a screaming one alive bit by bit for months.

She spends a lot of time away from the village and returning to the empty house at the compound is becoming more and more of a struggle.

Kakashi is still busy at ANBU according to Sakura whose smile is tired and strained when they come across each other in the hospital where she’s practically swaying on her feet. “I’m sure he’s thinking of us,” the pink haired girl says tiredly as she wraps Sasuke’s knuckles with infinite care (because they both know that Sasuke would never have stepped a foot inside the hospital if it wasn’t for her). “He can’t be training new recruits forever.”

“Have you heard from Naruto?” Sasuke asks as she draws her hand into her lap and stares at her teammate.

Sakura’s cut her hair during the weeks she’s been gone and traded the qipao dress for long ninja pants and a sensible red-sweater perfect for the autumn weather that leaves frost on their windowsills in the morning. She looks older and Sasuke’s eyes linger on the soft swell of her chest with dark eyes.

She’s gone by the time Sakura turns around towards her with a smile and letter in her hand.

They’re sent on an escort mission and for the first time it goes downhill.

It’s all Sasuke’s fault because apparently nothing in her life is going right.
They’re doing recon in Kuza when a Konoha genin that has absolutely no reason to wander around
the area happen upon them. Silver haired, large round glasses and a smile that sets Sasuke’s teeth on
edge because she knows that smile.

Her eyes lid in hidden suspicion and the fire crackles merrily between the four of them.

“Hello Sasuke-kun.”

The older boy ignores the other two completely, his focus on the Uchiha who is slowly closing the
book she’d been reading, turning until her legs dangle off the low branch about a meter above the
other two, right elbow on her knee and chin cradled in her hand.

“You’re one of Orochimaru’s,” she says, because there is no other reason for the boy to be tracking
her down.

His mouth lifts in a smile. “Do curb your enthusiasm, I’m only here to extend an invitation.” He
spreads his arms innocently.

“If you’re only here for pleasantries,” Akinari says below her. “Then you won’t mind introducing
yourself.”

The teen’s glasses flashes. “I don’t see the harm,” he shrugs, leaning back against the closest tree.
“My name is Yakushi Kabuto.” Everything about him is unassuming; from the grey hair, name,
gentle smile and unassuming looks.

“You’re a spy,” Sasuke notes as she absently kicks her left leg into a swing.

Kabuto flashes her a smile. “Orochimaru-sama wants to let you know there’s an open invitation for
you in his ranks,” he says, his eyes never leaving Sasuke’s. “We heard your team mates have both
been picked up and being trained by a Sannin each. Sakura-san put under the tutelage of the
Godaime herself and Naruto-san spirited away by the Toad Sage.” He tilts his head. “ Wouldn’t you
want to complete the circle? Imagine all that you could learn.”

Below her Sasuke sees Itsumo visibly tense.

“I have no interest in joining him.” She reaches a hand to her neck and Kabuto tracks the movement.

“Orochimaru-sama sends his apologies for how he handled your first meeting.” Kabuto’s dark eyes
linger on her shoulder for a moment longer and she wonders what would have happened had the
fangs actually pierced her skin. “It was a stressful time, you must understand,” he smiles.

“I have no interest in joining him,” she repeats firmly.

Kabuto’s smile turns sharper. “What exactly are you gaining by remaining in Konoha?” he asks.

“You teammates are serving under two of the strongest shinobi of our time and you – you’re out in
the forest, wasting weeks doing nothing while the murderer of your family is gaining ever so
stronger.” Sasuke stills. “You already met him once, didn’t you? Just outside the walls of Konoha.”
Kabuto’s knowing eyes buries into her. “How safe do you feel going to bed at night?”

Sasuke bares her teeth. “How I sleep is none of your concern,” she snaps, regretting it instantly
because her two sorry-excuse of teammates are right below her. “Just like Itachi is my business and
no one else’s.”

heard you spent almost three weeks at the hospital after your last meeting.”
“Take your concern to someone who wants it.” Her nails scrape against the bark of the branch.

Kabuto studies her for a long moment and below her Itsumo and Akinari shift into offensive stances. It’s a fool’s move - Orochimaru wouldn’t send just anyone to run his errands – but they are also shinobi and wouldn’t be going down without a fight if push came to shove.

“I’ll leave you to think about it,” he says pleasantly with a note of regret, pushing off from the tree. “But consider this, Sasuke-kun,” the spy says, dangerous eyes hidden behind round-lenses. “What does Konoha really have to offer you other than the ghosts of the dead and empty promises, hm?” He steps back. “We’ll be awaiting your answer.”

He melts seamlessly into the forest after a bow.

After a long moment Itsumo tilts her head, their eyes meeting.

“I’m not sure I like your friends,” the Inuzuka drawls.

- 

She dreams she’s standing in front of three mirrors.

Above her the sky is red, the clouds black.

Below her feet the sky is blue and the clouds white.

In the left mirror a six year old little boy in white shorts and blue shirt with a wide collar weeps miserably into his knees, small shoulders shaking, surrounded by death.

In the right one a young woman is sprawled naked on her back, her mouth grotesquely pried open by a black ball anchored behind her head and her eyes are wide with horror as her mutilated chest heaves desperately for breath.

In the third is her as she is now, weak and afraid.

- 

“So he’s still after you.” The Godaime looks displeased but unsurprised by the news. “He must have been forced to take a new body recently and no-doubt he’s looking to ensure you’re his next,” she muses, leaning back in her seat.

Sasuke’s eyes are drawn downwards as they usually are in her company and she forcefully tugs her attention to the window. The west side faces the mountain where the fifth face is glowering down at the village alongside the former Hokage’s.

Her eyes linger on the Sandaime for a long moment before turning her attention back to the Godaime, realising with a brief start that she’s been regarded in turn.

“I want your report on my desk before nightfall,” she says finally. “Everything you can remember. I’m giving you four weeks downtime until we know more about this situation.”

Inside the pockets of her jacket Sasuke’s fists knot into a white-knuckled fist as she bows.

- 

“I had a brother, too,” Sasuke tells the corpses on the floor. “He was born four years after me – cute thing with the biggest eyes you’d ever see.”
The bodies on the floor are still, lifeless, dead and doesn’t as much as twitch.

“He wasn’t a good brother but I keep wondering that if… if Jonah was caught and they ended up in the same prison then maybe-“ her nails dig into her knees, “maybe he’d have killed him… just like he killed our parents.”

The bodies on the floor are still, lifeless, dead and doesn’t as much as twitch.

She laughs. “It’s unfair of me, isn’t it?” she says wetly. “That I’m sitting here wishing for revenge when the boy you meant the world to is dead and all that remains is me and I’m not strong enough to avenge anyone.”

She hunkers over her knees, hands dropping to fiddle with the bandages around the hems of her pants as she frowns.

“He was your son,” she says quietly. “Itachi, I mean. You didn’t hurt him. Pushed him to do better, yes. But you never raised a hand against him.” She stares at the empty eyes of Mikoto. “He loved you. No one is that good at faking it.”

The bodies on the floor are still, lifeless, dead and doesn’t as much as twitch.

“I don’t understand,” she whispers. “I don’t understand why he killed you.”

"You are not even worth killing.”

“And why he didn’t kill me.”

"Foolish little brother.”

That night she has a dream that feels so real that it leaves her aching for days afterwards.

In the dream she’s half-asleep on the couch with a cold pizza on the table when there’s a sudden dip near her head and fingers gliding through her hair. She feels cold and warm at the same time, shivering as she twists away from the touch – her body suddenly several degrees too hot, as if put aflame.

The person hums and she whines when she’s forcefully manoeuvred into their lap, her fingers scrambling weakly to push them away but is easily battered aside - as if she was nothing more than a weak kitten.

Nails scrape gently against her scalp, tracing down, smothering their warm hand against the skin of her neck in a strange sort of caress.

Her eyes flicker and she whimpers softly as her body is shifted, the sound of a zipper too loud and frightening in the muffled buzz from the television put on mute. Her arms are lifted and she’s gently shook out of the protective embrace of her jacket until her arms are bare, leaving her only in a white t-shirt and lose pants.

The petting resumes, nails scraping against her scalp, over her neck and continues down her arm as they hum a soft sort of tune.

She quivers, goose bumps rising under their touch.

“I’ve been watching you,” a rough voice says above her and she trembles. “That studious nature of
yours never changes, huh?” His voice is warm and something inside of her recoils at the approval in his voice. “Perhaps…” he says, nails scraping down her neck. “No. Not today.” He sighs and Sasuke’s eyes lid in exhaustion.

“Soon,” he promises her, bending down to place a kiss against her feverish brow.

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It’s starting to snow for earnest as it hits December and Sasuke’s breath mists the air where she’s sitting on the back porch of Shisui’s old house and overlooking the small frozen pond. She’s piled up with scrolls around her, carefully spread on top of the blanket, and there’s a thermos and a pile of anpan in a chequered cloth scratched with seals to keep them warm.

She raided a large part of the Uchiha grounds during her years at the academy but hadn’t actually done anything with the majority of them. The ones that had interested her then were the ones that focused on chakra control and, in general, theories behind chakra, elemental natures and things related to it.

Now she picks up bits of everything and re-hides the others securely in chakra-seals locked to her own signature. Most of them are history, carefully preserved with traced with an aged sort of bitterness that sound ancient and old, a grudge carried through scroll after scroll.

But there are other ones, too.

The jutsus she finds are mostly fire related which, considering how much emphasis had been put on the goukakyuu no jutsu makes… sense, she decides. It seems that a large majority of the Uchihas had fire as their prime element and it seemed to be related to the Sharingan, somehow, though the scrolls were enormously reluctant to get into more detail. She suspectes a lot of the information had been mouth-to-mouth only.

There were scattered mentions of failing visions – mostly worries in abandoned journals that made her pause and nibble at her lower lip in consideration before starting to pile together any mention to read through properly at a later date.

It’s one of the piles she finds at the bottom that makes her pause in surprise before biting down in a steaming anpan with a hum.

- 

“Boar, dog, bird, monkey, ram – “ blood drips against the floor. “Kuchiyose no Jutsu!” She slams her palm flat against the ground and watched as a web of black spread out in a web of intricate black signs before darting back to avoid the poof of smoke.

A cat appears from the midst of it – its coat dark, eyes closed, mouth pulled up in a way that made it look amused even as its tail swished in agitation. It was nearly double the size of a normal house cat and wore a white yukata.

It cracks an eye open when Sasuke carefully sinks down to a knee before it, revealing purple. “So you’re the new summoner,” it comments, its voice rough and dark.

“My name is Uchiha Sasuke,” she introduces herself.

“Uchiha.” It tilts its head, considering her with its single eye. “We will accept this,” it says, eye closing. “I am Shien.” Its ear flickered. “It will be an honour to wear the Uchiha Ichizoku once again.” It inclines its head.
“Sasuke!” She nearly drops her bag in surprise as a hand lands on her shoulder and flinches, turning to meet surprised mint-green eyes even as she took a step backwards.

“Sakura.” She stares at her teammate, heart pounding, remembering another touch entirely as she drags a hand through her hair. It has been a long time since she’s reacted badly to her teammate’s touch, her chakra easily identifying the other, but she’s been on edge for weeks and she grimaces in apology.

Sakura tilts her head and Sasuke carefully turns her eyes to the Yamanaka to avoid the flash of suspicion and scrutiny that follows. “Yamanaka,” she greets as the blond steps up beside her pink haired friend.

“Uchiha,” the other snarls back and Sasuke is momentarily caught off-guard, her fingers digging into the paper bag at the badly hidden hostility in the other’s eyes as she rocks back on her heels.

“Ino!” Sakura rounds on her friend. “That’s not fair and you know it!”

Yamanaka huffs, crossing her arms as she turns away and Sasuke has the distinct feeling she’s missed something.

Sakura frowns at the blonde for a moment longer before turning back to Sasuke. “I heard you’re around the village for another week at least.” Sasuke glances at Yamanaka before she nods her head. “Do you want to… do you want to hang out on Sunday?” she suggested hopefully.

Sasuke blinks at her. “You’re always welcome at the Uchiha Compound,” she tells the other, perplexed.

There was a flash of… something… in the other’s eyes before they became warm and something soft settles over her face before being replaced by a impish grin. “I’ll bring the pineapple.”

“Must you?” Sasuke grimaces. “He’s not even here.”

“Pssh.” Sakura waves her hand. “We can’t go breaking traditions!” She winks. “Anyway, you vanished so suddenly last time and I’ve been practically been drowned in work.” She rummages through her back pouch, pulling out a wrinkled envelope with a sheepish smile as she straightens it out. “He wrote us one each.”

On the white envelope a smudged ‘Teme’ stares back at her.

She spends her nights training – reading scrolls and pushing herself beyond her limits. At five am she leaves the compound and laps around the village while the sun slowly climbs towards the sky. It reflects against up the snow around her, the world becoming alight in an expanse of ice crystals.

She spends hours training with Shien who is as light on her paws that she might as well be air for all the sound she makes.

“It’s all about how you move,” she says as Sasuke grimaces against the crunch of the snow beneath her. “You can use chakra, sure, but there are times where that chakra will draw attention and your mission will fail.” Her tail flickers.

On the back of her yukata the Uchiha fan stands large and proud and Sasuke’s eyes linger on it as
she carefully follows the cat on bare feet, breath missing in the cold.

She wakes with a start in the morning, her chest heaving as she hugs her knees to her chest.

“Do you ever have any strange dreams?” Sasuke asks, curled up in a light blue hoodie and a pair of ankle-long white pants.

“Strange?” Sakura has stolen one of her hoodies, the Uchiha-fan proud on her back as she leans forward to poke another piece of pineapple off her plate.

Sasuke paused, something strange shooting through her body at the sight of it and she has to forcefully direct her attention to her own pizza to keep from staring.

“Mm.” She takes a bite, shuddering at the stingy taste of the pineapple. “The kind of dream that leaves you feeling... odd... afterwards.”

Sakura glances at her from the corner of her eye and then suddenly her eyes goes wide and she flushes such a dark shade of red that Sasuke nearly drops her pizza in surprise. “Are you sure you’re supposed to be having this conversation with me!?” Sakura squeaks.

Sasuke stares at her.

“I mean, it’s a perfectly normal thing and I mean, as a medic you should be perfectly alright coming to me with these kinds of questions but—“

“It’s nothing like that!” She aims a kick at the other’s shoulder and Sakura laughs as she catches it with a tug so that Sasuke lands on her back in the couch with a huff as a nail presses against the bare beds of her toes.

“I was just teasing,” Sakura reassures her, already pawing for the bottles that usually gathered on the lower plane of the table. She draws out a handful and Sasuke watches as she snags a purple one before shoving the other one’s back and lets her head fall back, staring up at the ceiling with her arms spread.

The familiarity slowly relaxes her but doesn’t erase the anxiousness that seemed constant inside her these days.

“I have nightmares, sometimes,” Sakura admits after a moment and Sasuke tiltes her head towards her. “From that day on the bridge. And the forest during the chuunin exams.” There is something self-depreciating in her smile as she carefully paints her toes. “I felt so useless, unable to do anything while-” her hands clenches and Sasuke stares at her.

“I’m sorry,” she says.

Sakura pinches her ankle, making her jerk in surprise more than pain. “Don’t apologize you dummy.” She nudges off the finished foot off and reaches for the other. “We just have to get stronger so that when Naruto comes home, we’ll be together again. Stronger than ever.” She says this with a fierce sort of conviction that makes Sasuke’s skin prickle.

“I miss him,” she confesses.
Sakura sighs. “Me too.”

That night Sasuke scrawls a small preservation seal at each nailbed and watches them flash before fading away. On her right big toe Sakura had drawn an Uchiha fan and she brushes her thumb softly over the small emblem among a sea of purple.

- 

“Do you think he would have avenged you if he was alive?” she asks the corpses one evening, sprawled on her back with her head hanging off the couce, putting her nearly nose to nose with Mikoto’s. “Sasuke, I mean.”

The bodies on the floor are still, lifeless, dead and doesn’t as much as twitch.

“… Would you have wanted him to?” she asks.

There is no answer

-

She’s reinstated as an active ninja because they can’t keep her in the village forever and Sasuke knows, long before they step past the village gates, that it’s a bad idea.

“It’s nice to be out of the village again,” Itsumo says as they trek through the rainy grounds near Ame. There’s blame in her words and Sasuke ignores her, eyes scanning dully through the trees, waiting.

“Do you think-“ Akinari begins and never gets to finish.

Snakes explode from the trees, fangs bared and dripping with venom. They ignore Sasuke completely, curling around her two teammates and Rokudou as she takes a measured step backwards and looks towards the treeline where a pale man quietly glides into view, golden eyes intent on her.

“Sasuke-kun,” Orochimaru greets as her teammates screams becomes wheezes and finally silence.

Kabuto smiles beside the man, a quiet doll-like companion.

“Orochimaru-san, Kabuto-san,” she greets hollowly.

It doesn’t matter how fast she is. Not with these two.

Not on her own.

So she plays along.

“Have you considered my offer?” Orochimaru asks, stepping closer when she holds out her hand and he grips it gentle with long pale fingers, something dark and triumphant in his gaze when she smiles at him.

-

When she was little she used to lay herself flat up on her skateboard and push herself down the hill, arms spread as if she was flying.

“We’re like eagles,” her brother would say, struggling to manoeuvre the large board in his tiny hands. “When we’re big, I’m gonna take you flying to reals.”
He'd push his lip out stubbornly when she laughed.

“Alright,” she’d agree. “Let me be your wings until then.”

And he’d scramble onto her back and dig his bony knees into her shoulder blades and curl his small fists into her hoodie with a toothy grin as she spreads her arms beneath him and pushes them off with her feet.

His laughter had been music in her ears as they swooped down the hill.

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He beats their father to death with a crowbar eight years later and puts the house on fire with their mother still inside.

They sit side by side in the garden as it goes up in flames.

- 

A year goes by.

- 

Two.

- 

She dreams she’s standing in front of three mirrors.

In the left a boy lies slumped, his throat slit.

In the right a young woman smiles with relief in death.

The third is cracked and broken.

Chapter End Notes

So, uh, this happened?

As you've noticed this is a darker spin on things and it actually all makes sense. We've got something of an unreliable narrator with Sasuke but don't you worry, we'll be flushing reasons and actions out as we go along.

'Cause really, Ino, what's the deal??

Considering that all the Godaime could gather for Sasuke's retrieval mission was four genins and a chunin I think it's pretty obvious that it was a significant strain on Konoha after the invasion so I've expanded on some of my own headcanons surrounding that.

A village does not magically rebuild itself.

What is but one soldier in a village of many?
Tick tock goes the clock.


Let me know what you think~

Cheers!
They stare at each other across the distance.

On the hand of Senju Hashirama the blond stands tall in his orange and black suit. His hair is longer, messier, his face formed into something sharper by the years and the whiskers on his cheeks has deepened in colour.

But his eyes are just as blue, just as determined and there’s a wretchedness in the way he stares at the other.

“I didn’t know,” he calls, arms crossed and open jacket fluttering around his waist.

On the hand of Uchiha Madara the dark haired figure regards him in white jacket with a high-collar and purple hood, the Uchiha Ichizoku large and proud on the back of it. There’s a blue cloth tied to her hips by the purple rope favoured by the snake Sannin and black pants dipping down to close-toed boots.

“Does it matter?” she asks, mouth stretching into a mockery of a smile, empty of any real joy. “I don’t blame you,” she assures him, rocking back on the heel of her boots. “Blaming you would mean I expected anyone to come in the first place,” her mouth twists in broken self-mockery. “I learnt that lesson already.”

Naruto licks his lips, for once unsure what to say to the other. “He’s dead. There’s nothing preventing you come coming home.” He takes a step forward, his right foot on the very tip of the forefinger as he reaches out across the distance. “You can come home, Sasuke,” he says hopefully.

Sasuke stares at his hand, her own unmoving. “Of course he’s dead,” she says. “I killed him. Made real sure of it too. Several times. You wouldn’t believe how hard it is to kill a man who hides enough versions of himself around to feed a snake like Manda.” The blond flinches when she bares her teeth, eyes black and dead.

“Sasuke-“

“I am not ‘coming home’ as you put it so you can stop that already,” she says, shrugging. “Konoha was never my home. Konoha will never be my home.”

“That’s not true,” he denies instantly.

She regards him for a long moment across the ravine and he stares steadily back, hand never falling.

“Did you know that the days following the massacre, when I woke up from Itachi’s genjutsu, I was shoved into an interrogation room.” She leans forward, hands in the pocket of her jacket. “They kept me there for weeks.” Her mouth stretches. “Kept asking me why he’d done it. Why I was the only one alive.” She turns away from him, looking out and beyond the stretch of the world so small beneath her. “I didn’t sleep. I didn’t eat. ‘Why did he do it?’ I was six years old. My family dead. ‘Why did he do it?’ They demanded and I couldn’t say anything but the truth no matter what they did to me. I didn’t know. I still don’t know.” She pins him with a look, his skin so pale it looked ashen despite its golden tan. “There’s no home to be found in a village who stopped caring the moment Itachi left me behind.”
“Jiji wouldn’t have—” Naruto begins automatically and bites the sentence off violently because Sasuke’s eyes has darkened into a needle sharp sort of intensity. “I’m sorry – I’m sorry that happened to you.” His hands clench so hard that the peak of his sharpened nails tore through the skin. “But it doesn’t change what you are to me!” He clutches at his jacket, just above his heart. “We’re family,” he says desperately, searching the eyes of the other. “I never had a family of my own but when I look at you – I imagine what it’s like having a brother.” His face twisted into something jagged and hard. “I was so mad when I came back and you weren’t there. I thought that maybe – maybe you’d left me,” he confesses, trembling. “But it was worse than that! Because he took you away and no one—“

his shoulders bunches and he finds no words to finish.

“It doesn’t matter,” she says finally, shifting once again to see her sharingan spinning in the blue eyes of the other. “I am not coming back.” She tells him. “Don’t stand in my way, Naruto.”

“Where is your hitai-ate?” He demandes suddenly. “Did Orochimaru take that too!”

She blinks at him. “No.” She admits. “I still got it.” She shrugs, glancing into the distance where she could feel two more approaching signatures with the slightest flutter of her chakra.

His mouth twists. “I’m not leaving without you, Sasuke,” Naruto swears. “We let you down once by leaving you in that bastard’s hand but he’s dead now. Whatever he did to you – we’ll help you through it!” He vows. “And- and if you want to track down Itachi, we’ll do that too. Together.” He swallows thickly. “So you don’t have to run from us.” He steps to the very edge of the hand, his palm outstretched towards her. “We’re your team. Your family.”

She regards him silently across the distance.

And then her eyes flashed and Naruto takes a step back at the sight of her tomoes melding together into the infamous Mangekyou Sharingan. “I am already beyond redemption,” she admits quietly.

“I want to know what made him burn their deaths into my brain – killing them over and over and over again until I couldn’t erase their corpses from my living room,” Sasuke tells him at the end of the fight and Naruto stares at the hitai-ate for the first time worn proudly on a pale forehead and wants to claw it off and erase any trace of the slash through it but can’t even twitch.

“Don’t get in my way again.”

Sakura closes the door behind her, her steps hesitant before blue eyes glances towards her and he lifts a hand to pat the mattress of the bed. She toes off her boots and carefully climbs in behind him, her arms slipping around his bandaged body with care, chin settling on his shoulder.

“You’ve gotten taller,” she whispers into his ear.

“You couldn’t be taller than me forever,” his mouth twitches up before turning down. “I’m even taller than him now,” he tells her quietly.

Her arms tightens, her palm splayed over his heart and the scar stretched over it.

“I don’t get it,” Naruto confesses quietly. “I know why the others didn’t tell me but you? I thought—” his voice breaks and she feels her eyes sting in response to his pain.
“I didn’t tell you because I knew you’d have come home in a heartbeat,” she admits, drawing back and pressing her ear against his back to avoid looking at him. “Shishou sent two teams out after him and they were all killed. She wouldn’t send anymore and I wanted—” she draws a shuddering breath. “I wanted you to come home strong enough that it wouldn’t matter what they said,” she confesses into his back with a whispers as he stills, aware of the treason in that simple whisper, in the admittance of how far she was willing to go. “I told myself ‘three years – three years and we’ll be strong enough to get him back no matter what anyone says’,” she continues breathlessly. “Every moment has been for him and for you. To get him back from Orochimaru and keep you safe from Akatsuki.”

For a moment there’s silence between them, their heartbeats the only sound in the room – loud to shinobi ears. And then he twists and Sakura stills as he buries into her chest, something wet hitting the valley between her breasts and getting soaked by the bandage she used for binding. “I was so afraid that you’d given up on him ‘ttbayo,” he whispered wetly against her skin.

She wraps her arms around him, clinging just as desperately as her eyes burn with her own tears. “Never,” she tells him fiercely. “We’ll get him back – no matter what. If we so have to drag him all the way back here, kicking and screaming.” His arms tightens in response.

She accepts the amber liquid with nary a glance at the waitress, her chakra flushing through it in search of poison before she lifts it and throws it back. It burns, leaving a trail of fire down to her belly and she lifts her finger for another one while staring through the window and out at the rain.

Her black cloak is wet but not soaked through and she allows the hood to temporarily rob her of her vision of the rest of the world as she breathes slowly through her nose.

“Sasu-chan!” She closes her eyes, opens them and reluctantly slides her attention to the man settling opposite her with a wiggle. “I was looking all over for you!” he says breathlessly and his voice hitches in a way that makes him sound more like a child than the man he is.


“You tried,” he acknowledges, turning to order a ridiculously pink swirly drink from a dubious looking waitress. She makes a gesture for three more shots behind his back because dealing with Tobi tends to leave her with a headache. “But Tobi always knows where to find his Sasu-chan.”

She gives him a wary look.

It wasn’t far from the truth, she suspects. Tobi had visited her right under the nose of Orochimaru, finding her even on the days where she was locked up deep enough and with enough chains and bandages to leave her practically unrecognisable. He was handsy too - lifting her head up and settling her against his thigh to pet her hair and coo about its prettiness. Off-set against the violence from Orochimaru and Kabuto she’d become oddly desensitized to the feel of his hands running through her hair.

She didn’t think for a moment there wasn’t something off about him but so far he hadn’t acted against her as much as attempting to help her in his own twisted way. It didn’t explain why he was stalking her but she downs her third shot for the evening with nary a grimace just to not overthink it. She’d wanted a relaxing evening and it was turning out to be anything but.

“Sasu-chan shouldn’t be drinking so much,” he admonishes, even as he pushes the drink he’d
ordered towards her. “Tobi heard you met with Konoha-nin today and Tobi is a good boy so he came to make sure Sasu-chan was alright.” He looks at her, his one eye strangely imploring. “I give the best of hugs,” he says in what she suspected was an attempt to be inviting by the lowering of his voice.

“Go hug a lamppost,” she suggests, downing her fourth shot.

“She’s so mean.” He slumps dramatically, his dark eye tracking her hand as she lifts the drink he’d ordered to take a slow sip – annoyed when she realized it was just the kind of thing she’d order as-

“What are you doing here?”

“I already told you,” he whines but then perked up. “Actually, Tobi found this really cool rock last week!”

She stares at him, glass half-raised.

“A… rock,” she repeats.

He nods happily. “A very round one. In Ame. People in the rock.” He leans forward, the picture of a child sharing a secret.

“Like a cave then,” she decides, filtering his words into human speak. “Thieves or mercenaries?” she suggests, because he might be odd but it was rare Tobi took note on and remarked on other people. She was quite firmly an exception there as far as she’d noticed.

He begins tracing an eight on the table with his finger, leaving a little trail of char behind. “I dunno.” And, oh, he was pouting – Sasuke recognised that particular inflection. “They all had pretty cloaks though!” he says happily. “Black ones,” and there was something almost… longing in his voice. “With little red clouds.”

For a moment Sasuke forgets how to breathe.

The sky is red.

The clouds are black.

“Akatsuki,” she breathes and Tobi does a strange little wiggle in his seat.

“You know them, Sasu-chan?” he asks eagerly. “Tobi really, really want a cloak like that,” he confesses. “Do you think they’d give Tobi one if he asked? Because Tobi is a good boy and deserves a cloak just like so.” She glances at him, surprised by the vehemence that creeps into his tone at the last sentence. “Don’t you think so, Sasu-chan?” And – back to perky.

She hums, peering into the pink sugary depth of her drink. “You know what Tobi,” she looks up. “I do think you deserve a cloak just like that,” she says decisively, her mouth curling up even as her eyes remained empty. “And I know just who to ask about it.”

“-dismissed.”

“Actually,” Naruto doesn’t move and he’s gained a handful curious and concerned looks by the uncharacteristic seriousness that has settled over his face. “I have something I need to ask you,
Hokage-sama.” He meets her gaze, torn but determined. “I think… it’s pretty important,” he confessed, looking awkward as he drags a hand through his hair and glanced out at the stone monument with a frown.

Tsunade gives him a long considering look over the top of her folded hands. “So you want my full attention,” she acknowledges finally, stepping around the desk to lean back against it, putting them just a step away from each other. “Just the two of us?” She asks, a lightness to her words that doesn’t match the atmosphere of the room.

“Oh your discretion, Hokage-sama.” He bows his head, neck prickling.

Tsunade’s eyes flashes and she makes a sign, dismissing the ANBU as the jounin teachers who snags their students along. Naruto feels his team’s heavy gazes burning against the back of his neck before the doors closed and Shizune activates the seals (because alone with the Hokage means only so much even when you’re the honorary godson of one and he likes Shizune).

He feels strangely guilty as he gives the third Hokage one last lingering look before looking to the fifth.

“Speak,” she commands softly, every bit the Godaime in the way she demands absolute attention.

“I spoke with Sasuke before Kakashi and Sakura caught up with us,” he admits, unsure how to word it and feeling stupid for voicing it but knowing it needs to be said to because it hadn’t stopped nagging at him. “He said some strange things.” He paused. “Many strange things,” he acknowledges. “But one thing–” he lets out a breath, steeling himself as he looks into her eyes. “Sasuke said that after the massacre he was basically stuck in a room at T&I where they in not-so-many-words were implied to have denied him sleep and food and- and hurt him.” He begins to pace, a jittery sort of restlessness crawling through him. “He said, and I quote, ‘there’s no home to be found in a village who stopped caring the moment Itachi left me behind.’”

He looks over to the woman who had become something important to him in a very short time, feeling lost and seeking a reassurance he wasn’t sure existed. “He got really angry when I jumped to Jiji’s defence which was really… not like him. So it got me thinking, and it won’t stop bugging me, because he was six years old when Itachi–” he draws a sharp breath to center the anger that bubbles up automatically at the name, “when he killed all of his relatives and I can’t imagine Jiji throwing him into- into some sort of torture chamber,” he waves his right hand towards the rock formation in frustration. “But either Sasuke–” he bites the words off because he doesn’t really believe them. “Or Jiji did. Or someone did.”

“And you think the last part is most likely,” Tsunade says quietly and Naruto gives a sharp sort of nod, gnawing on his lower lip.

“After the fight he said ‘I want to know what made him burn their deaths into my brain – killing them over and over and over again until I couldn’t erase their corpses from my living room.’ Even saying the words made the hair on his arms rise and he brushes them self-consciously. “Sasuke was always a bit messed up. The touching-thing and- and the panic.” He drags a hand through his hair. “And maybe–”

“He didn’t get any help after the massacre because someone was busy squeezing him for details and combing it under the rug,” she finishes and Naruto nods, feeling like a traitor in the Hokage office even as the Godaime herself studies him without judgement.

Even he knew that someone who had managed to deny one of their (future) soldiers the help they needed was treason and not only that – it had to be by someone high enough in the ranks to have that
authority and means to get away with it.

That aside, it brought up questions like why someone had felt the need to deny a six year old the help he so desperately needed.

It was a dangerous line of question because only a handful fit the criteria and any one of them had a potential for disaster.

He has the bizarre urge to draw the curtains shut despite knowing that the seals had darkened them to prevent outside view and Sasuke had no-way of knowing he was digging into massacre-business.

“You’re not the only one who has been thinking it,” she says finally just to ease the burden even a little on his shoulders and his shoulders visibly slumps. “You understand that this stays between us for now?” she asks rhetorically because he’d already made sure to remove even his team from the situation.

He gives her a sharp salute, fist over his heart. “Hai, Hokage-sama!” he says and Tsunade relaxes against the desk, Naruto’s smile softer and more genuine since his return as she reaches out and flicks his forehead.

“Get some rest,” she advised him gently. *I’ll look into it,* went unspoken but heard.

“Thank you baa-chan.”

-

Shizune steps up beside her after re-applying the seals, ANBU not yet invited inside.

“PTSD, depression, panic attacks triggered by haphephobia, and androphobia to a certain degree –” Shizune flips through the pages, her voice heavy. “There are reports from the ANBU who watched over him during the first year or so after the massacre on orders to never interact, only make sure that he got from the compound to the academy and back again.” She frowns. “ANBU Bull and ANBU Tiger both reported to have broken this by picking the boy up and bringing him home on multiple occasions where ‘the target suddenly shut down and failed to register the world around them’.” She taps her nail against the file before shaking her head and handing them over.

“Yamanaka Rei noted that the corresponding trauma was more akin to that of a rape or torture victim rather than a boy who watched his brother kill his clan, no matter how violent.” Tsunade scans through the pages, her brow furrowing. “There are no notes on any following up on that…?”

“That coincides with your own report, don’t it?” Shizune checks.

“If it wasn’t for the fact that we were so understaffed after the invasion that we were pretty much tanking out genins just to fill the ranks I would have benched that boy the moment I saw him,” Tsunade admits with a grimace. “We still don’t know the limit or extent of the Tsukuyomi even after Hatake’s report but even taking that into consideration there’s clearly something foul afoot.”

Shizune nods, a crease between her brows. “Do you really think someone was cruel enough to leave him at T&I after the massacre?” she ventures after a moment.

“I think that Sasuke thinks that someone was cruel enough to do it and that’s reason enough to look into it.” She huffed. “Get Shikaku – and Inoichi.” Considers. “Might as well get the three of them, heaven knows they’re one of the finest teams we have for a reason.” She rubs at her forehead. “And just when things were slowing down…”
In another part of the village another blonde stares grimly down at her cracked mug.

Sasuke stumbles to her feet, door slamming open as she sinks to her knees and throws up. She retches and half-digested food dribbles its way out of her mouth and splashes into the bowl as her fingers flexes against the porcelain, shaking and gagging as her stomach cramps.

A hand settles on her shoulder and she jerks, nausea exploding through her and she leans forward, vomiting again as a gloved hands buried into her hair, dragging it away from her face as she quivers.

“Still not keeping it down, Sasu-chan?” Tobi mumbles miserably as her entire body is wrecked with the force of her trembling.

She blinks, seeing only red and black around her as the masked man tugs her away from the bowl and in a feat of strength easily hauls her into his arms before lowering her down into the bathtub. He turns the handles, letting warmth lap against her bare feet as he flushes the toilet and gives it a quick scrubbing down, humming all the while.

He disappears when the water covers her knees and then reappears with a pile of towels and a beige bag which he rummages around in after depositing the towels on the toilet.

A purple duck with drops drawn in blue down its chubby cheeks and a small Uchiha fan on its side appeared in the water and Sasuke stares as gloved fingers reaches down to gave it a squeeze, a gurgled ‘quack’ leaving the hole in its mouth. “This is Ishin Denshin.” Tobi gives it another squeeze, towing it forward in the water to bump against her painted toes before releasing it as she stared.

Another duck appears, this one with a clumsily drawn spirals in orange and black covering up the former yellow plastic. “Aienkien really doesn’t like seeing Ishin Denshin sad.” He squeezes it slowly, a long drawn-out quack gurgling against the rising water. “They are the bestest of friends,” Tobi reassures her, giving it an encouraging little puff towards the other bobbing duck.

A tiny thread of chakra thread draws the ducks side-by-side and Tobi makes little encouraging noises as the trembles slowly eased from her body and she slouches deeper into the water that had been turned off once it reached her ribs as exhaustion crawls through her limbs.

A ball of blue dropped into the water, fuzzing and bubbling and colouring the water and she finds herself reaching out for it, giving it a little spin with her index finger. “Does Sasu-chan like it?” Tobi lounged on the side of the tub, arms folded up to rest his chin upon as he watched her contently.

“Tobi bought it because Tobi is a good boy and wanted to make Sasu-chan happy,” he says earnestly.

It smells of lavender, erasing the last stench of iron from her nose.

When Tobi reached for her shirt and carefully manoeuvres it off her body she doesn’t protest, only hunching forward to hide her chest against her knees as the he drops the soaking wet shirt in a pile on the floor.

Aienkien nudges against the side of her leg and she reaches out and gives it a little spin in the blue water.

Blue.

Not red.
“The blue is so pretty,” Tobi sighs happily and she looks over at him with dull eyes.

It wasn’t the first time Tobi had helped her. She doesn’t know how many times the masked man had caught her at her lowest at Orochimaru but somewhere along the line it had stopped to matter.

There was no point of hiding something he was already aware of.

He’d sat cross-legged in the shadows and watched as Kabuto tore her to pieces – her eyes wild, more animal than human as she had struggled against his grip on her.

Had dipped his fingers into the blood and drawn silly faces on the floor next to the flickering light of a lantern when they bound her arms behind her and left her for days in the dark.

He might not have hurt her but he never did anything to stop it either.

Blue.

Not red.

Not red.

Not red.

She breathes in the warmth of the steam rising from the water.

“If you react like that on the field you are going to get killed,” Kabuto tells her the first time he catches her after a panic attack. “That’s a weakness, Sasuke-kun.” He’d smiled as he knelt down beside her trembling form and stroked sweat soaked hair away from her forehead. “We’ll make sure it doesn’t happen again,” he’s promised.

And she doesn’t have panic attacks on the battlefield anymore.

Just in her bed.

A tremble crawls through her body and she digs her nails into her arms, tearing at the skin while Tobi watches silently, one arm draped into the water to toggle the Ishin Denshin.

Blue.

Not red.

Not red.

Not red.

Chapter End Notes

You're all welcome to just stop being so awesome with your reviews so I can drag this story back to the proper three-chapter thing it was supposed to be and not the monster
I'm apparently making of it (because I'm weak and apparently fold like a spineless mush under your assault - how someone pegged me as 'such a dom' during the last spin of truth and dare I participated in I will never know). I was dead-set on five chapters at most. 'You can do it!' I told myself. 'Make something short for the first time in your life!'.

I'm deadpanning all of you so hard right now you don't even know.

I'm lucky to breathe between work, school and practically being attached to my computer while half-cramming dry bread down my throat because writing is fuuuuuun (it is, also, a pain in the ass and my sister is threatening bodily-harm if I don't mosey up from my hole and actually interact with people that isn't my dog).

This is...

A chapter.

I am expecting literally none of you to have anticipated the little spin I did here.

Also, uh, I'm not going down the Kaguya path like, at all, in this story so expect some changes to come along as we traverse our way onwards. You can entertain existential questions like: is Tobi and Madara the same person in this? What about Obito? What exactly is the author planning on going with this? Who knows!

On a side-note: The Duck names (because you might be curious). They're both yojiukugo and if I remember correctly:

Ishin Denshin: *what the mind thinks the heart transmits*.

Aienkien: *uncanny relationship formed by a quirk of fate*.

Cheers!
On her twentieth birthday she’d visited her brother in jail. Her friends hadn’t been overly impressed by her plans. “You can visit him any day of the year!” They’d said as she bundled up in a thick badly-knitted scarf that was supposed to be a gag-gift but ended up being practically attached to her (and she’d enjoyed the clear cringe in four out of five faces and the shy blush of the fifth - there was something about the mustard yellow colour that just got to her).

She hadn’t had any explanation for the sudden urge to see him and there’d been a fair amount of sighs and groans and shuffles. But when it was time to leave they’d practically crammed her into the musty old van they all shared and that smelled strongly of mint from the tree in the front mirror in a vain attempt to cover the smell of ash and made a road-trip of the four hour ride with bad-music and ever worse sing-a-long.

Her brother had been surprised when they led him bound up and wearing prison-orange to the small back table and the corner she’d practically burrowed herself into with a small pile of candy from the prison vending machine (because bringing cake into a prison just wasn’t happening) and was in the move of separating the yellows from the blues from the reds.

He’d looked so young – sixteen, only sixteen – a bit unsure to see her but happy as he slowly sunk into the chair opposite her. He’d grown – surpassing her height but neither of their parents had been big and he was more wired than broad and there was an old yellowish bruise on his cheek and a split in his lip.

“You’re still into the red ones, right?” she’d asked, shovelling the halved gummy worms and pile of red skittles towards him while popping a yellow half into her mouth and leaning her chin in her hand, elbow on the table as she regarded him.

And he’d smiled at the fact that she remembered as he grabbed a mixture of them and poured them into his mouth with a hum of content as he began to chew.

“It’s your birthday today,” he’d observed after swallowing, twirling a halved worm between his fingers. “Why are you here?”

“Can’t I visit my own brother?” she’d shrugged, reaching for a green and orange sour skittle that made the back of her tongue curl when her teeth broke through them. “A birthday is just another day.”

“Is it because I killed them today?” he’d asked, meeting her eyes unapologetically when hers darted up to study him.

“No,” she’d admitted. “I celebrated it just fine last year.”

His mouth had stretched, slow but strangely content as he bobbed his head. “Good,” he’d said. “Good. It wouldn’t be right if you didn’t.” He chewed up the worm he’d been palming. “Do you still...?” His hair is greasy but styled carefully and she wonders if he’d taken the time to do that for her – to clean up – for her.
It makes his hair shiny under the lamp.

“My friends are all coming over tonight to watch it.” She dragged a long sour thing towards her and stripped it in two – offering the red half to an already waiting hand. “They’re probably bringing popcorn and alcohol and hoping I’ll get bored half-way through so they don’t have to watch it for the fourth time this year.”

He huffed, amused. “It’s not that good.”

She’d stuck a blue coloured tongue out at him. “It’s a classic!” she’d told him and they’d shared a grin. Because he had sat there right beside her in front of the television with just as big eyes as *Metropolis* played for the first time before their eyes when she was seven and he was three and the world was as black and white as that of the movies they watched on the old television.

Their parents hadn’t been bad people.

Their marriage had been a direct consequence of teenage pregnancy and controlling parents preetching their pro-life agenda. They’d made it work to their best capability, carrying not only one but two children to term and making sure they never went more than a day or two hungry. Every last Sunday of the month they got a small bag of candy to share and there were always a present each wrapped up in pretty colours with bad rhymes come Christmas under a plastic tree that was wrestled up and carefully supported each year no matter how slanted and sad-looking it got.

They’d been young, seventeen, a childhood romance that became a heavy financial burden with too little money made from too long hours at miserable odd-jobs.

One had been a mistake.

Having a second child had strained what little they had until they were stretched thin.

Their mother never quite forgave herself for having Jake – for making a hard situation even worse and she’d spent many night cradling the weeping form of her new brother and listening to them fight through the thin walls. Hushing him gently and telling him, “it’s not your fault” and “they love you, they really do, they’re just stressed”.

She’s four and feeling a bit lost but determined to be the best sister ever.

Four years later he’s laughing on her back as they swoop down the long concrete road where cars rarely go anymore because it’s all cracked and overgrown and not-safe.

Eight years after that he beats their father to death with a crowbar and puts the house on fire with their mother still inside and she sits beside him as the red and yellow flames swallow the house they’ve spent all their life in and trying to understand but failing.

The question lingered on the tip of her tongue as she chews her half of yellow and blue gummy worms while he eats his reds contently. Just… happy to have her there on her birthday. Happy that she’d chosen to visit him as she celebrated another year of living.

She never does get around to asking.

Thinks: *I have time* and *I’ll ask another day*.

But seven years later a man who won’t take no for an answer tracks her down and, it turns out, she doesn’t have time.
Because she’s dead.

Sasuke gets the news on Sunagakure and the dead-only-not-dead Gaara when they’re wandering by the border of Ame just near the stretch of land that leads to dry sand and red rocks and a one-tailed jinchuuriki that nearly made squish of her body.

She’s in a bar again, hood pulled up, chakra channelled into her ear to listen to the gossip of the Suna jounin who are conversing in hushed whispers.

In the inner pocket of her half-zipped jacket the kitten Shien had dumped on her bed that morning is purring softly. Its coat is orange, face squashed and tail a stump. She’d woken up to it sprawled on her pillow, tiny nose buried in her ear and she has a strong suspicion Shien had just essentially put her in charge of the thing because the ninneko had refused to be summoned all morning and her thumb is bitten raw.

So, pocket it was. She’d ordered a glass of cream with her breakfast and the thing had lapped for several minutes when she’d tilted it awkwardly into her jacket so she figures it was a few weeks old, at least, despite its pitiful size and closed eyes.

“- can’t believe Chiyo-sama is dead,” one of them is saying as Sasuke stirs her miso and raises the warm soup to her lips, drinking directly from the bowl.

“- heard she gave her life for Kazekage-sama-“

“- he died and she brought him back to life!”

The bowl thuds against the table, knocking against the steaming cup of tea and spills it all over the other side of the table as she rises abruptly, the kitten strangely silent in her pocket as she turns, cloak flaring out behind her as she pushes the door wide open and steps out and into the rain.

Little claws bury into her chest but she barely feels it as she fights the panic inside of her, stumbling as her vision goes two-ways and gnashing her teeth against it.

“I am going to hurt you now, Sasuke-kun. I am going to hurt you and you’re not allowed to panic or I’ll increase the pain.”

She turns instinctively towards the trees, intent on leaving any sign of humans behind her.

“I want you to count them.”

Her feet thuds against the ground, splashes into the puddles as she forces herself forward and away.

“We’ll start at six hundred and sixty-six and you’re going to count the numbers with me as we go down by seven all the way to zero.”

She collapses to her knees and fumbles for the kunai on her thigh.

“Count, Sasuke-kun.”

Her clammy fingers wrap around the cold metal and slams it down.

“Count them!”

“Six hundred and sixty-six,” she gasps.
She yanks the kunai out and drives it into her leg anew.

“Six hundred and fifty-nine.”

She yanks the kunai out and stabs it down blindly.

“Six hundred and fifty-two.”

Chakra swipes through her body automatically, just like Kabuto had taught her, sealing the wounds even as she slams the kunai down anew.

“Six hundred and forty-five.”

Digs it into her flesh as something heavy and desperate builds in her chest.

“Six hundred and thirty-eight.”

he could be like me

Deeper.

“Six hundred and thirty-one.”

he could be like me

Again.

“Six hundred and twenty-six.”

he could be like me

And again.

“Six hundred and nineteen.”

he could be like me

And again.

“Six hundred and twelve.”

he could be like me

Gaara?

Are you

Are you

Are you like me?

Please-

-Kakashi-sensei is going to kill us,” Naruto says, looking unperturbed. He’s flat on his stomach with his legs up and crossed by the ankles as he squints in concentration. A walrus shaped hat is slants on his head and he’s wearing a black shirt with the Uzumaki-spiral on the back and orange boxers with toads on them.

“Kakashi-sensei should know better than to bail on team dinner,” Sakura says, dressed in a soft
yellow shirt with the Haruno-merchant circle on the back of it and red boxers with little white slugs on them. “One would think he’d have the decency to actually appear to one with you back in the village.” She swaps a blue container for a green one.

“Especially with us being officially known as Team Kakashi now,” Naruto agrees, swapping his own bottle for one with liquid gold and trades the brush for a small toothpick. “We sent him a letter and all.”

“You stuffed a note down his pocket during the Bell Test.” Sakura stretches, shifting to ease the ache by her shoulder.

Naruto scoffs. “As if he actually reads his mail.”

“Fair point,” she agrees, blowing to aid the drying and there was a rustle of movement and then a flump as Bisuke settles down before her and Bull rolls over to take a nap.

She exchanges the nail polish for a nail file and sets so make vicious claws of the blunt smooth ends.

“How long do you think it’ll be before he notices we stole his ninken?”

“I’ll give it another hour,” Sakura hums. “He’s brooding again.”

Folded up at the end of the bed is a pink shirt with the Henohenomoheji and a pair of dark blue boxers with little puppies draped on top.

(In a box under Naruto’s bed is a grey shirt with the Uchiha fan on the back of it and a pair of royal purple boxers with little kittens).

They had, infamously, been dubbed the Konoha Eleven before the name reached the ears of a certain pink haired kunoichi who’d smashed out an entire wall in the hospital and given a lecture that had terrified her patients and anyone who happened to within hearing.

(Because Sasuke had never willingly left the village and Sakura would tear anyone apart for implying he wasn’t part of them).

The nickname Ochiba had risen in its stead which was marginally less morbid than counting them down by disappearance (or death– the life of shinobi were seldom long).

They’d taken on the habit of meeting up every month or so some time after Sasuke’s kidnapping and it had become… a thing.

This time, only nine were in attendance.

“Mendokusē.” Shikamaru sits half-slumped with an elbow on one knee and chin in hand, feet dangling as he’d claimed his place on one of the piles of boxes in the small warehouse. “Why did you drag us here, Ino?”

“And why isn’t Sakura or Naruto here?” Kiba demands, leaning back against the wall with his arms crossed. Akamaru, tall enough to put his chin on his head, sits to attention by his side.

Shino pushes at his glasses. “This pertains Team 7. Why? Because they met Sasuke a month ago and he did not return with them.”
“W-why didn’t he come back with them?” Hinata voices by his feet, a cup of tea in her hand and knees half-drawn to her chest.

“I heard he killed Orochimaru-” Neji begins, cradling his own cup but leaning against a pile of boxes as opposed to sitting.

“A mighty youthful endeavour!” Lee nods to himself, the one highest in the room on the pile of boxes he’d stacked precariously.

“- which means he isn’t a prisoner anymore,” he finishes, unperturbed by the interruption.

“Exactly!” Ino crosses her arms, a frown on her face. “We all know they confronted him at the Valley of the End and, from what I managed to wiggle from Forehead, Naruto even talked with Sasuke before they fought.”

“So that’s why Naruto was in the hospital?” Tenten asks, frowning as Ino nods.

“But that makes no sense!” Kiba butts in. “He was kidnapped – why wouldn’t he want to return after finally getting rid of that snake creep? We all saw how he reacted at the chuunin exam.” He got three blank looks from the trio not part of the Rookie 9.

“He had a panic attack,” Chouji explaines, twirling the stick from the dango he’d finished. “A really bad one. Sasuke has always had trouble with being touched and the idea of a grown-man going after him for his body completely sent him over the edge.”

“If it wasn’t for Forehead and Naruto he would have had a panic attack there and then,” Ino adds, grimacing.

“That bad?” Tenten asks, concerned. “What in the world would trigger a twelve year old so badly? Because the whole touch thing sounds more like-“ she pauses at the numerous dark looks suddenly going through the room. “The massacre?” She breathes incredulously.

Looks were exchanged. “We don’t exactly know,” Shikamaru says finally with sigh, rubbing at his chin.

“H-he was really messed up after the massacre and missing for weeks before he returned to school.” Hinata hugs her knees, cup balanced on the right with an absent finger tracing the rim. “H-he didn’t speak for well over a year, I think.”

“Yeah.” Kiba scratches at Akamaru’s ear. “He was completely out of it. Nee-chan said she even saw an ANBU carrying him home all blank stared.”

“That’s horrible,” Lee whispers, heart aching.

“Tou-san says that all shinobi who faces trauma are sent to the Mental Health ward at the hospital to get help but I’m starting to think Sasuke never got that help,” Ino admits.

Uchiha Itachi had massacred his entire family, leaving only Sasuke alive and years later he’d nearly killed her father when he had broken into T&I for information.

Irrationally she’d blamed the boy who’d suffered the most at the hands of the man and even years later she felt ashamed by her behaviour. She’d been vapid and foolish but the sight of her father wrapped up in bandages had burned into her brain along with her mother’s tears and gaunt face by her father's bedside.
She wonders if anything would have been different if she’d reached out for him during those months of seeing him wandering around the village like a ghost – aimless with his team suddenly split.

She is determined to make up for it.

“He didn’t get better during the years, he only got worse.” She waves her hand. “We all saw how much he clung to Sakura and Naruto and even that sensei of theirs after only a couple of months as a team together. I doubt anyone bothered to truly reach out for him until they were stuffed into a team and expected to make it work.” There was a muted guilty buzz.

“We were just kids,” Kiba feels the need to point out as Hinata slumps in a state of total guilt.

“Exactly,” Ino agrees. “There should have been adults but somehow Sasuke just got left to his own device and apparently that didn’t work out too well,” she says with a humorless twist of her lips.

“What point are you trying to make?” Neji asks, levelling her with a wary look.

Ino puts her hands on her hips. “Sakura and Naruto are our friends,” she says this firmly and there isn’t a soul in the room who would deny it. “And Sasuke is a shinobi of Konohagakure. This,” she waves her hand, “whole situation doesn’t make sense and we have a duty to our fellow Konoha-nin to help them out,” she concludes, clearly pleased with herself.

“You want us to bring back Sasuke?” Kiba’s mouth drops. “Haven’t Naruto and Sakura, like, sworn in blood to do that themselves?” He makes a strange face and Akamaru whines in agreement.

“I do not think Sakura-san and Naruto-san would appreciate it. Why? Because they’re very possessive.” This earned him a round of several amused looks at the understatement.

Shikamaru studies her. “You mean information,” he decides.

Ino points dramatically to him, a wide grin spreading her lips. “Correct!”

“Y-you mean we keep an ear out for any word on him?” Hinata asks, looking up from her tea as a number of interested looks were levelled on the blonde.

“And figure out if there’s anything prohibiting him from retuning to Konoha?” Tenten adds, a contemplative look in her eyes.

“YOSH! I agree to this YOUTHFUL endeavour!” Lee rolled off his pile of boxes, landing next to Neji who doesn't as much as twitch. “No piece of information on the Uchiha will escape me if I so have to turn every leaf in the village to find it! And if I fail I’ll-“ Neji slaps a hand over his mouth.

“You are talking about starting up our own information network,” Kiba smirks. “I like it. I’m tired of being the last one to hear about things.” Naruto asking for private time with the Hokage still made his neck itch at the sheer oddity and the absurdity of seeing the blond so serious.

The prospect of levelling the field was delicious.

“He’s a shinobi of Konoha,” Neji says simply. And a friend of Naruto’s. Perhaps I will find a way to repay the debt I owe him.

Ino looks around, meeting eyes alight with the will and determination Konoha shinobi were famous for.

She grins.
Tobi latches onto her hand when he catches up to her after disappearing who-knows-where to do who-knows-what.

She’s changed her pants and the kitten is fast asleep, her jacket thick and big enough that the lump isn’t visible to outside view. She’s lowered her own chakra to civilian levels and smothered the edges of the creature’s, too, and the dark blue cloak she wears covers her clan mark.

The purple ropes of the snake Sannin has been tucked away in a scroll.

Tobi is wearing neither hoodie not cloak, his black hair slick from the rain that never stops in Ame.

He looks completely unconcerned by his state too, humming as he swings their hands together, his gloves fingers woven tight with hers and with strength that bellies the image of an ignorant child he plays at.

“Does Sasu-chan wanna camp outside tonight?” he asks as he tugs her right through a pool of water, and she flexes her toes as the cold reaches half-way up to her knees but doesn’t protest.

“In the rain?”

“Tobi really likes the rain,” he confessed, releasing her hand to do a little twirl with a splash before bouncing back and reclaiming it with a squeeze. “Does Sasu-chan not like the rain?”

“I like it just fine,” she grunts, absent-ly flexing the yin part of her chakra because most ninjas won’t notice the brush of it and she’s very, very careful.

“Tobi wants a fire and marshmallows,” he says, clearly pleased. “Because Tobi is a good boy and deserves the best camping with his Sasu-chan.”

“You should bring cookies and chocolate and make s’mores then,” she humours, the English word sounding strange in her mouth after all these years.

Tobi cocks his head. “Sasu-chan like these s’mores?” His tongue curls curiously around the strange word and against her will her lips tick up at the right corner.

“Sure,” she says, because she did but this body isn’t much for sweets even if she tries. “Prefer tomatoes though.”

“Then Sasu-chan will make s’mores for Tobi?” he asks, a single inky eye peering out at her, both hands clasped in front of him. “And tomatoes for herself?”

She shrugs because she sees no reason not to.

Tobi makes a little skip of happiness and he hurries his steps, as if the night would come quicker with the increase of speed as she trails after him.

- 

Behind them a man split evenly in black and white and swallowed up by a flytrap sinks slowly into the trunk of a tree, yellow eyes fixated on the back of the blue-cloaked figure.

- 

“I heard your little brother killed Orochimaru,” Kisame drawls as he steps into their shared bedroom.
and leans Samehada against the wall while stripping his blood soaked cloak. “That creepy assissant of his, too, and nearly annihilated the majority of Sound. It’s a mess and a half according to my contacts.” He chuckles, pretending not to see the flash of worry in dark eyes before it gets swallowed up by indifference and a quiet *hn*.

The younger one might pretend to be a cold-hearted killer but he’s just a kid and several years too early to hide his emotions from him. He doesn’t doubt for a second they’ll be making another *detour* during the next mission and he approves of that – that kind of loyalty.

He paws the package of strawberry pocky he picked up and throws it to the other before snagging up a towel and some clean clothes. The crinkle of plastic makes his mouth hitch up approvingly. *Kids,* he thinks to himself with a huff of amusement before ducking down the hall, *if you can’t win them over by words just give them something sweet.*

Chapter End Notes

Ochiba means *leaf pile* or *fallen leaves* if I remember my Japanese lessons correctly.

This is me laying some ground work because I needed to establish some things after making the chapters heavier because otherwise it stops making sense and yeaaah, this is me being incapable of making short stuff.

I really enjoy the Konoha 11 dynamic and they're along for the ride apparently. I'll get back to them a bit more proper as we go along with some individual exploration but I needed something to work with first.

This story is basically spawning itself, I don't know what to do about it other than flap my hands a bit helplessly and avoid dunking my head on the chair again after rolling out of bed at 3 am with too many ideas buzzing in my head.

One of you apparently found this after reading CPHC so on a side-note: I haven't stopped working on it, I'm just not getting the latest chapter the way I want so I'm taking it out on CATC while hashing out some details.

You're all so delightful.

Anyone notice how I colour-coded their shirts? I put way too much thought in details, I swear.

Let me know what you think~

Cheers!
"Don’t.” It’s a warning, a pale hand clenching down on a clothed wrist as her sharingan spins to life. Sweat drips from her forehead, hitting the cool stone and her chest heaves for breath as mania and panic pounds through her.

“Tobi just wants to help Sasu-chan.” It’s beseeching as much as a warning as the hand in her grip twitches as the other’s sharingan spins in mirror of her own.

It’s not the first time she’s seen it.

It’s not the first time she wonders about its implication in a world where she’d been celebrated as the last loyal Uchiha before getting kidnapped and forgotten.

“I don’t need help.” She releases him, pulling her cloak tighter around herself as she stares at the wet forest outside cave walls. Absently her palm presses against the soft warmth of a small body inside her jacket and something inside of her eases at the rise and fall against her breast as she sneaks her fingers inside the pocket and presses them over its small head after only a moment of hesitation.

“Is Sasu-chan mad at Tobi?” Despite the childish pout in his voice there’s an undercurrent of warning and she feels the hair on her arms rise in response.

She looks away.

“No,” she lies. “You just startled me.”

He perks. “That’s good!” he says happily, rising and stretching his arms above his head in exaggeration. “Tobi will go scout and get some food,” he announces, practically flouncing out of the cave.

Sasuke stares after him for a long moment, glancing down only when a squashed orange face presses up against the fingers that had stopped their petting. “Hn, Dobe.” She scratches its tiny ears as she leans back against the wall and closes her eyes with a shaky exhale.

“Shika!” Shikamaru jerks when the blond drops from his roof, staring in disbelief as a pink haired figure joins him with a wave, looking unconcerned by the fact that they were trespassing on Nara property.


“We just need to borrow Shika for a moment ‘ttbayo.” The blond looked ready to snag him right out of his seat and Shikamaru leans closer to Inoichi and Choza who were both seated against the wall of the porch on his right – both looking bemused by the interruption.

“Naruto, Sakura,” he acknowledges with lidded eyes. “I’m in the middle of something.” He gestured for the game as his father used the interruption to refill his sake with badly hidden amusement.

Naruto leans forward, eyes squinted. “Aw man, not shogi,” he complains.
Sakura elbows him sharply. “Shogi is a perfectly good way to spend the time.” She flashes an apologetic grin at the Nara head and he waves a hand, unperturbed as he took a sip.

“You’re just saying that because you pretended to lose against Sasuke to get out of it,” Naruto pouted. “Do you have any idea how many times he made me play? It was horrible.” He shudders.

Shikamaru blinks at the two of them. “Sasuke played shogi?” he asks in a mixture of interest and disbelief.

Naruto makes a strange grimace but Sakura bobs her head with a fond grin. “We discovered it by accident during a mission that involved gambling. Apparently he’s really good at card games and won’t turn down a game of go or shogi.”

“The cards are fine ‘ttbayo,” Naruto bounces on his toes with a huff. “But his games with Kakashi-sensei took days. So boring,” he bemoans. “Anyway, Shika – come on! We’re gonna be late!” He reaches out and snags him by the ankle, ignoring the sudden wide-eyes of the other and fingers that slide against the porch as Naruto yanks him clean off and hauls him up over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. “We’ll have him back before bedtime!” Naruto shouts as he disappeared up amidst the branches.

Sakura bowed politely before turning and following, easily catching up to the cursing Nara and laughing Uzumaki with a high-five in success.

Shikaku swallowed his sake. “They’re good influence on him.” He decides, reaching out and stealing his son’s king, ending the game.

Inoichi took a bite of his dango. “I wonder if it has anything to do with why Ino-chan has been sneaking around for the past weeks.”

“T’s curious,” Choza comments. “I haven’t seen Chouji this motivated in ages.”

He glances towards the trees with a sigh when he senses the muted chakra of Shiranui Genma seconds before the tokubetsu-nin slipped down the tree with an apologetic twist of his lip, senbon clicking against his teeth.

Back to work it was.

They had a traitor to sniff out, after all.

-  

Kuzanagi snarled to life with lightning and she catches the widening stretch of fangs as the seven feet giant of a man bends beneath it, his hand sneaking out and wrapping around her ankle even as she twists and presses her palm flat against his chest. His free hand presses against the ground in a feat of agility that belies his size and she finds herself launched across the field, turning to land in a crouch on a tree – pushing to avoid destroying it from the sheer strength of the throw.

She drops to the ground, her chakra flaring in search of the other in the duo even as she doesn’t move her gaze from him for a second.

“Well, if it isn’t Itachi-san’s little brother.” He scans her, something curious in his gaze and the scrunch in his brow when he meets her own deadened stare.

“Kisame-san,” she greets, head cocking. “Where is Itachi?”
His eyes flash and there’s something fiendish in the grin that spreads across his lips. “I heard you killed Orochimaru,” he says, ignoring her question. “Quite the feat for a kid.” He hefts the giant sword onto his shoulder as he studies her with approval that makes her blink.

“He was Akatsuki,” she says, half-statement, half-question.

“Was, until he decided that Itachi-san’s eyes would look better as his own.” Kisame regards her. “I assure you none of us are looking for any sort of vengeance, rather, congratulations on ridding the world of yet another creep.” He sounded approving, looked it too, and she cocks her head curiously.

She sheaths Kuzanagi and he follows the movement with pin-prick eyes.

“I want to talk with Itachi.”

“Talk or talk?” His chest rumbles with the depth of his voice and Sasuke was momentarily distracted as she wondered what it would sound like to have her ear pressed up against the center of it.

“A conversation. With words. From our mouths,” she says, just a tad drily, and he throws his head back with a laugh before he secured Samehada to his back with chakra.

“Come on then, kid,” he says and Sasuke blinks at the crook of fingers, her steps soundless as she falls in at his flank.

Kisame gazes down, brow creasing, before he gave a little huff of amusement and reached out to pat the top of her head.

Sasuke is curled up against the cave wall and nibbling carefully on a fried salmon when Itachi appears three hours later.

Kisame had managed to cajole her into hanging her cloak to dry and the orange tabby had climbed out of the pocket of her jacket to curl in her lap, accepting the mush of half-chewed fish she’s offering it – eyes closed as it opened its tiny mouth and carefully picking it from her palm with tiny needle-sharp teeth.

Kisame himself had stripped down to his pants – shirt and cloak stretched out near her own to allow it to dry.

Itachi pauses at the mouth of the cave, staring at them both.

“Kisame,” his voice was low. “Ototou.”

“Itachi,” Kisame greets where he’s setting up another fish over the fire while holding out a ready one for the eldest Uchiha. “Just in time for dinner.”

Sasuke doesn’t look up as she raises a hand to her mouth and removes a ball of half-chewed fish and lowers it down to a searching nose and tiny paws that stretches to reach with a soft purr of happiness against her thigh.

Itachi looks at Kisame in askance even as he accepts the food aftershrugging off his own wet cloak and folds down against the opposite wall as Kisame gives it a shake and spreads it on the ground near the fire. The giant man settles back to the left off his partner, closer to the cave opening and effectively blocking any breeze from reaching the smaller man.
“Sasuke-san, it’s not polite to ignore the other.” Kisame’s words make her look up, eyes widening ever so slightly at the reproach as she darts her eyes to the other Uchiha.

“She should have acknowledged you.” she remarks, dipping her head as the kitten’s rough tongue scraped against the pads of her fingers and therefore missing the flash of surprise in dark eyes as brows furrow.

“I see you signed the cat contract.” Itachi says after a moment of stretched silence.

“Hn.”

Hesitation.

“You still have the crow contract, right?”

“Ah.”

Kisame stares at the two of them.

“And I have the shark contract,” he says, his voice tinged with disbelief. "Glad we got that out of the way." He levels a look at the youngest. “Sasuke-san, you tracked me down to talk to Itachi, right?” He forewent the polite suffix for his partner in the privacy of the cave. “You don’t go looking for S-class shinobi to ask about the weather.” He mentally bemoaned the social incompetence of Uchiha’s as he laid out of the situation because both were looking attentively to him, as if he’d continue the whole thing for them.

He waves a hand towards the only non-Akatsuki member who ducks slightly into the collar of his jacket and Kisame would bet anything that he was nibbling on his lower lip.

“What…” his brow furrows and something akin to hesitance creeps through dark eyes. “Do you know if there’s any other Uchiha alive?” he asks finally and Kisame mentally applauded him for the sheer gutsiness of asking the very person who had practically annihilated them in the first place.

Itachi stares at him and Kisame knows his partner well enough to read that he was worried by the question.

“You have met someone with the sharingan?”

The younger Uchiha offered an awkward shrug, empty eyes focused on the kitten in his lap. It was an ugly thing – all squashed and wrong. It looked odd beside the dignified air of the small Uchiha, as crept up and folded together as he was.

He wasn’t nearly as striking as Itachi who tended to draw looks whether he wanted to or not but it was easy to tell that they were brothers. It was in the face and slim shoulders, the same dark eyes and permanent signs of stress – one taking the shape of deep lines, the other purple bags beneath the eyes.

“On and off,” Sasuke says and Kisame’s eyes narrowed slightly as Itachi did his version of tensing. “He’s looking for Akatsuki,” he offered, biting off another bite of fish and chewing it up to offer it to the cat with sticky fingers.

“You’ve spoken to him.” It wasn’t a question.

Sasuke finally lifted his eyes to meet that of his brother. “He calls himself Tobi.” He sounded wary and there was a note of unease in his voice as much as he tried to hide it.
Kisame wonders what it takes to unnerve someone who had spent two years with someone like Orochimaru and his creep of assistant.

“When did you meet him?” Itachi pressed.

The younger Uchiha fiddles slightly, playing it off as stroking the small tabby cat. “About a year ago,” he says finally, index finger stroking over a folded orange ear, mouth dipped into the collar of his jacket.

Kisame blinks. “Weren’t you at Orochimaru’s a year ago?” he asks, filing away the minute twitch that might as well have been a full-body flinch in stoic Uchiha.

“He…visited,” the younger says very carefully, curling onto himself, as if to hide from a strike. There is an eerie blankness in his eyes when he looks up to meet Itachi’s eyes. “I was travelling with him until three days ago,” he admits, studying his brother. “He wants to join Akatsuki.” It’s the second time he'd presses it and Kisame knows a warning when he hears one.

“Your fame for killing off all the Uchihas is looking more and more like an exaggeration, Itachi,” Kisame says wryly, stretching out one leg and leaving at the other half-way folded. “He dangerous?” he asks carefully.

Itachi dips his head slightly, tense as he studies his little brother.

Kisame tilts his head to the youngest. “Then why are you travelling with him, kid?” he demands.

Sasuke blinks, looking caught off-guard at the disapproval. “Ah.” He ducks his head. “He keeps… appearing,” he offers lamely.

Kisame stares. “He’s stalking you?” he asks in disbelief, slightly amused despite the heaviness of the situation when the very tips of the kid’s ears went pink.

“He bought me ducks,” he mumbles.

Kisame and Itachi both stares.

“Is that some kind of strange Uchiha mating ritual?” Kisame asks finally, noting the flinch in the youngest and filing it away for later with a note of something he wasn’t prepared to admit to himself.

Itachi’s levels him with a deeply unimpressed look and Kisame guffaws.

Sasuke watches them both with dark eyes, as if he wasn’t quite sure what to make of them.

It had been nearly three years since he last saw the kid and he’d been a terrified and somewhat resigned preteen who’d blown his arms to hell to get the Kyuubi jinchuuriki to safety.

There’d been a camaraderie and co-dependency between them that was unmistakably and rare in shinobi so young and it baffled him to see the boy rain-drenched and alone and looking for the same brother who had executed their parents in apparent cold blood and accompanied, apparently, only by his own personal stalker who was dangerous enough to put even Itachi on edge.

Not for he first time since seeing the kid he wondered about the rumours about the boy’s deflection to the snake Sannin.

It hadn’t fit the boy then and it didn’t fit him now.

The boy had reminded him of a drenched stray cat as they stopped at the cave and he’d lingered
outside even as Kisame shrugged off his cloak - as if unsure he’d really be welcome inside. It had reminded him of his first meeting with Itachi who had been much too young for the heaviness in his eyes – as if he carried the weight of the world’s sins on his shoulders.

He’d found himself shepherding the kid inside, gotten him to settle down to dry and made him food and tea while they waited (and he’d looking far too wide-eyed for a kid faced with basic common courtesy, it was ridiculous, really).

He knew he wasn’t the only one wondering.

Itachi was a genius, socially inept and awkward in his own way but Kisame had been with him for years and he knew the younger man cared deeply for the boy on the other side of the cave but wasn’t sure how to go about bridging the gap between them.

Despite that, Sasuke had sought Itachi out for help in handling something he wasn’t sure what to do about - a little brother seeking advice from his big brother when there’d been nowhere else to turn no matter the misgivings between them, never doubting he’d actually get it.

Kisame knows it had startled Itachi to find his little brother together with him, meek as a kitten and nibbling on a fish together with the small creature he’d scooped from somewhere in the large jacket he wore. Just like it had startled him three years earlier when the boy’s first reaction had been to get his friend to safety rather than to lash out at his brother.

“You lack hatred.” Itachi had told the younger Uchiha as Kisame watched the two of them from the shadows of the trees and the younger had looked something between afraid and resigned but never angry or spiteful at the man who had killed his parents, his clan, had tortured him and left him behind.

Kisame wonders if there isn’t something serious off about the younger Uchiha. Normal kids doesn’t have eyes so dark and empty they bordered on something dead and they certainly didn’t go seeking advice from murderers.

“You said you last saw him three days ago?” Itachi asks, ignoring his partner as the large man leans forward to nab a crispy fish from the fire before it started verging on coal.

“He comes and goes,” Sasuke confirms, wiping the last fish bits on the knees of his pants.

“Sometimes for hours, sometimes for weeks. Mostly I can sense him at least an hour or two before he gets back.”

Itachi blinks. “You’re a sensor?”

“An unconventional one according to Orochimaru,” Sasuke agrees, reaching out and catching the kitten as it tumbled off his knee and supporting it with two fingers under its body until it found all four paws.

“Unconventional?” Kisame couldn’t help asking and the kid tilted his head up, as if surprised he’d asked.

“I have nearly four times more yin than yang chakra and I’m more sensitive and attuned to it, apparently,” he explained haltingly. “I don’t need to use the yang part.”

“And most people have a larger density of physical chakra as opposed to spiritual,” Kisame says with interest. “That’s how you latched onto me, isn’t it?”

The kid bobbed his head and Kisame leaned back with a click of his teeth.
He’d seen the kid hook onto him, had felt the weight, but had been unable to sever the connection between them by just channelling his chakra thickly at his ribs. It made sense that if the kid was only using yin chakra and if so there wouldn’t be many who’d be able to, either. It would take cutting him off with a precise release of yang chakra and very few shinobi were capable of using one of either as a primary source.

It would take a really good medic-nin or someone with equal perfect chakra control to manage it.

He glances down as something collides with his knee and snorts as he hauls the small orange tabby by its neck and puts it into the lap of his partner who stares at it for a moment before smoothing a finger over its tiny head.

“Anyway, are you really fine with being followed around by that guy?” Kisame asks, brow raised.

Sasuke stares at him. “He’s not just going to leave,” the boy says factually.

“Not the question,” Kisame dismisses and he notices Itachi’s brow has dipped ever so slightly. “Are you comfortable being followed by him?”

“Why does it matter?” Sasuke asks, brow creased with genuine confusion. “He’s not going to go away.”

Kisame lifts a brow.

“No,” the boy says finally after a long moment. “I don’t like it,” he admits grudgingly.

“What about those Konoha-friends of yours?” Kisame leans forward. “They’ll help you if you ask.”

Sasuke shifts, folding his right foot under his left knee flat against the ground as he leaned back. “I spent two years at Orochimaru’s.” He says finally. “Tobi found me over and over again in the deepest parts of his dungeons no matter what and he never even knew. He’s not just going to go away.”

Beside him, Itachi stilled.

“So what’s your plan?” Kisame asks, stretching out and brushing his shoulder against his partner’s in support.

Sasuke cocks his head. “Find some information on him and try not to get killed?” he offers with a tick of his mouth and a morbid sort of cross between humour and self-mockery that Kisame really wasn’t sure he wanted to poke at.

“Sasuke,” the boy looks over at his brother. “You need to stay away from him.”

“He’s not going to stay away from me,” Sasuke says plainly and he rose, brushing off his knees and reaching out to grab his cloak and the small tabby from unresisting hands. “Thank you for the advice and the food. Kisame-san, Aniki.” He bowed his head, dropping the kitten into the inside pocket of his jacket and swept the cloak around himself before he stepped out into the rain.

Itachi reaches out to grab his bicep and Kisame resigns himself long before glancing down at the dark eyes of the other.

“No,” he says firmly. “We are S-rank nukenin, not babysitters.”

Fingers twitched.
“He killed Orochimaru – he’ll figure it out,” he tries. “Besides, Pain won’t like us toting around an extra. Super-secret Akatsuki business and all that.” He waves a hand.

A dip in the other’s brow.

“Fine,” he groaned in exasperation. “But you owe me,” he warned and set off to fetch the Uchiha stray with a grumble.

Behind him pale lips curled into a faint smile.

- 

Kiba’s team had a tendency to overhear all sorts of conversations and learn all sorts of secrets just by passing through the village.

Hinata with her byakugan, capable of seeing through walls and clothes (although the later fell under things that weren’t politely mentioned in conversation) and both male members were capable of scenting out relationships between people while Kiba had a tendency to overhear all sorts of things from people who habitually forgot that his hearing was nearly as good as his canine companion.

It was considered rude to exploit their talents even in a shinobi village, mostly by the paranoid civilians who considered their private lives invaded as it was. But sans the veins creeping beneath Hinata’s eyes and just a bit too many beetles crawling around their abilities were pretty low-key and Kiba didn’t feel remotely guilty for exploiting it to the max.

And the things he heard once he started actively seeking out information...

Kiba wasn’t sure what exactly this Ne business pertained but he knew that the strange boy that had joined Team Kakashi was part of it and he had a feeling he was about to chew on something far above his station.

But Ino had been right when she said they were all shinobi of Konoha and if Sai turned out to be dangerous to either Sakura or Naruto it was on them for not finding it out first.

The plan was to distract Team Kakashi with any titbits they picked up on Sasuke during their missions while they dug deeper into the Ne business and the whispers of a man with an arm of red eyes.

He just hoped the latest rumour from Team Asuma didn’t hold any truth to it.

He wasn’t sure how Naruto would react to his supposed friend joining up with the very people who wanted to capture and kill him for the bijuu inside of him.

Chapter End Notes

I really like the Nara clan. I’ve been considering making them part of the focus in the next story in this serie. To be fair, I’m also considering one with Kushina and Mikoto’s generation and a spin on a Jiraiya romance I don’t think I’ve ever seen. You do not want to know how absolutely littered my memo-pad is at this very moment and that’s with me keeping it neat.

Anyway, welcome to chapter 6 of Claws Amidst the Cracks! Where we got a name to
go with our squashed orange friend and Sasuke sort-of made contact with his brother and Kisame. Did you think she'd just let the whole Tobi thing be? Yeah, no. Her spider-senses is all kinds of shot after everything and she's lucky that Itachi isn't stuck with, say, Hidan. They're S-class nukenin for a reason Sasuke, sheesh.

I really like the dynamic between Kisame and Itachi so expect more expansion on that. What do you guys think of them so far?

Things are also heating up inside the walls of Konoha *dramatic finger-waggling*.

I'm also picturing Kisame hoisting Sasuke under his arm and bodily bringing her back to the cave if you're wondering. I can practically picture the ?? ?g? popping around her like little balloons.

That said I am so going to bed now because my throat has been aching all day and if I get sick I'm going to miserable for days and bemoan everything while munching chips and watching GTLive because I'm a geek with simple pleasures.

Anyway, let me know what you think.

Cheers!
The Lock

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The events leading up to Shikamaru’s kidnapping goes like this:

Hinata and Neji had volunteered to keep their eyes out for the blond’s return and it is the latter who catches him entering the Hokage’s office with a frown after a long mission alongside his new teammate Sai and a man Neji understands goes only by Yamato.

He activates his byakugan and scans the streets in search of any of the other Ochiba while keeping a weary eye on the tower least the blond decides to bail. It doesn’t take him long to find a familiar flare or steady power and it’s close enough that he chances it least he has to deal with the jinchuuriki on his own.

He’s self-aware enough to realize he’s not always the best to offer things like emotional support. The very idea is enough to make him sweaty.

“Chouji-san!” The younger boy looks up in surprise and excuses himself from the robust woman he’d been talking with in the crowded restaurant. Neji recognizes it as one of the many famed Akimichi restaurants, this one dessert themed going by the sweet smells.

“Neji-san?”

“Naruto just entered the Hokage tower.” Neji said in a low voice.

“Ah.” Chouji held up a hand. “Give me a minute.” For such a large person he moved nimbly through the crowd and disappeared while Neji kept his attention on the tower. Likely there’d be a mission report before Tsunade-same broached the subject but Naruto had never been known for his patience.

He’d give it ten, maybe fifteen minutes before Naruto either escaped through the window or something exploded.

Neji didn’t know what to think about the rumour about Sasuke joining up with the Akatsuki.

None of them had when Kiba broached it during an emergency meeting after the first rumours snuck past the village gates. His own team might not have been familiar with the Uchiha but they had heard enough to draw their conclusions.

He glanced momentarily towards the gates, wondering what the Uchiha was thinking when joining up with the very man who had annihilated his entire family and tortured him. No matter what reason laid behind it he doubted it was a decision made lightly and he didn’t like the implications of that.

It was bad enough with the kind of things they were sniffing up on their home turf.

Chouji stepped up beside him about two minutes before Naruto, predictably, fled through the window.

The two exchanged a look before moving to intercept him as fled towards the Forest of Death in an explosion of chakra.
“Sakura! My most YOUTHFUL rival!” Lee skidded to a stop before her, teeth gleaming as his eyes sparkled. “I challenge you to a contest!” He proclaimed loudly and proudly, both hands on his hips.

Sakura, harried and still wearing her hospital jacket didn’t even pause as she threw an arm around his shoulder and pulled him close with a ‘heurgh!’ from the force behind it as she dragged him along.

“Let’s make it an eating contest.” She suggested, grinning and only losing her hold with a curl of amusement after a moment of exaggerated wiggling and he straightened, looking delighted.

“A most fantastic suggestion my Cherry Blossom!” He easily fell in beside her, a bounce in his step. “What should it be today?” He hummed, an exaggerated contemplative look falling across his face as he peered around. “Barbecue? No. No, no, no we did that eighteen challenges ago.” He rubbed his chin.

“How about dango?” Sakura suggested, spying a familiar purple haired proctor. “We can count them by the sticks.”

Lee slapped his palms together and sung his agreement before flashing away to set the order in motion while she trekked after him with a fond grin.

Two hours later they were both regretting their life-decisions, sprawled out on training ground five with enough dango sticks to have nailed a wildly accurate lotus flower with a dancing frog above it on a particularly thick trunk.

“I think it’s a tie.” Sakura said with a burp and a hand on her aching belly.

He gave her a shaky thumbs-up from where he was clutching his stomach and she giggled, her eyes focused on the stars alight above them with a nostalgic grin that slowly faded as she raised a hand above her, as if she could reach up and pluck the stars from the heavens.

“You heard about it too, huh?” She asked finally in the stillness. She turned her head towards him when he didn’t answer. “Thank you, Lee.” She said sincerely.

He huffed, rolling over until their heads were side by side, staring up at the sky. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He said. “I was merely settling our score my Eternal Rival.”

Sakura grinned softly. “Of course.” She said. “How silly of me.”

She stares up at the stars, wondering if Sasuke is watching the same ones.

Her eyes lingered on the brightest star in the sky, the one the raven haired boy had insisted on calling ‘The Dog Star’ as Naruto giggled about having a ‘Kakashi-hoshi to guide them home’. Sasuke had never been very vocal but he’d enjoyed naming the stars with them during one of the many late night guard missions they’d done together.

*He must truly hate us to have chosen the man who murdered his parents above us,* she thinks.

Lee says nothing as something wet drip against the ground and Sakura raises an arm, covering her eyes with her wrist.

- All actions have a reaction.
Sakura and Naruto sleep entwined after the news and then they decide to act.

The Uchiha Compound hasn’t been touched in years – not since Sasuke’s kidnapping. It’s filled with dust and there’s a heaviness in the air as they step into the house which, despite the time, barely makes a noise as they slide the door open.

There are scrolls and papers on the table, a mug of elder juice half-drunk and a half-eaten piece of tomato pizza only saved from mould by the preservations seals.

Movies are clattered on the floor, as if thrown in frustration, and there’s an aching sort of regret in them both at the sight of a lone nest of pillows and blankets from where their teammate had slept on the couch.

“He must have been lonely, huh?” Naruto says, bending down and picking up a movie with the front picture of a weeping samurai and geisha folded up in each other’s arms on a boat.

“We all got busy.” Sakura admits. “Me, stuck in an overrun hospital at the heels of the Tsunade-shishou. Kakashi-sensei back in ANBU and then you away and travelling with Jiraiya-sama.” She sighed, a wry twist of her lip. “For the best of the village…”

Naruto squeezed her shoulder. “We’ll get him back.” He says, firm with determination.

“I know.” She says, because in this question there is no doubt between them. “I just wish…” She blew out a hard breath. “No time for what if’s.” She says firmly. “We need solutions. Clues!” She cracked her knuckles peering around.

Naruto gave her fists a wary look and stepped past her, pushing the movie back into the bookcase by the television.

“Allright.” He weaved his fingers together and stretched them out before him. “Operation Get-Sasuke-Home is a go!”

Sakura snorted. “We really need to work out a better name. It's a bit... in the face.”

He stuck out his tongue at her.

What they find is a lock.

"This is-?” Shikamaru breathed.

The door was lined with fuinjutsu – sealing it behind a deceptively simple oaken door. It was a complex thing and even with training under his father’s tutelage it took a long moment to even locate the protective keys used and hooked into the arrangement in the middle.

Everything about it was rigged as a code-word with a fail-safe, the question supposedly right before his eyes.

But the letters were nothing like he’d ever seen.

“We don’t know.” Naruto bounced on the front of his feet, arms folded as he stared at the array. “I picked up enough from Ero-Sennin to figure out it’s some sort of riddle, right? Like a question.” He looked over for confirmation and Shikamaru nodded slowly, taken by the complexity of it.
“We’re sure Sasuke is the one who made it.” Sakura leaned back against the wall opposite it. “We’ve seen him disappear down here and his chakra signature, while faint, is pretty thick in the middle part.” She gestured loosely with her hand and Shikamaru reached out to press his fingers gently against blood stained ink which flared beneath his touch and confirmed her words with a brush of static.

“What exactly did he hide behind here?” He asked, turning towards them, brow creased. “This is far too complex for a twelve year old to hide anything behind.” No matter how paranoid, he thought to himself but didn’t finish aloud. The other two tended to be a bit prickly regarding anything related to the Uchiha survivor.

Sakura and Naruto exchanged looks.

“Notebooks.” Sakura lifted a hand to tuck a piece of short pink hair behind her ear. “Scrolls, drawings.” She offered, eyes fixated on the large rusty array. “Sasuke was never really much of a talker but he did spend a lot of time writing and there’s liable to be something that we can use to help him in there.” She gave the door a helplessly furious look before she tucked it carefully behind a sheen of green determination.

“We figured there might be something in there that could help us get him back.” Naruto reached out and clasped his hand with the pinkette, meeting the dark brown eyes of the Nara.

Shikamaru turned back to the array with a click of his tongue.

“There’s not any way to solve this unless we figure out a way to decode whatever this is,” he tapped the strange blocky letters. “Without a key it’s just guesswork. Have either of you found anything containing scribbles like this lying around? A small note in the trash, a forgotten page in his room…?”

“No one has been in this compound since he was taken.” Sakura said, drumming her fingers against her bicep. “Tsunade-shishou set up the seals herself. Today was the first time we thought to check.” She took a step forward. “If there’s anything like it – we’ll find it.” She promised fiercely.

Shikamaru didn’t doubt that for a second.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” He asked, despite already knowing the answer. “He went through great lengths to keep this safe.” He cautioned.

“If there is anything in there to help us get Sasuke back-“ Sakura began.

“-then there’s no doubt about it.” Naruto finished.

“Better to ask forgiveness than permission.” They said in perfect tandem.

He stretched his arms over his head, cracked his neck twice before he ticked his mouth into a smirk. “Alright,” he said. “I’ll help you. But,” he held up a finger. “If anyone asks I am an unwilling accomplice.” He warned.

I am delighted to finally wire back to the first chapter with this one. Kudos to whoever picks up what I’m talking about.
No, seriously, guess what I'm talking about and I'll, like, write you something. No joke. I have a deadly amount of spare time for about two weeks forward and I'll crumble you together a one-shot or something drabble-ish.

Ending this as the next chapter goes up.

I actually had an entire second part in this chapter spanned out but it looked so off together that I ended up removing it before posting. So, what you're getting is a ridiculously short chapter and the other half gets to tank up the first part of the next chapter. It's just not workable in any other way. So, yeah. It is what it is.

On the other hand - yay! Half of chapter 8 is already down.

I rewatched Beauty and the Beast as I cobbled this up after seeing it on the big screen some months back. I did not remember them going quite thar heavy on the auto-tune for poor Emma.

I'm still mildly traumatized at being robbed of my favourite movie of 2017.

On the other hand, I really liked the new Justice League even if the enemy made me yawn.

Also booked my ticket for the new Star Wars after selling off some games! So excited after the mess that was Rogue One (I didn't dislike it but it just didn't work for me, like, at all).

Give me my daily dose of Rey any day.

As always, let me know what you think.

Cheers!
Wrapped in Silence

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gaara pauses and stares at the cat seated nimbly on his desk when he steps into the office.

He closes the door slowly behind himself and removes the official Kazekage cloak and hat worn for the council meeting on their respective hooks before he meets the intelligent purple eye of the creature cleaning a paw with deceptive focus.

“Hello.” He greets in a low murmur.

Its black and three times the size of a normal housecat with a kimono-like jacket in soft pale purple with the Uchiha Ichizoku worn large and proud on the back of it.

“Kazekage-sama.” Its voice is low, almost a purr and its mouth is pulled up in a way that makes it look like it’s smiling even as it fixes a single purple eye upon him.

“Do you belong to Uchiha Sasuke or Uchiha Itachi?” He asks it carefully and its tail flickers.

“Sasuke- nekojin is the only one I serve.” It looks almost offended to have been asked. “I am Shien. I bring a missive for you.”

Gaara carefully hides any reaction as it shrugs out of the black container strapped to its back and put a paw on top of it to give it a shove towards him.

He can’t think of a single reason for Uchiha Sasuke to contact him but he steps forward obligingly and removes the scroll with nimble fingers under the careful watch of a purple eye.

“Sasuku-nekojin asked for me to remain until you have an answer for us.” Shien says as Gaara strokes his fingers over the fine print, eyes widening.

-

A summoning contract is a bond in blood and chakra.

Just like a summoner gained characteristics of the animals they brought to their world the creatures gained from their summoner. It was how creatures that had once been mindless and wild had come to speak and walk like humans. It was how humans developed noses and hearing and teeth that diverted from their own kind.

It was rumoured that the Inuzuka Clan of Konoha once held the wolf contract until the wolves were so incorporated into their clan that they decided to leave the summoning world and meld permanently with them for all the future generations.

Orochimaru had signed with the snakes and it had given him fangs capable of carrying and delivering seals and a bone and muscle structure capable of stretching and bending just like the long sleek creatures themselves. He’d bound himself over and over with every single body that decayed after a stretch of three years through inky marks sunk into his skin and in return there wasn’t a single snake in the summoning world born incapable of human speak and all of them with an uncanny cunning nature.
The toads bore armour and with a grip secure enough to wield weapon with webbed hands and opposite thumbs and Jiraiya-sama spat the same flammable oil from the depth of his stomach as they did.

The purple cloth bunched by her neck was a stark reminder as much as a necessity as her sense of smell sharpened to a headache inducing intensity and her hearing picked up while her steps quieted to match the natural soft padded movement of the cats.

It’s impossible to miss the wet twist of soil even with the rain splashing against the ground and the drag of their feet in the slick mess.

Sasuke bends down, her hands sinking down beneath the mud until she’s almost down to her shoulders in it and the pads of her fingers meet the structured earth beneath it. She waits and it only takes a second.

She cocks her head at the sound of moving sludge and she twists her fingers viper-quick, fingers carefully wrapping around it before she straightens out.

Her hands leave the mud with a bubbly sort of suckling protest and in her hand something white and wormlike twists and arches in protest. Its mouth is a circular hole of rows upon rows of teeth and the noise it makes is high-pitched and warbled, almost as if it’s choking on something.

“That’s one of Zetsu’s!” Kisame calls from several feet ahead where both he and Itachi had paused and turned to watch her when they realised she’d wasn’t moving with them. “They know our chakra. Try to keep at the foot of our tracks to avoid them.” She lifted her head towards him and eventually nodded and lobbed it high and far away with a high-pitch shriek of protest.

“Orochimaru’s best defence was himself.” She waded through the high-high mud with some struggle despite the path the two elder carved for her.

“And look where that got him.” Kisame snorted. “We might be nukenin but we value our down time. It’s enough to keep track of the others.”

“How many are you?” Sasuke asked, rain dripping from the hood of the cloak and the tip of her nose from the steady fall over them.

Kisame exchanged a brief look with Itachi who inclined his head.

“Nine until recently.” He told her, his powerful legs pressing through the mud to widen the path behind him. “That pink haired team mate of yours? Apparently she took out Sasori and that blond friend of yours stole an arm from Deidara before he managed to escape.”

Sasuke blinked at his back.

He glanced back at her silence, over the head of his partner. “Didn’t think that about them, huh?” He leered and she sunk her chin into her jacket, her eyes black and empty as they met his, her steps slowing to put distance between them.

Mud sunk into the path, filling the trench behind him as he snorts and turns away, widening the gap with ease as she lingered for a long moment before slowly moving to follow.

Sasuke dreams of Orochimaru.
He’s warm and clothed beneath her nude form – the same purple rope she’d torn off his dead form hanging around her neck like a noose. He’s raised one hand and tangled it in the ends of it, bending her back in an arch over him as he pulls on it, her arms straight and pressed against his chest to prevent herself from falling into him.

The cock between her legs is gone and there’s a weight to her chest, hair falling down the right side of her shoulder and brushing against him in a wave of inky darkness.

“You should kill him.”

He’s floating in a sea of purple, his hair spread around him like black seaweed and yellow eyes meeting hers steadily and with patient understanding of her person.

"If it wasn’t for him-“

She draws a fist back and slams it down, bone crunching beneath her knuckles as his head concaves beneath the force and the body beneath her jerks before it melts into the purple sludge around her naked form, leaving her alone.

Above her the sky is black with red clouds and ooze bubbles and warps beneath her, arms shooting from beneath her, slimy fingers clawing into her skin and yanking her down even as she twists and claws to remain above it.

“You can’t escape me.” Orochimaru chides as he wraps around her from behind and she draws a desperate breath before getting forced under. “Not while you remain blind to the truth.” She struggles against him but his wiry form is unmoving from her back as the weight of him brings them down, down until all she can see is purple and she’s forced to draw a breath and then another, sludge filling her lungs, mouth and nose.

“I see you, **** *******.” Orochimaru whispers into her ear, yellow warping into red and the tomoe spins and disorts as he laughs.

“You always say you’re busy this, busy that… Nii-san, you don’t like me, do you? I knew it… You just don’t like me.”

Sasuke remembers Itachi crying.

Her brother hadn’t cried. He’d just watched the flames swallow their parents with a quiet contemplative contentness as wood crackled and broke and their mother’s screams were swallowed into nothingness as the walls and the roof collapsed and sirens rung in the distance.

But Itachi had cried that night, standing over the bodies of Fugaku and Mikoto as the boy’s desperate hands pulled the door open, eyes wide with panic and pain as he cried out in disbelief and horror for his brother.

She looks to the sky that hasn’t been blue for years, the clouds as black as the tar keeping her heart together.

She never hated her brother for what he did.

She struggled with trying to understand it as the police chained his arms behind his back and took him away from her as their childhood home folded to ash and glowing embers behind her.
But she couldn’t hate the boy who’d spread his arms like wings with laughter as they rode down the hill and who clung to her on the back of the bicycle when she picked him up from football practice with muddy shoes and a tired yawn.

Her brother who made silly-faces at her with a beard of bubbles and who held her hand as they launched off the rocks into the dark water below, shrieking with joy. He who climbed into her bed and rested his chin on her shoulder to listen to the stories she read to him until he fell asleep with soft breathes puffing against her collarbone.

"Don’t cry, Jake. Your big sister will always be here to protect you.” A whispered promise in the night as she pressed her hand through the wooden gates of the bed to touch a tiny blotched face.

*His* memories of Itachi are just as fond, just as warm and just as desperate as *hers* when she thinks of Jake and she wonders if it’s the warped love for murderous brothers that ties her together with the dead child.

His memories are just as fierce and real as any of hers.

She can perfectly recall the fuzzy fake-fur of the green toy dino in a sweaty palm as tears and snot drips down his face and the door opens to his Nii-san who kneels down to sweep him into his arms without question or demand to *stop acting like a child.*

Remembers the smell and feel of his brother as he throws his arms around the elder’s shoulders and buries close with love and desperation and relief that warps into a single universal truth in the mind of the child: *Nii-san will always protect me.*

Stuck with the two nukenin she feels like an imposter and it *aches.*

She wakes up from short naps with her nails buried into the skin of her wrists as if she could tear it off.

Itachi had *known* Sasuke.

His memories are shared with the dead child inside of her and she feels like she’s falling short with every word that leaves her lips, every broken flinch away from him.

She wants to tell him that the boy is dead.

That all that remains of them both is bits and pieces ill-fitted and barely holding together like a handful of puzzle pieces half-heartedly put together with sellotape and abandoned half-way.

But as she glances up and meets the dark eyes of the other there is nothing but silence.

-  

Kisame isn’t surprised when the kid spends the first nights with them half-dozing by the fire instead of sleeping. He’d been rather more concerned if he hadn’t displayed some sort of caution to fall asleep around them even if neither he nor Itachi were the sort to lull kids into a false sense of security and then slit their throat while they slept.

That said, by the seventh night with the kid growing deep enough bags beneath his eyes that he was beginning to look remarkably like a raccoon and Kisame was seriously starting to become concerned by his ability to function and Itachi was being markedly unhelpful.

“He can’t stay awake forever.” Itachi says when he brings it up, up to the knees in mud and it’s wet
enough that even Kisame was starting to get bothered.

Kisame would have answered but Sasuke took that moment to sink chest deep into a sink hole with a *slurp* and he had to wade over and haul the kid out by the scruff of his jacket least he drowned.

He steered both Uchiha to a cave four hours later before they could freeze to death from sheer stubbornness.

He dug out a hole with a *doton* and slammed a heating seal on the side of it before he filled it up with water. It didn’t take long before steam was crawling up towards the ceiling and Itachi had gotten a fire going with a *katon* and a pile of wood pulled from a scroll.

Sensibly, the elder Uchiha had stripped off his cloak, shirt and wet pants and was in the movement of twisting his hair to rid of the water as the flames danced over his bared skin, warming him.

The younger, however, was shivering badly and looking rather like drowned cat at the mouth of the cave, eyes focused somewhere towards the East.

“Sasuke.” he called, straightening, and the kid turned towards him.

Exhaustion and cold didn’t mix very well and he looked dead on his feet, eyes ringed with purple and a slight sway as cold air blew over him.

“Come here.” He crooked his finger, beckoning.

It took a moment, dark eyes staring at his fingers as if they didn’t know what to make of them, but slowly the youngest stepped past his brother, who’d been watching him from his peripheral vision, and stopped within reaching distance of the nukenin.

Kisame mentally sighed as he reached out and carefully began unbuttoning the cloak and pulled it off the unresisting body. “I’m not going to undress you.” He cautioned, throwing it aside even as he bent down and got the boots off – not bothering to comment on the painted toes. “You’re going to take a bath and you’re going to eat and then you’re going to sleep.” He said, giving the kid a nudge as Itachi passed them on bare feet and climbed into the water, unbothered by his own nudity.

Kisame copied him, hanging his boxers on a rock beside his partners before sinking into the warm water with a groan of appreciation.

It took a couple of minutes from shaking fingers and a sway that Kisame kept a careful eye on. But he was soon nude and carefully climbing into the small make-shift hot spring a step or so from either of the men inside of it.

Itachi had produced soap from somewhere and was lathering up his hair. The younger Uchiha had drawn his knees to his chest and was resting his chin on the top of them and it didn’t take long before he was half-dozing in the warmth.

At least it was pretty much confirmed, Kisame thought, exchanging a look with his partner whose gaze was dark and troubled. Whatever had brought the kid to Orochimaru’s hide-out, it hadn’t been nearly as willingly as the rumours had made it out to be.

The scars that littered the kid’s body were too fresh, too brutal and too consistent to be anything but the result of torture.

Itachi threw the soap to him and Kisame caught it gratefully and dunked his head beneath the water before scrubbing stiff muddy crust away with relish, breathing the heated water without trouble as he
took his time before he resurfaced. He dragged a hand through the wet blue strands and sighed.

“It smells like sandalwood.” Was Sasuke’s blank observation as Kisame held it out to him.

“And you smell like seven days of sweat and mud.” Kisame drawled as pale fingers wrapped around the brown soap and pulled it to his chest and slowly starting the arduous task of scrubbing down with stiff fingers.

Kisame removed himself first, his thick skin far more resistant to the cold than either of the two skinny Uchihas. He unsealed the supplies after a brief rummage through their wet cloaks and stuck the cauldron out in the rain to fill it with water while he chopped up the root fruits and bunny meat and scraped it together with some salt and herbs before sticking it all together over the fire.

Itachi leaned on the rock, arms folded before him and chin resting on top of them as he watched his partner work while his little brother dozed near him.

He pulled himself out some fifteen minutes later and unsealed dry pants, underwear and shirt and pulled them on before leaving an identical set near the younger with a brief shake of his ototou’s shoulder, muscles bunching beneath his touch.

“Food is ready.” He said gently, rising and then crouching down by his partner who offered him a bowl of warm steaming soup.

Sasuke wasn’t far behind, yawning as he folded down by the fire with a shiver that wouldn’t quite go away even as he pulled the bowl Kisame handed him close to his chest.

“Eat up.” Kisame held out a canteen that was cautiously accepted. “Take a sip of rum and then go to sleep. Properly.” He pinned the youngest with a look. “You’re doing yourself no good like this.”

Itachi very, very carefully didn’t let his lip twitch at his partner’s fussing.

- Sasuke dreams she’s smashing Orochimaru’s head over and over and over.

Brain splatters as bone shatters and she’s covered in blood but he only laughs and laughs and laughs as his features warps and shifts beneath her until she doesn’t know what she’s looking at and her hands raise to cover her ears and she can’t-

- Itachi watches as his little brother wrenches awake, sweating and trembling, a hand over his mouth to muffle the sound of his harsh breathing.

He pretends not to even as something inside of him twists at the helpless horror in the younger’s eyes.

Near his feet Kisame exhales near soundlessly and closes his eyes after several tense minutes when Sasuke finally lowers himself down into his sleeping bag and curls up on his side, his back towards them.

Itachi doesn’t bother waking his partner for the second watch.

- Their Leader is a paranoid bastard and coupled with a creature such as Zetsu backed by a number of
paranoid minds the Akatsuki main-base had been turned into something akin to a death trap.

The thick mud was enough to put-off most and those who dared to go further were ensnared by the cannibal and eliminated without any evidence.

Kisame might have found it ridiculous if it wasn’t so effective.

He’d grown up in Kirigakure which was wet and cold but Ame was a constant rain that never really let up. He thrived in water but mud was another thing entirely and he was nearly as relived as the two Uchihas slugging away in his tracks when the base finally appeared around the bend and the thick sludge made away to grass.

“Finally.” He grunted, tired and aching and already half-way into the cave when Sasuke shook the last of the mud from the boots.

“Sasu-chan!” The youngest Uchiha stilled, eyes rising to meet the dark eye of the masked man waving his arm in a wide childish arc from where he was crouching over the cave opening.

- 

Gai was well familiar with his Eternal Rival’s shortcomings and thus wasn’t overly surprised when he caught the man’s underlings practically camping on his doorstep. He did, after all, live two doors down and the two somehow managed to bicker and kick in their sleep loud enough that several jounins had cracked their doors and windows open to locate the disturbance.

The green blanket with angry ducks the two had wrapped themselves in had nearly brought tears to his eyes from sheer adorableness and he vowed to help them on their most YOUTHFUL endeavour!

It was with this in mind he intercepted Kakashi the second he stepped past the control station, Kotetsu still with a hand raised and mouth opened as Gai swerved into view and cheerfully slammed his leg into his Rival’s midriff with enough force to break ribs and sent him crashing into the forest with snaps and falling timber in the wake as Kotetsu gaped at him.

“G-Gai!?”

“Do not worry!” He gave a thumbs-up and a gleaming reassuring flash of his teeth. “I’m just helping a lost man find the road of life!” He winked and then took after the man least Kakashi did something foolish like trying to escape.

Gai wasn’t known as the fastest man in the village for nothing and he grinned as he easily folded backwards and grabbed hold of the sweeping leg and twisted, curving himself around the smaller body and locking his arms tight before he folded the move into a suplex that was sure to knock a few teeth.

Chapter End Notes

This was supposed to be the second half of chapter 7 but that didn't work out so here we are, chapter 8 up and about!

I have veeery much been enjoying your guesses from the last chapter and I'll reply to like three of you for either a drabble or a one-shot depending on how swept up I get in whatever idea you might have for me. I'll likely comment and then remove said
comment because I don't really enjoy leaving my email hanging around but do feel free to hit me up when you get it!

I'll do more of these when I have time between stuff so keep an eye open, yeah? Might reply one of you randomly, too, if I feel like it. I write a lot of one-shots and drabbles between things just to unstuff my brain a bit and I might as well challenge myself while at it.

I rewrote this chapter nine times and this is absolutely the best it's getting even if it feels off in like a million ways for me. I really, really didn't get it to cooperate and I'm half-way uploading it just to get it away from my computer so I can keep writing fun stuff because this chapter just isn't and I sincerely want to print it out and make it into tiny paper planes and throw them out the window.

Does it feel as off to you as to me? I want to know because I am so stressed about this chapter that it's ridiculous.

Live and let live, I suppose.

That said I really liked how the Gai-scene turned out. I did briefly lose it and spent twenty minutes at 4 am panicking because my computer was being an ass and shut everything down to update just when I went for the arrow of regrets.

Cheers!
Orochimaru’s hideout had been infinite dark corridors levelled deep beneath the ground of Otogakure with levels of prisoners and experimentations alike chained up and bound to silence. It served as a place to hide and ensured to get anyone who didn’t belong lost and ensnared by whatever crawler happened to be slithering around as an extra pair of eyes for the Sannin.

The Akatsuki hideout is a dome of stone carved with leery stretches of monstrous faces looking down at them with blank intensity in the room that doubles as both kitchen and something akin to a living room and maybe council room judging by the couches settled by a large table.

She fiddles with a red thread, twisting and turning it so and so while the aroma of seared salmon picks up and the humming of the masked man across her fills the silence of the room.

Kisame’s hair is dripping from the shower, the dark blue strands combed back by lazy fingers and staining the t-shirt he’d pulled on afterwards without care and it clings to him. He looks comfortable but tired by the stove, easily manoeuvring around the space as he pulls herbs and spices and chops up vegetables to be seared in a sweet smelling sauce.

Beside Tobi is a blond haired man who has been watching her with an eerie sort of intensity since Kisame had shoved her into the seat with a squeeze of her shoulder.

She hadn’t seen the other Uchiha since Tobi had folded in at her side upon arriving at the hideout.

Kisame drops two plates onto the table, shoving one of them under her nose before settling into the chair beside her. She’s offered silverware and a glass of water and blinks as the large man takes a spoon and scoops rice, sauce and vegetables into his mouth without fanfare.

The blond opposite gave the empty space before him a very deliberate look before pinning the much bigger man with a narrowed glare. “Oi, where is my portion?” He demands.

“Shouldn’t you be feeding your own brat?” Kisame leers, very deliberately glancing towards the masked man who was crouching on his chair like an oversized bird without wings.

“Sasuke, this is Deidara.” He introduced, glass clicking against the table as he put it down. “Deidara,
Itachi has temporary business with his little brother who will remain her for as long as they need to clear it between themselves. Do try to play nice.”

Sasuke inclined her head.

Deidara looked rather like he’d swallowed a lemon by the way his face soured when he looked at her. “Leader approved it?”

“Indeed.” Kisame scraped the last off his plate. “Get this cleaned and you can have the last I made.” He told the blond, already rising and his chair scraped against the ground.

“Sasu-chan! You can stay with Tobi!” The masked man offered, practically bouncing off the floor as he reached out to grab her arm.

Before she could react Kisame’s arm shot out and clamped down, hard. His grin was fiendish when Tobi’s dark eye shot up to meet his own. “No need.” He said. “Itachi-san has already made arrangements.” He said this very pleasantly but Sasuke could hear the creak of bones and had known Tobi long enough to pick up the anger beneath the childish façade.

She stepped closer to Kisame and ignored the way Tobi’s eye flashed before relaxing into the familiar glint of childish theatrics. He yanked his hand back from a slackened grip with a little spin, arms crossing with a theatrical huff.

“Kisame-san is mean.” Tobi complained with a clear pout. “Tobi was just being a good boy.”

Deidara snorted, his visible eye lidded on his partner with a sharp blue eye, plate and glass clinking as he sat down with a steaming plate of sweetened curry. “If you’re a good boy I’m next in line as the new Tsuchikage.” He kicked out against the back of his new partner’s knee when Tobi whined loudly in protest and the masked man flailed and complained as Kisame relaxed his shoulders and he turned to leave.

Sasuke fell in step with him and pin-prick eyes glanced down to study her as torches flare up on the walls of the corridor leading down to the rooms. She feels tiny next to the bulk of him but it feels less oppressive now than it had even hours ago.

“Thank you.” She said.

Kisame snorted, his large palm settling on her head to give it a tousle.

-

The room isn’t large.

There are two beds settled against opposite walls with bedside tables with lamps to read – one of them piled with books while the other was bare save for what looked like a crossword.

There is a tall shared wardrobe with space to hang their cloaks in and there was a door linked to a moderately sized bathroom with both shower and bathtub.

In the compound she’d slept on the couch in the living room, at Orochimaru’s behind bars or locked doors on cold floor in empty rooms.

It’s the first time she’s been in a proper bedroom in years.

Itachi is already asleep and Kisame doesn’t waste any time stripping down to just boxers and settling
down on his bed, rubbing at his brow as Sasuke lingers uncertainly after brushing her teeth.

“We’ll get you a futon in the morning.” He says, voice rumbling softly despite the gentle volume. “I doubt spending another night in a muddy bedroll is very appealing,” he said sympathetic twist of his mouth, “but there are some blankets, pillows and shirts in the wardrobe so help yourself to them.”

Sasuke has slept in far worse conditions and the blankets are thick and soft and warm as she drags them out. After a brief moment of consideration she spreads them out at the foot of the shark-man’s bed, using the shirts to soften it up as Kisame’s bed creaks as he stretches out and it doesn’t take long before his breaths evens out to match his partner’s.

She curls up, listening to the sound of their breathing and nosing into the pillow, eyes open and staring into the darkness. She spreads her fingers and the sharpened night vision gifted to her by the cats catches the ever so faint reflection of her own pale hand even in the near complete blackness of the room.

The shirt closest to her smell of iron and brimstone.

It’s a peculiar smell.

Familiar.

"Nii-san.” The boy whimpers sadly.

She closes her eyes.

Breathes in.

Breathes out.

-

She dreams she’s sitting on the shattered reflection of a large mirror.

In it, the sky is blue and the clouds white but when she looks up there is only black clouds trapped in a sea of red.

“Nee-chan.” She stills at the childish whisper, her breath catching as she slowly looks back to the large piece by her hand where an enormous black eye stares back at her.

“Nee-chan, why did you kill me?” The eye blinks and she jerks as her right hand stings and there's a red print left behind like an oddly shaped tear as she scrambles to her feet.

“I didn’t mean to!” She tells it, stumbling back as the mirrors bends and cracks, shattering, pieces raining down around her and it enfolds her its grasp.

“Nee-chan.” The voice complains, eyes appearing around her, filling out every broken little piece and she slides on blood-slick feet. “Nee-chan, you killed me.” The young voice whines. “I want Nii-san. Nee-chan, I want Nii-san.” Her chest heaves as she stumbles blindly backwards.

“I can’t!” She cried out, feet torn to ribbons and smearing the mirrored eyes beneath her in her panic. “I wish I could but I can’t.” She gasps. “I’m sorry!”

The boy in the mirror stares at her with thousands of eyes that scrunches up in tandem.

“Nee-chan.” He blinks large wretched eyes. “I am dead.”
She takes a step back.

“I want Nii-san.” He whispers and large fat tears forms and splashes against the other side of mirror where the sky is blue and the clouds white before it seeps between the cracks and laps against her skin.

“You killed me.” He sobs. “Nee-chan, you killed me.”

The mirror has formed into a gaping bowl of shards and her torn feet stings in the salt from the tears as it builds around her and there is no way to escape.

She stands in desperate wretchedness of a dead boy and her blood sullies his grief.

“I’m sorry.” She weeps. “I didn’t mean to. I didn’t.” She collapses her to knees and chokes in the tears as they rise above her, swallowing her up.

“Nee-chan, why did you kill me?”

The tears of the dead boy mixes with the blood of her torn feet and it fills her lunges, drowning her as the sobs of the boy vibrates around her.

“Why-?”

-

She vomits all over herself.

She doesn’t even have time to twist and it splashes over her front and legs, half-digested chunks in the mess from the dinner Kisame had made for her forced up her throat as she gags.

Someone swears and she hulks over as her stomach tenses and more vomit splatters into her lap, a dripping sour mess and she lifts a hand, wiping uselessly at her chest with sticky fingers.

“Oh kid.” Someone large crouches down by her, hesitant and hovering before coming to a decision and slides a gentle arm around her back, the other around her knees and hauls her up and against a broad chest. “Turn the bathtub and fetch an extra pair of towels. Kakuzu and Hidan are still out – they should have a pile.” The deep voice rumbles against her back as she quivers and she twists to press her ear against it as the world flickers around her.

Red.

Blue.

Red.

Blue.

Red.

Something soft presses against her mouth, wiping away the vomit with broad, careful strokes. Once the worst is gone hands deftly assist her out of the stained shirt and pants, dropping it to the ground in a soggy pile.

“It’s okay.” The deep voice rumbles against her back. “There’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

Her hands flexes against the mess of scar tissue that is her thighs and she taste the sour bile in her
mouth and feels chunks logged in her nose when she breathes.

She closes her eyes as she’s lifted up, like a child on a broad hip as he manoeuvres her into the bathroom. He’s speaking to her, to someone else, she can’t tell. The world feels off-kilter and she twists as she’s lowered into warm water and the man who smells like salt and pine moves to pull away from her.

She latches onto his shirt, fingers twisting desperately into the fabric and for a brief moment she sees silver hair instead of blue and something inside of her sobs brokenly.

“I’m not going anywhere.” The voice says gruffly and she blinks through a world of weeping eyes in mirrors that fluctuate around her, crawling around her vision like shattered cockroaches. She focuses on the blue skin of the man whose shirt she’s buried her fists into as he uses a large hand to wash the vomit off her body with clinical gentleness before she’s hauled up and swept into an enormous grey towel as she totters unsurely on her feet.

She’s bent over the sink and made to blow her nose and rinse her mouth before cold water splashes onto her face, adding a layer of clarity to her destabilized mind as she scrambles for stability.

Her vision swims, her pupils shrinking and dilating as she’s hauled up and they’re settled onto something soft.

She’s pulled against salt and pine as brimstone and iron settles almost hesitantly to her right.

“Do you know who I am?” His voice is smooth, low, familiar.

“Nii-san.” The boy in the mirror sobs.

“Aniki.” She echoes dully.

The trembles are slowly abating from her frame as her tired body copies the deep, calm breaths against her back. There’s a broad palm spanning nearly her entire stomach; loose, there, but not restricting.

“Do you remember what happened?” He asks, a dip in his brow that she wants to smooth out as she blinks at him in exhaustion.

“Nightmare.” She says, because there’s no way they haven’t guessed that already. “I’m tired.” She admits as she slumps miserably against Kisame whose thumb is rubbing against the skin on her stomach.

She stares at Itachi whose eyes are as dark as her own and hair even blacker.

“I know.” He says and she wonders why he looks so sad.

She wakes in a large bed dressed in boxers and a shirt that isn’t hers.

It’s quiet and her throat is raw, tasting of old bile despite the water and saliva that had done their best to rid the taste. Kisame or Itachi had removed her make-shift nest and pyjamas to laundry it and there was an underlying smell of lemon from whatever had been used to scrub the floor clean.

For a long moment she stares at her scarred thighs where she’d torn it them so viciously that what remained was white and thick and ugly beneath her touch.
"Who are you truly, Uchiha Sasuke?" Kabuto whispers in her ear. "I look at you and I wonder who was lucky enough to be the first sully your very soul."

She draws her knees to her chest, pulling her hands up and over her head, eyes blank.

Uchiha Sasuke is a creation of mistakes, she thinks.

She remembers when the Sandaime had visited her in that hospital room following the massacre.

In that white blank space where masked-faces kept guard and no-one made a move to touch or even comfort her as the boy wept and wept and wept and she was so numb that her mouth remained slack and dripping, too broken to make sense of anything.

The boy had recognised the man.

He’s kind, he’d whispered with all the hope of a wrecked child clinging to the last shred of good in the world and she tracks him with listless eyes as he pulls a chair to the side of the bed. Nii-san said- but he’d never finished because the reminder brought death and he’s choked on a wailing sob that echoed too loudly in their head.

The boy had thought his brother kind, too.

Sasuke remembers chains, a too small room, soiled clothes, dry lips and hands that wouldn’t let her sleep. Of curling up on a cold floor that was too familiar and clawing for sanity in the horror of it’s happening again.

She could never trust a man who loved someone like Danzo, whose eyes had been unforgiving and cold when he demanded answers they didn’t have and pushed the child past the last shred of sanity after surviving the massacre of his family and the betrayal of his beloved brother.

When they let her out the boy was so small and broken that he was barely anything but cracked memories and echoing sobs in the back of her mind.

He’d been six.

She never forgets it.

What is the point of life, she wonders some days. The world is twisted. Ugly. What is the point of even getting out of bed?

“Maybe, just maybe, there is no purpose in life...” Orochimaru had answered when she asked, interrupting the quiet scratch-scratch of his pen and the beep of the machine she’s hooked up to. “But if you linger in this world, you might discover something of value in it.”

It’s a ridiculous thing to cling to but it is all she has some days.

Orochimaru had been a terrifying man but he was also insanely clever, the sort of sharp intelligence that would have won him awards in her world.

A part of her admires him (she hates herself for it).

His experiments were unethical and he was ruthless but so had the first heart transplantation been, the first amputation, the first caesarean section. Some horror stemmed into fame to be remembered and written about in history books, sung with praise, the trail of blood and bodies behind conveniently scrubbed away in the history books.
Orochimaru had had the potential to become that kind of man.

He’d been famed, popular even, one slated to become the Hokage before Namikaze Minato rose bloody and triumphant from the wake of the Third Shinobi War and claimed the seat.

Envy had driven Orochimaru past the point of no-return and only his sensei’s weak heart had spared his life.

She stares at her nails which pulls and tears at the skin.

Sarutobi had been a dangerous Hokage.

He’d been heralded as the Shinobi no Kami, thought to know nearly every jutsu there was. He’d personally lead the team that would become feared through all of the Elemental Nations; the Sannin, and he’d been a Hokage for longer than most ever made it in the ranks of shinobi.

But for all his strengths there were weakness.

He’d failed to kill Orochimaru.

He’d let Tsunade go without a fight and their hospitals had suffered tremendously in her wake.

Jiraiya had lost himself after his student’s death and would be absent from Konoha nearly as long as his female teammate, leaving his godson to be raised in hate.

Ironically, Orochimaru had been the first of the three to set a foot in Konohagakure for years.

The Sandaime’s old teammates and friends held enough power to challenge the Hokage without anyone to challenge them. Left to rule undisturbed during the same period as two Hokages died and the third claimed her seat.

Uchiha Sasuke is a creation of mistakes.

It’s Sarutobi’s ruthlessness to an unknown child that traps her between white walls once and breaks the boy.

It’s his failure to hurt someone dear to him that leads her to being trapped a second time in a cage of pale fingers and yellow eyes and nearly takes her, too.

What remains is jagged and vicious.

“There is something broken in you, child.” Orochimaru had mused as he stroked sweaty strands from her forehead. “But you’re still here.”

She thinks of Sarutobi dead at the hands of his student and Orochimaru dead at her hands and thinks that, maybe there’s something to that after all.

She breathed out a sigh and draws her hands from the scars.

“Just another day.” She tells the empty room and forces herself to get out of the bed.

- 

She meets Hidan and Kakuzu and senses the being Kisame calls Zetsu in the walls occasionally when it passes through to meet with the two Leaders of Akatsuki.
Hidan is foul-mouthed and feverish in his faith and violent in a way that expects violence back and he grins and spits blood from his mouth the first time she slams him against the wall with a press of her chakra when he startles her on her way to the kitchen.

“Who’s the kid?” He demands, grinning, his eyes a glorious kind of violet that is pretty on such a ferocious man. “I didn’t know we babysat.”

Kisame leans back on the hind-legs of his chair to look at them both, mouth pulled in a lazy smirk. “That’s Itachi’s little brother Sasuke.” He says, clearly unperturbed by the situation and it eases something inside of her.

Hidan’s eyes sweep over her form. “You’re awfully pretty to be related to that person.” He huffs, hefting the giant scythe on his shoulders. “If you ever want to play, hit me up?” He licked his lips. “I love the taste of new blood.” He leered.

“You eat people?” She asked, lingering, intrigued despite every hair at the back of her neck standing on edge.

He huffed. “I’m not that freak Zetsu.” He grimaced, stepping past her with a twirl of the deadly blades before it’s situated onto his back with a flare of chakra. He bends forward to nab a onigiri from the shark-man and Kisame plants his foot in the man’s chest the second his fingers brushes the rice and she hears the sound of snapping ribs and a delighted groan behind her when he slams against the wall.

She looks at Kakuzu who is large and broad and who stares at her with eyes that are otherworldly. He’s not as tall as Kisame but he comes the closest of the member’s she’s seen so far and there’s something dangerous and vicious boiling beneath the surface of the eyes that studies her.

“You better not cost a dime.” He tells her, voice gravelly.

She considers him.

“When I killed Orochimaru I… liberated… most of his fortune.” She admits, enjoying the way his eyes briefly flickers with something akin to surprise before deepening into a vicious sort of greed. “I don’t mind paying for me.” She tells him. “It’s only right.” She brushes her finger over one of the seals in the pockets of her jacket and pulls a wallet brimming with notes and holds it out as a peace offering.

He studies her for a moment before snorting. “I’ve babysat for less.” He says, snagging it up and stepping over the sprawled out form of his partner.

Sasuke thinks of the numerous D-rank missions she’s done and tries to imagine Kakuzu as a scrawny pre-teen surrounded by wailing kids.

Shakes her head with a rueful sort of feeling before trotting off to find the library Itachi had briefly mentioned.

She doesn’t try avoiding Tobi for more than a day or two.

The man is vicious when he wants to be and dangerous when he’s being slighted. He tolerates her brush-offs to a point but if she doesn’t allow him he gets pushy and when he gets pushy be becomes something vicious.
The library is far away from the meeting-room and bedrooms, a spiral of a dark corridor stretching achingly into something rather impressive with a plump sort of couch and at least two reading desks with accompanying lanterns slotted into an ever-burning flame by seals.

They killed high-risk targets for a living pick and she sincerely doubts that even someone like Hidan just leaves knowledge lying around. It makes sense to cultivate it into something they can make use to – it’s shinobi nature.

She’s nabbed a scroll and curled at the very end of the couch and it doesn’t take long before Tobi crawls over the back of the couch and stretches out, his face towards her stomach as he cuddles into her lap.

She blinks briefly down at him.

It isn’t the first time he’s done it but it’s rare.

Usually he prods and pokes of manoeuvres her to rest in his lap.

“I missed you, Sasu-chan.” He says, his voice soft, darker than it usually is.

“You’re the one who disappeared.” She points out.

He makes a huffy little noise and she suspects he’s pouting beneath the mask.

His hair looks soft where it flop out in messy spikes and for a second she imagines the strands as buttercup yellow and the mask giving away to a sunshine grin and whiskered cheeks and pauses when she realizes she’d dipped her fingers into them with an aching sort of longing.

He makes a needy little sound and pushes up against her hand when she makes to draw them back.

Slowly she curls her fingers, scraping her nails against his scalp like she does to Shien when she’s in a mood and Tobi slumps against her, eye closing. “Mine.” He whispers contently.

It’s an eerie sort of stillness and she struggles against her tense muscles and knotting anxiousness in her chest that always comes with his proximity no matter how many times he pushes into her space.

“All mine.” Like a content cat.

Chapter End Notes

Mrrr.

If only you knew all the things I have planned...

Protective Kisame makes me happy in a decidedly odd way. Sort of warm. And all... cozy-like.

It's too bad there aren't that many fanfics with him out there.

Or Konan.
I love Konan. That woman don't get nearly enough love. But then, female characters are so hastily written away that I'm not even surprised (ending of Naruto serving as prime example).

What I wouldn't do for a good F/F Konan romance. Or a M/F/F with her and Pein...

I would write it myself but I seldom write romance. At least anything that leads with romance.

Who knows, might be a future project.

Do you guys ship anything in this story? Other than Sasuke for obvs reasons.

I sometimes plot side-pairings and the like and I entertain end-story pairings but it's a fifty/fifty on whether I actually write it out or just leave the hints scattered around.

Depends on whether it fits as I tie it all up, I suppose.

That said I just watched Star Wars and I have so many questions so it's time to dig deep in another fandom to clear out some queries.

Cheers!
Shikamaru had stripped off his vest, the only one of them to wear standard gear, and it laid on-top of a messy bed where it had been discarded hours ago.

Chouji had wasted no time to remove the thick armour that the Akimichi were famous for along with his red coat and was down to a black under-shirt. He’d tied his hair back, the black cord knotted far down making it appear rather like a bushy tail.

Ino had merely wiggled out of her sandals with a groan of relief before folding down as Chouji balanced the desserts he’d brought with him with practiced ease and elegantly doled them out.

“We’re staging an intervention.” Ino said bluntly when Shikamaru slotted an exhausted look up, an edge of mania in their depth.

“You need a break.” Chouji clarified, leaning over to pour a dollop of dark syrup over his team mate’s anmitsu.

“Your dad was complaining about you last night.” Ino pointed her spoon at him and Chouji took the moment to drizzle an extra layer of white over hers when she wasn’t busy shoving it into her mouth before he settled down beside her.

Shikamaru scrubbed at his forehead in frustration as he glared at the heaps of paper that had taken over his kotetsu.

“He was twelve!” Shikamaru slammed his hand onto the table. “I don’t understand how he even began to do all of this.” He waved his hands over the numerous papers spread around him, visibly irate as both his team mates exchanged knowing looks.

“Told you it was coming.” Ino said smugly.

“I didn’t deny you, Ino-chan.” Chouji reminded her, stealing a scoop of sweetened mikan from her bowl.

Shikamaru slumped into his arms with a groan. “I’m being beaten by a preteen.” He mumbled, voice muffled by his sweater.

“Maybe you’re not looking at it the right way?” Chouji suggested, licking his spoon clean before dropping into the empty bowl. Seeing as Shikamaru was making no move to touch his he reached out and exchanged them with a sleight-of-hand that made Ino side-eye him in amusement.

“Right way?” Shikamaru demanded, straightened. “It’s an entire different language!” He swiped several papers aside and claimed an entire new scroll, unfurling it with a flourish as he grabbed a brush and began tracing out blocky foreign characters in a hurry with an ink-stained hand. “From various notes and scribbles in an old notebook we’ve managed to deduce that it’s an alphabet made out of twenty-six characters that seem to have a primary and secondary character to represent them.”

He scratched out twenty-six large blocky characters and then a step below he marked out twenty-six softer and smaller characters.
“If the system uses this,” he made a single black dot, “as a *kuten* it means it writes from the left to the right and there’s a clear gap between the characters which would imply a system used to clearly distinguish each word for easy reading.” He frowned down at the paper. “There are clearly rules. These,” he pointed to the blockier characters, “mainly seem to appear at the beginning of sentences but can occasionally be found randomly scattered through the text in this-“ he took a second to dig around before pulling out a well-worn leather notebook which he opened and tapped with a stained finger.

Ino and Chouji leaned forward to peer at the rows upon rows of inky characters painstakingly printed in fine lines. There were blotchy spills and a small scrawled little creature with an oversized mouth and horns munching on the last letters that slanted from the hand of the thing at the very end, half-swallowed.

Chouji flipped a page, revealing more letters, more words.

Sometimes there were more small drawings but they were rare and didn’t seem to have particular theme. The pages were smeared, dog-eared, leaves and flat flowers occasionally turning up as they turned one page after the other.

“It’s clearly a well-established language.” Ino mused, twirling a flat cow parsnip between her fingers. “The hasty way they’re written are too precise to be anything but.”

“But that’s impossible.” Chouji said, brow creasing in bewilderment. “That would mean he’d had enough time to establish a familiarity with it long before writing this.” He folded his arms over his broad chest.

“I know.” Shikamaru said, notably frustrated. “The notebook is well-worn, filled from the first page to the last, and it wasn’t new when he left the village.” He let the implication hang for a moment.

“Sasuke might have been clever.” Ino said, shaking her head. “But this is beyond that.” Her brow creased. “What kind of favour exactly are you doing for Naruto and Sakura?” She asked suspiciously.

Shikamaru gave her an innocent look and she raised an unimpressed brow in return. “You might be a genius, Shika, but I’m slotted for the Torture and Intelligence Division and I’ve been doing seduction missions for a year now.” She reminded him, unimpressed. “My clan read *minds*.”

Chouji offered a shrug when the Nara looked to him.

“I’m curious.” He admitted with a sheepish quirk to his lips when Shikamaru shot him a betrayed look. “You’ve been buried in this project with barely any sleep for days now. It’s far and between you get so stumped.”

“And you haven’t even sought the help of Shikaku-oji-san.” Ino reached over and poked him firmly in the ribs. “So either you fill us in or we’re hunting down Forehead for a *chat*.” She flexed her fingers warningly, hinting at exactly what a *talk* would imply.

Shikamaru pinched the bridge of his nose.

Truthfully, he had driven himself into a corner and no matter how he twisted and turned there just wasn’t any way to miraculously unlock an entire language without some kind of *key*.

*It’s like a code,* he told himself as he stared at the foreign letters, *find its rhythm, its repetitions, things that don’t match and things that match too often and pick at them until they reveal their secrets.*
Find the key, find the key, **find the key**.

The notebook had been the most concrete base for the language they’d found but among the papers were long notes, small memos, half-hearted scratches and small creatures with speaking and thinking bubbles offering commentary to the content with grouchy faces and bodies that were more mouth than anything.

He was starting to hate those small evil-looking things.

With a sigh he admitted to himself that a second and third pair of eyes would be a relief.

“I’ll talk to them.” He said finally, mouth twitching slightly as Chouji’s shoulders relaxed and Ino gave a triumphant pump of her fist.

- 

“It’s unusual for you to seek me out.” Kakuzu remarks as Itachi steps inside, closing the door behind him.

It’s early, the sun just rising somewhere outside the cave walls and he’s been awake for hours. There are rows of numbers counted on the desk, economics, but the book held open in one hand is an old diary by the Shodaime Hokage he’d filched somewhere along the road of his life.

Kakuzu rarely keeps things, money can be made from anything with a push, but even he has downtime and knowledge are the trademark of a shinobi’s life.

He closes it as he contemplates the younger man.

Kakuzu is *old*.

He’s nearing his hundreds but his body doesn’t age and his mind is as sharp as ever thanks to the jutsu stolen upon the day he left Takigakure with the hearts of the village elders beating inside his chest and covered in the blood of traitors.

Kakuzu has met a lot of people during the course of his long life and Itachi is among the more grudgingly curious cases he’s come across.

“I am sorry for bothering you Kakuzu-san.” Itachi inclines his head. “I have a request to make.”

“I don’t do requests.” Kakuzu says bluntly even as he puts the book aside on his desk and gestures for the other to take a seat on his bed. “But I’m open for a trade.” He says gruffly, curious as to what made the other seek him out.

Itachi takes the seat and as his eyes rise to meet his own Kakazu realises that there’s an edge to his eyes that he’s unused to seeing.

If he were to describe Itachi he would have said he was an old soul stuck in a young body – tired and burdened by the knowledge of life.

But while troubled there is a new feeling of determination edged in the black depths and the very lines of the body as the smaller man folds his hands together.

“I’m sick.” Itachi says bluntly and Kakazu’s hand twitches. “It’s in my lungs.” He continues, as if he hadn’t essentially bared the kind of critical secret that could mean death in the shinobi world as casually as one talked about the weather. “I’ve been trying to slow it down but my medications
haven’t been good for years.” He says, voice smooth.

Kakuzu is old, not blind.

He sees the way Kisame watches both of the Uchiha’s and he sees the way Itachi aches at the sight of his little brother who is the poster child for everything wrong with the shinobi world (Kakuzu recognises the signs well enough and he’s frankly surprised the boy is functional enough with the level of trauma he drags around).

He doesn’t believe for a second that Itachi is turning to him for help because of a sudden bout of self-preservation.

Had Kakuzu been a better person he might have cared beyond weighing human nature against his own financial greed and mentally tallying up a future weight in gold in return for his help.

“I’m not a medic.” He says.

But he’s the closest thing to one they have after Sasori’s death, he knows, and Itachi does too.

“Fine.” He says when Itachi meets his gaze steady and without fear or impatience. “We’ll hash out the payment later.” After he knows what kind of illness he’s dealing with and what it’ll cost him to get the supplies to deal with it so he can at least triple it.

“Thank you.” Itachi bows his head.

“Just take off your shirt.” He says grudgingly.

- 

“I have failed you.”

Sakura isn’t sure who is more mortified – her or Naruto. There is something very off about having the sensei you’ve adored for years bow their head in submission, as if expecting furious yelling and resigning himself to the fact.

Kakashi looks haggard in a way that isn’t unfamiliar in a shinobi village. She’s seen it often enough in the hospital and she thinks that maybe the signs were there from the moment they were assigned under him but exaggerated after three hard-pressed years in the ANBU.

Beside her Naruto looks a touch too wide-eyed and he’s edging into a flailing sort of mute panic that she has to look away from to keep herself from laughing because her team is as sad as it’s wonderful.

Kakashi is an emotionally stunted man who reads porn in public and in front of impressionable kids.

She doesn’t know much about his past even after scanning his files but she knows he was the student of the Yondaime and that none of his teammates are alive and he’s spent too-many years as an active ANBU.

His father’s suicide is also sort of infamous as Hatake Sakumo had been blamed as a catalyst for the Third Shinobi War (which Sakura personally thinks is bull and she will find an off-hand way to bring it up in the future because Kakashi-sensei is absolutely the sort to horde guilt like some people hoard bottle caps).

Somewhere to their right is a gathering of fashionable ninken, each with their claws filed to vicious points and painted in pretty colours.
Sakura has absolutely taken a picture and added it to the scrapbook she’s keeping under her bed to show their missing member once he’s back with them.

“You’re an idiot.” She says bluntly and she’s aware of Naruto looking furtively between the two of them as Kakashi’s shoulders grow tense.

She draws a deep breath, blows it out.

“It wasn’t your fault.”

She remembers curling up outside the room, wanting to make sure Sasuke was okay and hearing those exact words spoken as the sound of wretched sobbing reached her ear and the world around her changed forever.

He looks up startled and she smiles because he’s there, with them, and all they need to do is bring Sasuke home and they’ll all be together again.

And no one will ever separate them again.

Sakura won’t allow it.

-Everybody wants to rule the world.-

Konoha is no different from Iwa or Akatsuki.

Just different names with different levels of play pretend.

Konoha is benevolent, civilians whisper in the same breath they cover away from the shinobi who rules them.

Konoha protect its own, rumours spread while children are branded and taught to kill with their first stumbling steps.

“I thought you were a Raiton user.” Kisame remarks when he finds her sprawled out on the ground with an invisible shield extended around her. “And maybe a second affinity for fire considering that’s what your clan was revered for before-“ he made a vague gesture with his hand.

“I’ve never been good at fire release.” She admits, staring at the rain smattering above her. It’s strangely pretty, a bit otherworldly, and she finds that if she focuses on the rain she can pretend the flashes of red behind dark clouds are just that, pretend. “I’ve got two natures - Raiton and Suiton.”

“Primary?”

“Both.”

He raised a brow. “Unusual.” He hummed.

“Orochimaru said the same thing.” She rolled her head to the side to look at him properly. “And he said that usually lightning goes with fire since they’re both volatile.”

“For the same reason water often is a second match to earth.” Kisame agreed, folding down and spreading Samehada across his lap in a single fluid move that made her blink languidly at him. “Both deceptively calm but capable of great destruction when disturbed.”
“He won’t admit it, you know.” Kisame said as she carefully focused on extending the bubble-like shield over him as well and it garnered her an appreciative look that stirred something inside of her chest. “But he’s worried about you.”

“Worried?” She asked. “About Tobi?”

“About you.” Kisame huffed slightly. “Though I admit there’s something really off about him. Can’t quite put my finger on what exactly.” He admitted with a slight grimace.

“Itachi killed our entire clan.” She reminds him, even as something inside of her stumbles at the word choice.

“He left you alive.” Kisame points out as she tilts her head back to the sky. “He killed every single last person in that compound, including your parents. Everyone slaughtered without mercy, without hesitation, except for you.”

“You are not even worth killing.”

“Sasuke.”

“What happened to you?”

What is kindness? Sasuke does not know.

Is it kindness to spare a child in the wake of his family’s massacre or is it cruelty?

He couldn’t kill his little brother, the whispers say.

**He must have hated him.**

**He must have loved him.**

The boy just wants his family back.

She dies in the hands of a man she had once loved and wakes in the massacre done by the hands of the brother he had loved more than anything else in the world.

The sharingan spins in the face of the thirteen year old’s face as saliva drips from her mouth down her chest and the tears won’t stop and she wants nothing more than to scream and scream and scream of months of being unable to make a noise outside gagging sobs muffled by the ballgag in her mouth and she can’t--

And everyone is dead and gone and she’s dead and nothing is making sense and the boy won’t stop crying and he’s as broken as she is and she wants to comfort him because she knows that aching wretchedness in his soul and--

And it doesn’t work like that.

Because she died, she died and she isn’t dead but the boy is fading with every day ticking by and she hushes him, tries to tell him it will be okay and sshh, I’m here, I’m here and--

Why am I here I want to wake up I want to wake up--

Is it kindness to give life to a broken soul?

Her last breaths had been drawn in a body that barely functions as she slowly drowns in the blood
that fills her lungs while her tormentor presses himself between her legs.

The last thing she sees are the ugly yellow walls that had kept her a prisoner to her very last breath and a bowl with her own rotten fingers.

“What colour is the sky?” She asks him.

Kisame stares at her for a long moment before tilting his head back. “Grey.” He decides after a moment. “A touch of blue in it but mostly grey today.”

He looks at her and there’s something unfathomable in his eyes when they meet hers.

“What colour is your sky?” He asks her

“Red.” She breathes as something wretched and broken twists in her chest and stretches the smile on her face into something ugly and misshapen. “Just an infinite stretch of red.”

- Jiraiya regrets a lot of things.

“It comes with age.” He jokes to Tsunade who shots him a baleful look before averting her eyes because she understands more than she’s prepared to admit.

When she summons him he’s in Otogakure in the ruins of Orochimaru’s hide-out.

He’s walked through empty corridors and blood stained walls and counted the hundreds of graves made for his old teammate’s experiments and he feels terribly old where he slumps against the wall and stares at the beheaded body of a man he had once trusted with his life.

What remains of him is something twisted and wrong, less human and more reptilian and nothing like the pale nine year old who had smiled shyly as he bowed his head and introduced himself to the class.

Most of the research had been burned, or maybe pocketed by the Uchiha when he left.

It’s hard to say.

He doesn’t necessarily enjoy the idea of Orochimaru’s old research in anyone’s hand but he’s one of the very few alive who knows the truth of the Uchiha-massacre and he trusts that Itachi will keep an eye on things.

It doesn’t make him less tired, less wary.

It had been years since Hiruzen had approached him, weeks after the massacre had taken place, telling him that he had a new agent waiting on his discretion.

A thirteen year old kid who’d erased his very family on the orders of his Hokage.

Jiraiya had been disgusted, furious, but he hadn’t been able to do anything because the deed was already done.

To this day he doesn’t understand that kind of loyalty.

He looks down blood stained halls and wonders if even Itachi does once the boy realises what his loyalty had cost his brother.
Temari isn’t unused to being sent on long missions.

She did a lot of courier missions between Suna and Konoha, both in her capacity as the Kazekage’s sister but also as an ambassador as she progressively took on more and more responsibility.

The work was long hours and a lot of careful wording as she argued for her village’s cause and prosperity. She particularly disliked the council members who were as bothersome and old as Suna’s own and an outdated system she knew both Godaimes were working to have removed.

Temari was as impressed as she was terrified by Tsunade-sama as she watched Konohagakure rise from the invasion at three times its strength.

Not only was she strong but she was clever and she was paving the kind of groundwork that would keep Konoha shinobi alive and coming back to the battlefield long after others fell by enforcing field medic-nins with an efficiency that shouldn’t have been possible.

Temari had accompanied Haruno-san to the genin academy and she’d made careful note of the new routines and empathise on field medical that had been worked into a necessity to graduate the academy.

Sunagakure would never be able to measure to Konoha’s medical cunning under the rule of the Godaime but they would try and they would bow as the treaty between their villages strengthened and Suna slowly rose from the hole the Sandaime Kazekage and Orochimaru had dug them into.

Signing the last line and bowing her head to the now familiar gate-guardian before she found herself making her way to the Nara grounds for a hopeful cup of tea and maybe a game of shogi before she had to meet up with the Godaime at five.

Nara Em straightened at the sight of her and Temari found a smile creeping up her face at the sight of the older woman on guard duty.

“Mari-chan.” The affectionate nickname and lazy wiggling of fingers as the other reached out for her made her lengthen her steps and she allowed the other to pull her into a brief hug. “You’ve been gone for weeks.” Em says as she draws back, tilting her head ever so slightly to look up.

Like most Nara her hair is dark and there’s a lidded kind of look to her eyes. Her eyes were twinkling when she reached up to tug at one of Temari’s tails.

“I’ll be around for at least two weeks.” Temari grins. “Maybe we can visit that bar you were talking about last time?”

Temari has never had friends before but she finds that in Konoha she has several.

It’s still unfamiliar but she’s slowly getting used to it, one step at the time.

“I’ll get the gang together.” Em winks at her. “Shikamaru-san is currently accompanied by Ino-san and Chouji-san.” She tells Temari brightly as she steps back, the long metal pike on her back glimmering slightly in the sun. “Maybe you can get them to take a break. Heavens let it be known we tried.” Em huffs. “Shikamaru-san can be just as bad as Shikaku-sama when he’s at it.”

Temari raised a brow and hummed, waving absently over her shoulder as she trekked down the familiar path.
She removed her shoes at the porch and stepped inside on bare feet. The lower area of the house was empty and Temari stopped only to pick a cup from the kitchen before climbing the stairs and opening the door without knocking.

She might have found amusement in the way Shikamaru knocks down his own cup as he jerks in surprise and Ino inhales the cookie she’d been chewing in shock. Chouji has to reach out and pound her back as she splutters.

Shikamaru looked rather like a raccoon and she folds down neatly beside him. “By all means, make yourself at home.” He said dryly and her mouth twitched.

“You’re mother said I’m always welcome here.” She offered him just a tad smugly, bumping her shoulder against his companionable.

He rolls his eyes with a grumble and excused himself to fetch a new cup, leaving her with his teammates.

“It’s great to have you back, Temari-san.” Chouji greeted as Ino lunged for a tall cup of water. “For how long are you staying?” He had already reached for the tea to pour her cup and she murmured her thanks.

“Two weeks at least depending on how things go.” She might not be close with Shikamaru’s teammates but she wasn’t opposed to their company. It helped that they seemed to genuinely enjoy her company.

“That’s great!” Ino grinned at her. “Have you told Hinata yet?”

“Em said she would.” Temari admitted, sipping her tea as she absently scanned over the numerous papers scattered over the table.

Blinked.

“Did Uchiha Sasuke write to you too?” She asked in surprise and there was a crash as Shikamaru dropped his second cup.

- 

You will be an exemplary shinobi or you will be nothing at all.

Sai’s world spirals down to this single truth as he kneels before Danzo-sama and then shatters when he raises his head and sees the familiar figure tied up and bleeding at the feet of his Master.

“Sai.”

“Danzo-sama.” He answers automatically.

“You,” Inuzuka snarls and Sai very deliberately doesn’t look at him. “You filthy traitor!” He roars even as Danzo-sama’s hand twists further into the messy brown locks of the other boy.

He’d been divested of his clothes, left only in a pair of boxers and knotted with rope to prevent him from rising. His arms had been tied up behind his back in a position that forces his shoulders forward into a mockery of a bow and blood drips from his temple, his body wet with perspiration.

His eyes are the furious eyes of a wolf – lips pulled back to reveal fanged teeth.

“Naruto and Sakura trusted you!” The boy snarls and Sai pretends not to have heard him even as
something inside of him twists. “After everything-” Sai doesn’t see Danzo-sama move but he sees the blood from the crushed nose and the cursing and Danzo-sama looks remarkably unconcerned by the whole happening.

“He was following you.” Sai’s breath very nearly hitched but he knows this game and his face remains a blank mask. “You’ve been slacking off.”

“It won’t happen again, Danzo-sama.” He says without any inflection.

His Master hums. “No.” The man agrees. “It won’t.”

He throws the boy forward and Inuzuka lands roughly at Sai’s feet, struggling, his eyes dark and furious

Sai stares at him.

“Because you’re going to find out what he knows and then you’re going to kill him.” Danzo says mildly.

Chapter End Notes

I wish I could get working on the next chapter right away but I'm working 7-22 the next three days and there’s seriously two hours to get there and two hours to get home so I'm going to be dead. But at least I'll have the bus rides there to scrawl in my notes between reading, heh.

I really like Kakuzu - he's brilliant and interesting to write and I've seen about zlich interactions between him and Itachi so I'm having way too fun with that. And just, overall, structuring things up for the comings chapters. It's neat and a lot of strings to haul around and knot together.

That said Kiba and just Sai. What a bind they've gotten themselves into, I mean, really.

At least we've finally managed to drag Temari into Konoha with a certain letter.

How exciting.

I've also come to realise there's a ridiculous amount of sweets being mentioned in my stories considering I don't like sweets. At all.

Repressed feelings? Hm.

That said I'm craving some soup and I'm gonna watch a movie and then I'm going to survive the day on coffee fumes.

Cheers!
Sai tastes weakness in the seconds it take for his mind to scramble up a proper response.

He looks at Kiba whose eyes are furious, burning into him, and he looks at his Master who is calm and composed and watching him with the sort of sharp knowing that makes the back of his neck prickle.

"Danzo-sama?" There is something hard in his chest that makes his breaths too heavy and Sai very carefully does not acknowledge it. "Inuzuka-san is a clan heir." It’s as much as a statement as a question and there’s a strange feeling crawling down his arms, prickling against his skin as if wishing to break through.

“I’m aware.” Danzo remarks, turning to look at the boy at his feet with disdain. “But even those have their uses.”

Kiba snarls and Sai is forced to react when the other lunges towards his Master, catching him and slamming him flat against the floor, settling himself on top in hopes of keeping him still. One hand goes behind his back, finds the tied hands sweaty with perspiration and digs his thumbnail into it in warning while he puts weight on his knees to keep him still.

He feels the tension rolling through the frame beneath him and swallows as he centres himself.

“You mean to use him for something.” Sai tries carefully and he knows Kiba is listening too from the way his breath hitches momentarily, too quick for anyone but himself to notice.

“The death of a clan heir,” Danzo rasps. “Can be used to instigate a lot of things.” He leans against his cane which Sai knows functions as nothing more than a prop for his old and weak persona. “As you well know Uchiha Sasuke murdered Orochimaru and has joined up with his brother.” Sai takes in the way Danzo’s middle-finger twitches momentarily, a tell of either anger or ill-ease. “So far he has not done anything against Konoha and the Godaime refuses to take the proper precautions against him.”

Sai wiggles his fingers, still out of sight, his palms just as sweaty as he clumsily flexes his fingers against the other’s in a mockery of the Tairitsu no In.

“It means that, no matter what, we’ve got each other’s backs, ‘ttbayo!’”

- Sasuke skids across the ground, her back arching low against the ground as Samehada tears through the space above her.

She twists, anchoring herself as she simultaneously pushes and her leg slams into his with enough force that she would have crushed it were he not already moving, taking several steps back as he draws breath, fingers already in their finished motion.

Her eyes widen and she launches high, hooking onto him and beginning her own signs before remembering herself and with a low curse anchors herself to the closest tree and pushes away in a burst of acrobatics as the water dragons tears clear through it in a shock of devastation that far
surpasses what Zabuza and Kakashi had managed against each other.

She lands on branch in a crouch, one hand gripping the handle of Kuzanagi.

“I see the cat contract didn’t just develop your sense of smell.” Kisame remarks casually, Samehada hefted on his shoulder with a smirk. “I thought that anchoring ability of yours might have hindered your natural development but you’re quick on your feet. Colour me impressed.” And he looks it too and something she hasn’t felt in years stirs inside of her.

“You are aware that I only know two water release?” She had to double-check.

“Not liking the disadvantage?” He grins at her. “That’s only through a fault of your own.” He shifted Samehada, leaning the edge of the great blade against the ground. “Honestly, who goes into Ame without knowing at least a B-rank Suiton or two?” He sounds strangely offended.

Sasuke strongly suspects that at least half of Akatsuki wouldn’t be able to fill that particular demand, Itachi being the exception. They’re all specialists in their areas and while she doesn’t doubt that they could they haven’t come across as the sort who does.

Taking pride in their own art and all that.

Even Kisame for all his words is primarily a Suiton user even if she’s seen him use four out of five elemental releases with ease.

But Kisame is a man of discipline and she’s coming to both respect and fear that aspect of him.

“Can’t you teach me then?” She asks, climbing lower before she lets one leg drop down in a movement of faux ease as she takes her seat on a large branch. “Orochimaru never could.” She points out.

He raised a brow at her. “Are you even aware of what you’re asking, kid?”

She swung her leg, not saying anything as they stare at each other.

It’s not their first match, far from it. After realising Kisame was meditating in the early hours, when Itachi was still asleep and she was both restless and wary of running into Tobi, she’d taken to following him. She’d go through her morning stretches and then she’d settle to read, close enough to listen to his slow breaths in the rain.

It had taken three days before Kisame had nearly skewered her against the tree she’d claimed as her own with a challenge in his eyes when she gripped for her own sword, sharingan spinning.

He pushed her limits, introducing new rules and forcing her to adapt or get shaved to ribbons as he hunted her. It was different from the playfulness that had challenged her to pursue Kakashi one-armed up a mountain but demanded a certain sort of discipline that’s separate from Orochimaru’s.

“You’re already doing it.” She dares to say and his eyes narrows.

Kisame tells her: no Sharingan.

She does not use it.

He tells her: no Raiton.

And she obeys even as it puts her at a severe disadvantage.
She does not know what part of her is responsible for following through with the motions and demands but it’s *there* and she’s doing it.

Kisame reaches into the back of his pouch, rummaging around for a moment before pulling out something small and rectangular and she catches it when he throws it to her.

She hunches over it instinctively and raises her shield with a quick seal when she realises it’s a book.

“Read it.” Kisame tells her. “And then ask me again.”

It’s made of red leather, carefully bound and she stares at it for a long moment before she tucks it into the inner pocket of her jacket.

—

“One brother asked me to become his *shishou* today.” Kisame tells his partner, studying the jars occupying the formerly empty bedside table.

“I thought he already had.” Itachi raised a brow, looking up from the book he was reading. “You’re already training together every morning.”

“See, that’s what the kid told me too.” Kisame unscrewed one of them, nose stinging as he inspected the cream. As far as he could tell it was good quality and he was reluctantly impressed by the old codger’s thoroughness. “But I’m the last member of the *Kiri no Shinobigatana Shichinin Shu*.” He reminded the other. “It comes with certain regulations.”

Itachi tilted his head, considering it. “Apprenticeship then?”

“I’m going to pierce your brother if he says yes.” Kisame deadpanned and guffawed at the strange look that passed over the other man’s face. “It’d make it official.” He dropped down on the bed beside Itachi who shifted slightly, just enough to brush their arms together. “Old traditions.” He touched the stud in his own ear briefly.

“You’re good for him.” Itachi murmurs.

“He didn’t come here for me.” Kisame pointed out with a note of reproach. “But I admit the kid is growing on me.” He chuckled.

—

She’s eleven, frowning over homework.

Jake is seven, flat on his stomach and staring at the small green beetle she’d found in the garden and kept in a glass jar on her bedside table. He’d gathered a small pile of sticks, stones and leaves which he used to make a small road for it leading towards a little flat red block and his attention was carefully focused on its every awkward little movement forward.

“There was a man at school today.”

She looks up and then down and behind her. “A man?” She repeats, brow furrowing.

She shuffles her homework between the pages of her math book and closes it before carefully scooting off her chair and folding down on the rugged floor beside him.

Jake’s attention doesn’t waver from the beetle.
“I didn’t like him.” Jake informs her.

He’s still in his soccer clothes from the game after school, the colours bright and the number 31 displayed proudly in white. She’d biked him home since it was Tuesday and both their parents were working late – it was nearing six and she knew she had to start on dinner soon.

“Did he say something to you?” She asks carefully.

Jake’s mouth curl.

“Did he do something to you that you didn’t like?”

He doesn’t answer.

“Jake-“

“I don’t want to see him again.” Jake looks up at her and she stares back. “Ever.”

She’s eleven.

Jake is seven.

“Did he-“

“I want him to go away!” The beetle makes a crunchy sort of noise when Jake slams his palm flat against it, simultaneously pushing himself up.

But she’s faster, arms wrapping around his waist and tumbling forward with him when he jerks to get away. She pulls him back with her weight, knees dragging against the rug, swallowing a grunt of pain when he changes tactics abruptly and pushes back and she lands hard on a bunch of blocks.

She twists, pushing him down as he kicks and screams and nails rakes against her face, her arms, her shirt tearing. She struggles to keep him down, gets her arms around him and pulls him close as hands tangles in her hair and pulls until her eyes water-

“I want him to go away, I want him to go away, I want him to go away, I want him to go away, I want him to go away!” He howls, tearing at her hair and there’s blood where his nails catches and drags her skin open.

But she doesn’t let go, no matter how he screams, no matter how much it hurts.

She curls around him as best as she can, as if she could shield him from the world with her body as he beats against her.

“I want him to go away!” He half-screams and half-sobs into her ear. “I want him to-“

Sasuke wakes with a start, eyes open and searching before her mind has fully shaken the dream off as she pulls herself into a sitting position. She notes Kisame’s heavy breaths is missing but Itachi is still sleeping which means it’s before eight.

She listens and there’s voices, she realises, down the hall in what she’s come to think of as the mess hall in lack of better word for it.

Kisame calls it the kitchen but it’s not just a kitchen so Sasuke stubbornly doesn’t.

She draws herself up, steps silent as she reaches out to touch Itachi’s shoulder.
“There are two voices that I don’t recognise.” She tells him plainly when his eyes open.

Itachi drags a hand through his hair when he sits up, straining to hear the low murmur (she wonders who if them has the sharper hearing – how a crow compares to a cat) as she takes a step back and he makes a low noise of realization. “They’re back.” He says, wakefulness slowly settling in as he lets out a small yawn that makes her blink and turn away.

When they were travelling both Kisame and Itachi had slept little, waking early no matter how late they settled down for the night. But back at the base Itachi had turned out to be the late sleeper of the two while Kisame meditated outside in a small clearing followed by training before heading inside to make breakfast in time for Itachi to join him.

It’s obvious that they’ve been partners for years; there’s a certain rhythm and awareness constant between the two.

Most mornings she ends up joining Kisame outside but he’d temporarily banned her from training with him until she’d read the book. Instead she’s spent the last two mornings crawling into the shark-man’s bed, breathing the scent of salt and pine as she studies his brother’s sleeping face across the room.

The door to the bathroom clicks as Itachi disappears inside and Sasuke stares at it for a moment before pulling off her sleeping shirt and making a grab for her pants.

The boots are close-toed and she lets her gaze linger on the small Uchiha mark painted years ago in amidst purple before she pulls them on and secures them properly onto her calves and tucks the hem of the blue pants at the top. A t-shirt comes next and she picks a white one for the day, shrugging the pale jacket with the purple hood over it.

Lastly she ties the long rope that had once belonged to Orochimaru and deftly slides Kuzanagi in place just in time for Itachi to step out with a towel around his waist.

While his brother gets dressed Sasuke brushes her teeth and rinses carefully before combing a wet hand through her hair to settle it all in place over the right side of her neck. She studies her reflection for a moment before she heads out to where Itachi is waiting for her and he gives her a brief smile as she falls in step with him.

She flares her yin chakra and notices that Kisame as well as Deidara and Tobi had headed out sometime during the night. Kakuzu was in his room and Hidan in another room deeper down the corridor and she pulls the purple cloth secured to the inside hem of the t-shirt up over her nose to dampen the smell of death just before they step into the mess hall.

There’s a man and a woman waiting for them. Both of equal height, taller than her but shorter than Itachi, she measures absently, and there’s a shared sort of intensity to them, too.

His hair is a mess of spikes in a sharp orange colour and there’s black bars going through his nose and ears and fanged snake-bites beneath his mouth. His eyes purple and ringed and she counts five before she averts her attention to the woman and she wonders just what kind of doujutsu he’s in possession of.

The woman’s hair is purple, lighter than the colour Sasuke favours, but not by much and she’s momentarily distracted by the paper rose secured to the bun on top of her head. She takes in the careful black lines drawn out by the side of a pair of amber eyes with a lingering mixture of envy and admiration.
When her eyes drift down there’s an amused quirk to the woman’s lips and Sasuke ducks her head and looks to his brother upon realising she’d been caught staring.

“Pein-sama. Konan-sama.” Itachi inclines his head in greeting. “This is my little brother, Uchiha Sasuke.”

“You look much alike.” Konan murmurs and Sasuke realises she’s looking right at her. “It’s a pleasure to meet you Sasuke-san.”

“The pleasure is mine.” She bows just a tad too deep to the woman whose smile grows.

When she straightens she catches the eye of Pein who regards her silently for a moment before looking to Itachi. “I have need of your expertise.” The man’s voice makes Sasuke straighten without meaning to. There’s a sort of sharp intensity, both his eyes and body language but also coiled in the depth of his chakra and it’s easy to see how such a man can command a gathering of S-rank nukenin.

“I’ll keep an eye on your brother, Itachi-san.” Konan said and Sasuke got the distinct feeling that the entire meeting had been timed for this exact offer as the woman easily sidles up beside her. “We need to restock the supplies and I wouldn’t be opposed to the company.” There’s nothing inherently threatening about the offer but Sasuke shifts uncomfortably anyway, only glancing up when Itachi squeezes her shoulder in reassurance.

She bows to the Leader and his brother as they leave, disappearing down the dark hallways.

“Do you want to eat breakfast before we leave?” Konan asks as Sasuke shots one last lingering look after Itachi before following the woman.

“Fruit is fine.” Sasuke finds herself saying, wary and unsure what to do with herself as Konan opens the fridge.

“It’s a five hour trip, minimum.” She says. “I’ll make us some onigiri for the road. Plum alright with you?”

“Y-yeah.” Sasuke finds herself taking a seat at the table, hands curling into the fabric of her pants as an unsure sort of jittery feeling bounces through her.

It’s the first time she’s been alone with an adult woman in... she doesn’t know how many years (Tsunade comes, perhaps, the closest in recent time – surrounded by ANBU and shadowed by her assistant).

He had been… six? (his mother).

She had been… twenty-five? (fellow worker, she thinks, but it’s hazy).

Sasuke blinks at the bowl of neatly cut apple pieces and peeled mandarin bits slides in front of her but when she looks to Konan the woman has her back to her.

Sasuke slowly picks one up and takes a cautious bite, chewing slowly.

They spend most of the trip in relative silence.

Sasuke treks obediently a step or so behind the woman, slowly relaxing when she doesn’t find herself bombarded with questions.
It rains gently in the beginning but it’s as if they cross an invisible line half-way and it just… stops… which allows her to shake the hood of her cloak off and relax at the first rays of sunlight in several weeks.

Half-way there Konan offers her an *onigiri* and they pause in a clearing to eat in companionable silence, perched on a flat rock.

Sasuke is cautiously coming to hope she’ll get through the next couple of hours shot-free as she minimizes the area of her yin chakra to avoid overwhelming herself as they halt just outside the perimeters of a small village.

Konan seals away her cloak, revealing a sleeveless zip-up vest of sorts with an open back. It fit like a normal shirt at front but the back extended almost all the way down to her knees with a slight swish. Unlike the other members in Akatsuki she wore a slim pair of black pants and heeled boots which were less recognisable than what was favoured among the male members.

She looked every inch a kunoichi and Sasuke ducks her head as she seals away her own cloak, jacket, belt and sword, leaving only the white t-shirt with the mask pulled high.

Konan beckons her along and Sasuke’s ears burns as she follows, a peculiar sort of humiliation coursing through her and she shoves her fists deep into the pocket of her pants and tells herself not to think.

But it was hard not to compare herself to the woman – seeing all that she isn’t so blaringly in her face.

“We need to pick up an order at the seamstress.” Konan tells her and Sasuke can’t help the way she strains to hear the mature depth of her voice. “Food is the priority and we’ll be using special storage seal to preserve it on our way back.”

Sasuke knows what seals she talks about because she uses them herself and nods absently.

Food shopping for a gathering of S-rank nukenin turns out to be something of an adventure and Sasuke learns a lot about the people she lives with.

Like the fact that Hidan hates any kind of vegetable but will grudgingly eat a salad if there’s cantaloupe in it.

Or that Konan picks up monkfish and package of liver because it’s one of the few things Kakuzu willingly eats and Sasuke cautiously accepts the sample from the seller when she notices her sceptic look.

It turns out to be delicious and the young woman behind the counter giggles at her expression.

If she’s truthful she hasn’t actually tried a lot of the food in this world. At home she’d made what was familiar with, bastardizing the recipes that she remembered. On missions the foods were basic rations and easy to make stews from rabbit and fish and a handful of assorted herbs.

But Konan tries most of everything with careful deliberation and Sasuke finds herself offered to try alongside her, unable to deny it as all kinds of new things appear before her, dipped in sauces, fried, sometimes raw and drizzled in light sheens.

They’re at a fish vendor, Sasuke absently accepting the little paper plate of fish and listening with one ear as Konan bargains, when her eyes goes wide. “What’s this?” She blurts out before she can halt herself and she realizes she’s interrupted something when both pauses to look at her and she
ducks her chin, missing her jacket. “It’s really good.” She mumbles, swallowing down the last and pulling the mask high over her nose.

“It’s skipjack tuna.” The vendor’s eyes crinkles when they smile. “Never had it before?”

Sasuke mutely shakes her head.

“It’s pretty rare here in these areas.” They muse. “They nest at the seas near Kumo but occasionally they travel this here way.”

Sasuke makes a noncommittal noise and Konan studies her for a second. “We’ll take what you have of it.” She decides and the vendor lighten up as they haggle over the prize.

Sasuke stares at the ground and there’s a mulish sort of resistance inside of her when Konan gives a nod to the vendor and moves towards the next one. “Come on.” The woman beckons and Sasuke swallows thickly before complying.

She lingers outside as Konan finishes her business at the seamstress, leaning against the wall of the shop and watching the sun caught in the red sky. She feels at odd with herself, self-conscious, and she scratches at the inside of her left wrist with slow and careful deliberation to keep herself focused.

She straightens when Konan finally steps outside.

“Is there anything you would want to pick up while we’re here?” She asks.

Sasuke opens her mouth to say no but then halts and – “a notebook.” She finds herself saying.

“Kakuzu requested we’d pick up some for him, too. We also need ink.” Konan decided. “Go and see if you’ll find something suitable for yourself.”

They split up and Sasuke searches the rows of small blank notebooks until she finds a pocket-sized blue one with the outline of a rabbit in a darker shade of blue and golden markings outlining the spine of it. She also picks up two cheap ones, two small pens for ink writing and a gathering of black, red and green ink.

She’s lingering by the oil crayons when Konan finds her. “Do you enjoy drawing?” She asks, arms full of what looks like the sort of books used for accounting and a general assortment of basic supplies and blank scrolls.

Sasuke shrugs. “It’s been awhile.” She admits.

Orochimaru hadn’t been the kind who kept crayons and paper to make time pass.

“You should pick some up.” Konan says. “There’s a lot of downtime between missions and its never wrong to have something to make travelling bearable.” She tilted her head. “It’s too bad Sasori isn’t around. He’d been delighted to find a fellow artist.” She doesn’t sound sad but maybe regretful at the loss of someone who had served Akatsuki well.

Sasuke hesitates but finally choses a small pack because the older woman seems to be expecting it and Konan makes her pick up a larger arc of papers before they pay for everything at the counter and seal it away.

Konan orders them each a warm cider which taste of honey apples and Sasuke finds herself absently kicking her leg into a swing, the other supported on a pin beneath the high chair, as she studies her across the small table.
Everything from the outlined muscles in her arms, the swell of her breasts, the round piercing just beneath her lower lip and her soft purple hair. The way she tilts the bottle to her lip, alert but with a certain relaxation to her shoulders – as if she knows there is nothing here that can hurt her because she’s the most dangerous creature around.

Konan isn’t soft. There’s a surety and confidence and an awareness of herself that’s attractive and envious all the same.

“Whatever you’re thinking of it is okay to ask.” Konan’s voice makes her think of Tsunade – there’s the same sort of quality to it, attention drawing and with a slight depth to it.

Sasuke looks at her fingers, long and pale and both foreign and familiar at the same time. Thinks of the black eyes she sees in the mirror each morning and the depth of her anxiety, the wrongness that burns through her at the sight of her flat chest and limp member.

Thinks of the words whispered to Kakashi-sensei so many years ago when he was out cold, unable to hear her.

“Could you – “ her fingers creeps up to touch the outline of her eyes. “Could you teach me how to –“ her other hand flexes against her thigh but Konan is patiently waiting her out and Sasuke draws a deep breath. “Could you show me how to do those lines by your eyes?” She asks haltingly.

She doesn’t know the word for it. It’s never come up in this world, just like everything from brushes and powders are foreign and strange.

She’d never one for make-up but the way Konan draws out the corner of her eyes interests her, makes her want to see if she’d like herself just a little more with the feminine tilt to her features. Makes her wonder if maybe – maybe she could look just a little less like the dead boy and a little more like her.

Konan regards her silently for a long moment, something in her eyes Sasuke doesn’t understand. But she refuses to lower her eyes, refuses to be ashamed for this one thing, because she’s so very tired of hiding who she is.

“Come with me.” The woman puts the cider down and Sasuke finds her hand caught in slim but strong fingers that pulls her along.

She hovers a bit awkwardly at the small store until Konan pulls her closer, bracketing her between her arms and murmuring lowly in her ear about the different products. Sasuke wants to tell her that it’s enough with just the dark paint but she can’t form the words, not when something inside of her is so very relieved to finally know.

“Purple would look good on you.” Konan murmurs kindly, her voice soft, and Sasuke swallows as she nods in helpless agreement.

Unlike the books, Konan stills her hand when she reaches for the pouch in her pocket and pays it in full herself.

They stop at the same clearing where they’d shared their onigiri on the way there and Konan paints her eyes in the light of the setting sun.

“Why did you bring me with you today?” She as Konan dips a thin pencil in pink and Sasuke feels her trace something to the side and a bit down on her face. Her skin itches but since Konan isn’t actually touching her skin it’s bearable and she focuses on the feel of the soft brush and tries to ignore how close the other is.
“Would you believe me if I said I simply wanted the company?” Konan asks, tilting her head as she draws back with a slight mischievous quirk to her lips that makes Sasuke want to reach out and trace it with the tips of her fingers.

Sasuke gives her a dry look and for the first time that day she hears Konan laugh.

“I admit I have ulterior motives for bringing you out here.” She heaves herself up on the stone opposite Sasuke who relaxes slightly at the distance between them and watches her attentively. “You have been with us for a while now. You train with Kisame-san in the morning, eat dinner with the other members when they’re at the base and you seem to have a soft spot for the library.”

Konan is clearly hinting at something and Sasuke struggles to connect the dots.

“I have… enjoyed my stay.” She says carefully.

Konan gives her a look that is far too knowing.

“Sasuke-san, I know you’ve spent almost two years unwillingly with Orochimaru.” She tenses. “But you got out and instead of returning to Konoha you sought out your brother. I do not pretend to know your reasons.” Konan reaches up and tucks stray hair caught by the wind behind her ear as Sasuke averts her eyes. “What I know is that you’re clever, only sixteen and able to go head to head with one of our strongest members. Akatsuki would be a fool not to extend an invitation.”

Sasuke jerks in surprise, her eyes locking with ember. “You’re troubled, I see that.” Konan says gently. “We all face adversities and not all of them are easy to get over. Not all of them easy to function through.” Sasuke’s knuckles whiten against her thighs. “Akatsuki’s goal is for a united world without pain.” Konan spreads her arms. “A world without death, without violence. A world of harmony.”

Sasuke counts her heartbeats.

“Every member has joined for their own reasons.” Konan continues, eyes searching. “Tell me, Sasuke-san, what do you desire more than anything in the world?”

Sasuke stares at her for a long moment before she lowers her eyes to her hands.

*What do I want?*

She thinks of Itachi who she is just getting to know again, who is silent and steady but there and trying when he doesn’t have to. Itachi who had killed his entire clan but left the boy alive and is asking questions she doesn’t know how to answer.

Thinks of Jake who had laughed and spread his arms like wings as they rode down the hill of cracked concrete. Jake who beats their father to death with a crowbar and burns the house with their mother still inside while clutching her hand in his.

Thinks of Kisame who is firm and pushes her limits but never too far. Kisame who cooks her food and told her to ask him again, when she was informed and sure of her decision, and who is so, so very gentle with her when her mind is too broken to make sense of the world around her.

Thinks of Kakashi who was the first to ask *how are you holding up?* Kakashi who had held her after Orochimaru tracked her down in the Forest of Death and made her tea after cutting her hair. Kakashi who had told her over and over and over *it wasn’t your fault*, as if he could make it true with only his words.
Thinks of Naruto who curled around her protectively and vows to keep her safe as the world fractures. Naruto who eats pineapple on his pizza and wiggles his cold toes against her side and never once judges her for being who she is. Naruto who doesn’t always understand but tries anyway with a clumsily sewn up jacket and hopeful eyes.

Thinks of Sakura who looks at her and sees the broken pieces but reaches out anyway. Who coaxes her with gentle touches and an understanding that makes her want to hide, makes her want to reach out. Sakura who makes her feel broken and whole all at the same time and who learns how to paint small figures on her toes after Sasuke admires the little pink cheery blossom Ino had made on hers.

Thinks of the boy whose cries are loud and wretched before they fade away into mere whispers and impressions at the back of her mind no matter how she struggles to hold him together.

Thinks of ****.

She stares at hands that are simultaneously hers and that of a dead boy.

“Why did he do it?” They ask her over and over again as the boy cries and cries and cries.

“Why did he do it?” They ask her over and over again as she girl buries her face in her knees and covers her ears.

- 

“You probably hate me, don’t you? Being the best isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. When you have power you become isolated and arrogant. Even if you’re coveted and sought after at first. But we only have each other as siblings. I’ll always be there for you even if I’m only an obstacle for you to overcome. Even if you do hate me… That’s what big brothers are for.”

- 

“We’re like eagles,” her brother says, struggling to manoeuvre the large board in his tiny hands. “When we’re big, I’m gonna take you flying for reals.”

He’d pushes his lip out stubbornly when she laughs..

“Alright,” she agrees. “Let me be your wings until then.”

- 

“Foolish little brother.”

“Sasuke.”

“You’re not even worth killing.”

“What happened to you?”

- 

“You’re going to be a big sister!”

- 

“I want to know what made him burn their deaths into my brain – killing them over and over again until I couldn’t erase the corpses from my living room.”
She looks up and gives Konan a lopsided little grin.

“I just want to turn twenty-eight.”

It’s dark in the library and it takes a moment for his vision to adjust enough to see the figure curled up, knees towards the back of the couch and face relaxed in sleep.

He draws a breath, careful, so careful not to disturb her when he crosses the distance and sinks down beside her. He frees the mask from his face, hooking it onto his belt before he raises one hand to his mouth, pulling the glove off and letting it drop into his lap.

There’s a slight tremble in his fingers when he reaches out and strokes strands of black away from her pale face. He blinks at the small pink bunny painted by her eye and a small fond smile curls his lips.

“You look so beautiful like this.” He whispers and he can’t stop himself from wanting to touch more, his hand following the line of her jaw, brushing her lips with scarred fingertips. “I thought.” His brow furrows before he lets out a sigh. “It doesn’t matter now.” He leans forward, his breath brushing over her face when he noses at the curve of her ear and her brow creases when he inhales deeply, eyes closing.

“You don’t know how many times I wanted to take you away from his hands.” He confides her, voice a tremble as he ghosts his fingers up and over her eyelids. “He knew I was already watching you and he stole you right out of my hands.” His knuckles whiten and he draws a sharp breath, forcing himself to relax as he leans further over her, crowding her, pressing his brow against hers and leaning as close as he dares.

“But you’re here now.” He reassures her. “We won’t be separated again.”

He feels her chest expand when she draws breath, her arm pushing up against his chest and his heart stutters as he draws back.

It takes a bit of careful manoeuvring but he manages to wiggle one arm beneath her head, cushioning it against his bicep as he carefully moulds the front of his body against her back. She slots perfectly against him and he can’t resist drawing her closer, his hand stroking against her chest until it settles possessively over her heart, fingers curling protectively.

“There’s still too much of the boy inside of you.” He presses his brow against her spine. “But I’ll make it right – just like I promised you.” He swears. “Just hang on for a little bit longer.” He noses up against her, breathing her scent, feeling the rise and fall of her chest, the pounding off her heart – “all mine.” He whispers, reassuring both himself and her.

Chapter End Notes

This became a very peculiar chapter, I think.

Poor Sai and Kiba got it really, really sticky right now and yeah, that's gonna be a mess and a half.
That said, I love Konan. And, we've sort of been building up to this with Sasuke hanging around in the Akatsuki headquarters. I mean, we're talking about people who want to conquer the world here and she is, smack-dab among them and perfectly usable.

It's a wonder what Sasuke is thinking in all of this with everything going around and wooooow -

Decisions, decisions.

Did you all think I'd leave you hanging completely regarding her brother? We're building a picture, trust me, and we're gonna get the proper people involved to sort out that whole mess. Eventually. Like, it's somewhere in the future, I promise.

There's also a lot more of Orochimaru in the future but that's not really as comforting. But we have, like, two whole years of stuff to handle right there. Some good, some bad.

A lot of bad.

That said, I'm a girl but I'm lousy at make-up. Any of you know if there's a particular name for the little... triangle... things Konan paints by her eyes? I'm really hoping there is a name. English is my second language and I'm not good at this in my first language, really.
EDIT: I have been informed it's called a winged eyeliner - thank you for the help!

Also, Kisame ey-yo! Some of you have been all like 'Kisame should take her under his wing!' and it's like you're all reading my mind because goddamn of course he is! I'm also slowly sorting out the Itachi situation because it's still messy from both of their sides and we're gonna get further into it as we stroll along. That kind of trauma isn't just solved with a snap of fingers, after all, and Itachi still doesn't know the extent of the consequences following that night.

To be fair, we don't know everything about it either but we're hiiiiiiiiinting.

Anyway, so far Itachi is taking comfort in the fact that Sasuke has Kisame to lean on while being proactive elsewhere.

And Tobi, oh man, what a situation. What really went down that night of the massacre? It ain't the chapter to find out just yet but we'll get there!

Some of you already guessed it but yes, it has been confirmed: Tobi is absolutely the one Sasuke had a 'dream' about before Orochimaru got his hands on her. There's more to this but that'll be later on.

ALSO: I have silver hair!! I am like way too excited about it. Kakashi hair, yo. Kakashi hair! Man. I miss him. There's absolutely a Kakashi POV in the future because he's been a busy, busy little bee.

Cheers to you!
Temari is still feeling a bit bemused some hours later and it’s a relief to see the small group already gathered at a table when she steps inside.

There’s Em, her clothes traded for a green button-up thrown over a yellow shirt with a sunflower on it. Temari spies at least two empty bottles before her and she’s pushing into Anko’s face with a look that’s entirely too challenging.

Anko for her part is in full get-up and just off from work by the looks. There’s a certain sharpness to her that means she just got out of a session and Temari strongly suspects Em is pushing her buttons just to get that edge off.

By the way Anko is watching the other she’s playing a dangerous game – torture takes a certain sort of mind-set, after all, and even the best needs a moment to disconnect from it.

But Yugao is there and if there’s anyone who’ll rein the two back it’s the ANBU (and Temari is still reeling from that particular tidbit after a night that had ended in too much drink and a stint of nude midnight bathing in the Forest of Death).

She sidles up to Hinata at the bar.

“Hey there.”

The younger girl were already shifting back towards her as Temari threw an arm over her shoulder and she tilts her head, their lips meeting in a sweet kiss. “I-I missed you.” Hinata whispers against her skin, cheeks pink and Temari relaxes against her.

“You too.” Temari murmurs into her ear, squeezing her closer for a moment, relived to finally be with her again.

Despite being three years between them there’s only an inch or two difference in height and Hinata pushes their cheeks together in a gentle little buff and Temari let’s go of her so that Hinata can pick up the tray of drinks with a nod of thanks to the bartender and a small daring kiss to the corner of her girlfriend’s mouth.

Temari spies her favourite plum wine among them and her mouth quirks as she takes the lead through the tightly packed bar, pulling back a chair to allow Hinata to slide in first before following.

Yugao and Em were already occupying the other length of the corner couch with Anko leaning precariously on the back-legs of her chair on the side closest to them.

“Tem-chan!” Anko’s chair thuds against the ground. “Fancy seeing you back in town!”

Yugao reaches over and nudges Hinata’s hand back before she can start serving them and does it in her place as Hinata shakes her head in response to a low question and murmurs something back, swallowed by the loud chatter around them.

“I figured I needed to get back before you started serenading me in your letters.” Temari smirked.
“We should all practice our prose.” Anko declared unapologetically, nabbing her bottle of sake out of Em’s hand when the woman raised it to her lip. “And you, little missy, need to learn some manners.” She gave the other woman a sharp enough look that even Em knew she was crossing limits.

“Anko has been loudly bemoaning about your absence,” Yugao confides as she drags the basket of steaming *anpan* closer and nicked two for herself. “There’s been a lot of complains.” She gives Anko’s chair a shove with her foot which makes the older purple haired woman choke on her sake and Em squawks in protest as she steals her sweet drink and downs half stave off the coughing.

Temari guesses the complaints had been made in true Anko style which meant broken tables and loud off-key singing.

Hinata leans back against her and she’s clutching a glass of *shochu* which, from the whiff of it, is a fairly expensive one too. Temari accepts her *umeshu* from her other hand with a kiss to the crown of her head as the younger melts contently against her, cheeks growing pink when she notices Anko smirking at them.

“Em said you’re staying for two weeks.” Yugao raised a brow.

“At least.” Temari felt Hinata twine their hands together and gave it a squeeze. “I’m not here on strictly unofficial business.” Anko and Em clinked their glasses together with a whoop and Hinata raised her own drink in a little toast that made Temari’s insides twist up in warm butterflies.

“I have another week of downtime.” Yugao sipped her drink with a sly grin.

“Five more weeks of early guard duty and my afternoons entirely free!” Em leaned forward. Anko folded her arms. “A week.” She says, nodding to herself. “I can do a week.” Which was Anko talk for bothering Ibiki until the man got annoyed enough to shut her down for a week himself.

Anko hoarded her vacation days something fierce.

“I-I’m free until the end of the month.” Hinata admitted as they looked to her, her finger tapping absentely against the glass.

Anko made a noise of realization. “I almost forgot about that.” She leaned forward, elbow on the table. “Have they figured out what they’re gonna do with you yet?”

“Forgot about what?” Em asked in interest, ears perking up at the potential gossip.

Anko threw an arm around her shoulder, squishing their cheeks together as Em squeaked and struggled to get away. “Nai-chan has gone and gotten herself preggers.” She said gleefully, laughing as Hinata shot her a reproachful look for her volume.

Temari let out a small ‘huh’ as she leaned back thoughtfully. Truthfully it was pretty rare for kunoichi at Kurenai’s rank to get pregnant. Shinobi life was a full-time career and few remained actually stable enough to settle down and have family, if they ever even wanted one in the first place.

But Kurenai had come across as someone down to earth and stable enough to pull it off which was likely a side-effect by the intense compartmentalization the genjutsu profession demanded (one didn't go flare up someone's worst nightmares without knowing how to deal with it oneself).

If she tries very, very hard she can almost picture the woman with a heavy stomach.
“Are you getting a temporary sensei for the next year then?” Em asked, blinking a bit owlishly at the news.

Hinata shook her head minutely. “Both Shino and Kiba have been taking B-ranks to cover the mission requirements for the jounin exam.” She admitted.

Since jounin-rank demanded a certain amount of solo missions under ones belt that made sense, Temari decided. Hinata had already fulfilled hers during the months following the invasion while the majority of her age mates were still cleaning up and then continued it rather effectively during the following years after taking a liking to it.

It had been a clever move by the Hokage.

The Hyuga were famous, afterall, and Hinata might have been shy but she wasn’t a push-over and she was both clever and well-spoken. Getting trained up to work as an official ambassador and spokesperson of Konoha had visibly helped her feel more confident in her skin, and Temari in particular had admired the effect it had had on the girl.

“They’re likely to be recruited then.” Yugao hummed. It was a dead give-away that any Inuzuka or Aburame who ranked jounin were at least offered a position within either the Hunter-Nin division or ANBU. “You haven’t been approached?” The purple haired woman leaned forward in sharp interest and Temari made sure to give her a very unimpressed look over her girlfriend’s head for the blatant offer buried in the question.

Hinata had taken the jounin exam at the same time her cousin had. It had been held in Suna and Temari had very much enjoyed housing the young clan heir in the same apartment complex she lived in during the event. It was when they finally became a couple after months of sporadic meetings that had turned into lunch and dinner together during long missions that just happened to coincide (Temari suspected a certain involvement from Kankuro who had struck a strange friendship with the Godaime’s assistant on a basis on shared enthusiasm for poisons of all things) in all from Kiri and Iwa to one very nerve-wracking trip to Kumo that had ended disastrously.

Hinata shot her a very dry look because they both knew just as well that Hinata had been practically drowned in offers since gaining rank and Yugao gave a very sharp grin in return, entirely unapologetic.

“I’m still thinking about it.” Hinata said and Temari suspected there would be a talk in the future regarding whatever her girlfriend had brewing in her pensive eyes.

“Whatever you decide on, you’re gonna be great.” Em encouraged happily. “And if you don’t like it, you can just try something else until it fits.” She pressed her foot down hard on the ANBU agent’s.

Yugao rolled her eye but let it go with a large bite into her third anpan.

Anko made a noise. “Alright, enough wishy-washy! Our only blonde is back among us and we need more alcohol to celebrate.” She slammed her hand flat against the table and Hinata pulled herself up as Yugao swept up the basket of bean-bread to keep spilled alcohol from drenching them as bottles and glass toppled. “Waiter!”

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“You’re really thinking about it, hm?” Sasuke didn’t startle exactly but she was surprised to have been spoken to and craned her head up.

Deidara wasn’t looking at her, his arms folded with a single palm tilted up where was a small clay
bird sat, its beak nibbling on the man’s index finger. His hair was wet, the blond hair dark and let down from its customary tail. The dark blue kimono with white hem made him look startlingly younger than she was used to.

“I recognise that book.” He said a tad wryly when she didn’t immediately answer. “Apprenticeship to the Kirigakure no Kaijin himself, hm.” He glanced at her, something at once spiteful and thoughtful at the same time. “Are you going to accept?”

Sasuke glanced down at the book. “What do you think?” She asked.

Deidara blinked, rain dripping from his long eyelashes, and then he snorted into a laugh. “You’re a strange kid.” He says and she wonders if she’s supposed to be offended – he was barely older than the body she occupied, after all, and she’d lived longer than he had in one life.

“So you.” She closed the book, tucking it into her jacket and Deidara folded down beside her, crossing his legs.

“I think you should do it.” The man says easily, the bird scuttling onto his knee with a little flap of its clay wings. “You’re not going to get another offer like that here.” He said matter-of-fact.

“And here I thought for sure you were just waiting to take me on.” Sasuke dared to hold out a finger and Deidara side-eyed her for a second before he reached out to give the bird a little buff. It flailed forward, settling onto Sasuke’s finger with a little wobble and squawk at its creator as she carefully lifted it up to eye-level.

“I’m sure Hidan would just love it if you asked.” Deidara leaned his chin into his palm.

“I wonder if he’d be genuinely happy to recruit someone into the cult of Jashin.” Sasuke mused, reaching out with her free hand to give the bird a little scratch under its beak. It tilted its head high and made a warbled noise of happiness as it leaned into her touch with bliss staining its features.

“Kakuzu would kill you before he could.” The blond said with a droll sense of humor.

They both tried to picture it and shared identical snorts of amusement with a slight startled look exchanged afterwards.

Sasuke ducked her mouth into her collar of her jacket and Deidara averted his eyes towards the trees.

She focused on giving the small bird a little tickle on its chest and ut crooned and nibbled on her knuckle with consideration as she folded forward, hugging her knees with her left arm.

“Konan mentioned that you like to paint.” Deidara commented after a long moment and she tilted her head towards him to show she was listening. “Sasori-dana would say that art is eternal.” He huffed slightly, something heavy in his gaze as he stared out into the rain. “Made himself into a puppet and all…” The bird on her hand gave a mournful little thrill.

“You didn’t get along?” Sasuke asks curiously.

“Not at all, hm.” Deidara dragged a hand through his hair. “But we understood each other, I think.” He trailed off, seemed to realize who he was talking too and grimaced to himself as he straightened up. “Anyway, that’s not why I’m here. I was cleaning out the room and there’s still a lot of Sasori-dana’s things just… lying there.” He scratched his index finger against his cheek. “Seems like a shame to throw it all away, you know?”
Sasori’s room turned out to be something of a paradise in art.

The bird on her shoulder squawked and launched itself off her to land on Deidara’s waiting hand as the man settled down on his bed and she craned her head around with wide-eyes.

Empty canvases and what seemed to be like an endless amount of different art supplies crowded up, piled onto shelves and appearing in numerous shapes and forms. There was a slumped puppet with gaping jaw in the corner, painted all red but traced in preparations for future layers and entire buckets of paint piling nearly all the way to the ceiling in an unsteady tower.

There was paint splattered on the wall and floor, save for a single round spot, and compared to Deidara’s almost nit-picky clean side it was a startling contrast.

There was a cloying scent of explosives and paint in the air which was perhaps the closest the two different art ideas had come to balance out in the room and she spun in place, wanting to touch, to trace, to move, but stilled herself before she could.

Deidara seemed to sense her hesitation because he leaned forward. “He wouldn’t forgive me if I just left it there.” There is something decisive in his tone. “It’s just tools of the trade.” His tone softens. “Without tools there can’t be art, so much we both agreed on. It is the result that matters.” He taps his fingers against his knee before rising abruptly. “Anyway, I have a mission to get ready for so just – take whatever you want and I’ll blow up the rest of it, hm.” He waved a hand dismissively, turning to his dresser and shrugging out of the kimono-style jacket.

Sasuke considers the space carefully for a long moment, enough time that Deidara has finished changing into full Akatsuki regalia and was pulling his hair into a high tail when she finally turns towards him.

He raised an eyebrow in question.

“Would it be alright if I kept it here?” She asks finally.

Deidara’s face went carefully blank. “What?” He said flatly.

Sasuke knows she’s stepped into dangerous territory at the flare of KI but she pursues her lips and breathes through the cloying feeling as the scars on her thighs itch. “I never met Sasori.” She meets his eyes. “But it’s like – it’s like he’s alive in here.” Her brows creased.

She thinks of the house burnt to ash, every trace of her childhood erased in hours, thinks of her apartment likely emptied and sold, and meets his wooden eyes with a stubborn set of her jaw.

He allowed him to linger on the edges of her yin chakra for a moment before letting it fade as he joined up with Tobi.

Instead she focused her attention on the room for a long moment before she turned and trotted off to Kisame and Itachi’s room.

Itachi was lying on the bed, freshly showered after training and he’s reading a slim green book of some sort. He lowered it when she gave the door a small knock and tilted his head in silent inquiry.
when she ducked down beneath the bed with a flare of chakra.

His mouth twitched.

“Did you place a seal under Kisame’s bed?”

“Just a small one.” She admitted, peeking up at him. “Do you think he’ll mind?”

“As long as you don’t seal anything strange in it I believe you’ll be fine.” Itachi’s voice was low and steady, not as deep as Kisame’s but familiar all the same and the whispers of the boy scrabbles for attention at the sound of it. “Is that art supplies?” He puts the book away and Sasuke struggles not to fidget as he draws closer. “May I?” He held out a hand and she hesitated for only a moment before handing it over.

It was from the new supplies bought with Konan and she’d only managed three drawings in it so far. Nothing particularly exciting, just easy sketches she’d traced in absently. It’s on cheap paper but Itachi takes it like it’s made of the finest there is and very carefully cracks it open.

The first page is of Konan, the bottle of honey apple cider raised to her lips, gaze focused on something in the distance with the afternoon sun spilling across her face. Sasuke had drawn a small blue bunny, identical to the one she still wore on her face, on the nail of the pinkie slightly extended on the hand holding the bottle and a pair of floppy blue bunny ears on her head.

The second is a picture of Dobe after she’d found him sprawled out on her pillow again, flat on his back and all four paws spread out as he purred in the warmth. She’d sketched out Sakura’s red qipao on him and fluffed the fur on its head into something not unlike Kakashi’s spiky mess but she doubted those particular details might stick-out to his brother.

He turns the thick paper and Sasuke tries to read his expression.

The third was a half-finished sketch of Itachi leaning against Kisame, asleep. It was from their travelling and she’d just started filling in the clouds on their coats in a soft red colour. On the rock above them she’d traced out their respective summoning animal – a grinning shark with sunglasses peering over the shoulder of a crow with triangular glasses bent over a thick book.

Itachi’s mouth twitched. “You’re very creative.” He said, closing it and handing it back. “I’m impressed.” He said with genuine appreciation and something inside of her goes side-ways as her equilibrium falters.

“Thank you.” She breathed in a rush, a sudden urge to step closer coursing through her so strongly she had to physically keep herself back. “Deidara approached me about Sasori-san’s old art supplies.” She hears herself saying as the world suddenly disconnects around her. “He didn’t want to throw them out and so offered them up for my use.” Her mouth shuts with a click and she stares at his brother who stares back, brow slowly furrowing, and she counts her breaths as she struggles to centre herself. “I-if you want to see more sometime-” she swallows. “You can – you can –” Sasuke takes a step backward and for a second she doesn’t know what she’s looking at.

A thirteen year old Itachi covered in blood creases his brow identically to his twenty-one year old self and she thinks they’re saying something but she takes a forceful step backwards as her mind tilts off-kilter. “Anyway – I need to fix this now.” She says haltingly and turns as she latches onto the puppet in the art room and disappears in a soundless kawarimi and Itachi’s hand closes around air.

She lands in a crouch, her chakra lashing out as she slams a privacy seal onto the floor, locking herself and the entire room away from the world in a skitter of black ink and a flash of blue.
Reality shifts out of focus and hundreds of eyes flickers in and out of her vision.

For a second she’s back at the compound, staring down at the dead bodies of Fugaku and Mikoto.

The next they’re in the room with her and they’re burning and she struggles for one breath after the other, chest constricting as if snared by one of Orochimaru’s snakes and her fingers tangles into the fabric of her shirt as she folds over herself, mouth open and gasping for air as she chokes on the smoke filling her lungs with ever inhalation.

“I want you to count them.” Kabuto’s voice whispers and Sasuke clings to the words like a starving dog.

Red crawls over the floor like spider-cracks and she can’t look away, her mind a static mess as it opens wide beneath her and she squeezes her eyes shut while fumbling blindly for the kunai in her back pouch, choking on a sob of panic and terror when she opens her eyes and Jonah stares back at her with soft eyes.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” He asks her and when his hand makes contact with her cheek the hand reaching for the kunai turns rotten and collapses off her with a sickening squelch and she thinks she’s screaming but she doesn’t know because all she can see is Jonah, as young and kind and beautiful he’d been before he’d killed her and she scrabbles to get away, colliding hard with the wall as he rises from the ground and brushes ash from his shoulders.

“Do you remember how we used to dance in the kitchen?” He hums the soft melody and she clamps her hand over her ear and presses her shoulder against the other but it won’t stop and his face twists into an ugly desperate snarl with every step closer to her until his gnarled fingers sinks into her arms and he drops to his knees before her. “You always were selfish.” He whispers, his voice layering with echoes of Itachi’s and she can’t breathe.

“I should have killed you that first day.” He stares at her with one eye spinning red with the sharingan. “Then maybe you wouldn’t have killed that boy.” He presses his index and middle finger beneath her right eye and they shoot open, Mangekyo spinning to life as blood drips down her cheeks and he smiles grimly. “We both know the truth.”

He trails his fingers down, slipping them into her mouth to fold over her lower teeth by the first joint and her mind is nothing but white noise as the walls around her melts and the roof collapses and the sky is red red red and the clouds are black black black and she’s drowning in her own blood, unable to breathe through the Ag In HeR MouTh aNd ShE cAn’T-

- She wakes in a pool of vomit, collapsed on her side with drool dripping from the corner of her mouth as she stares at Sasori’s art supplies with empty eyes.

Everything hurts and against her will she feels tears pooling in her eyes as she draws her knees against her chest and curls into a ball as her shoulders shake and she presses her hand against her mouth to muffle the sound of her sobs as she squeezes her eyes desperately shut.

For once the boy doesn’t make a single sound.

- Itachi finds her curled up in a tree several hours later and easily pulls himself up beside her. He doesn’t say anything about her abrupt disappearance, doesn’t make any move to touch her.
Just sits there.

She doesn’t say anything either. She’s too exhausted to even think, eyes lidded and mind miles away.

Dobe is curled up in her lap and she keeps rhythmically smoothing down his fur, feeling his small breaths and soft fur beneath her fingers and the occasional brush of tiny claws when he stretches his legs and his little stump of a tail twitches contently.

Itachi puts the art supplies she dropped in her hurry down on the branch beside her and she pulls her knees tight against her chest, nearly disappearing into her jacket.

She doesn’t remember falling asleep but when she wakes up she’s tucked into Kisame’s bed and Itachi is nowhere to be found.

She rolls over and blinks when she comes face to face with a yellow dino settled side-ways on the pillow beside her – button eyes as black and empty as her own.

Inside the boy croons as she slowly reaches out and carefully draws it into her arms, just like the boy had done with a near identical green one so many years ago.

Kisame pauses, his senses flaring in warning and he lurches out of the way of the kunais that barrel towards him and his eyes widen and he swears as he pulls through the hand-signs and raises a large wall of water to shield against the enormous fire dragon that coils towards him.

There’s a loud hiss that spreads in a rolling explosion of white steam and Kisame barely has time to draw a breath and get Samehada up in time to block the kunai that pushes against him with all the strength a man as sick as Itachi shouldn’t possess.

“There’s this thing known as talking about it.” Kisame grunts as his muscles strains and Itachi’s shoes skids against the ground.

Sharingan flares and Kisame feels a shiver of equal dread and excitement crawl down his spine as Itachi stumbles back and melts into a scattering of black crows that circles around him, loud and furious with their squawking as he stares up at the sky where hundreds of red eyes stares back.

“Well, fuck.”

Kakashi has been an ANBU for the better part of his career and he’s well aware that it comes with a price. He sees it in his fellow shinobi – in bodies that never truly relaxes and eyes that won’t stop searching for danger.

Minato had once told him that he had the right mentality for ANBU and he knew that his ability to compartmentalize was probably the only reason he was remotely sane after taking his first life at six.

He remembers the first months after being assigned to Team 7 under Minato – resentful and bitter and stuck with two children far beneath his skill level. Uninterested in connecting with them and desperate to get back to familiarity as they pushed everything that he wasn’t into his face and expected them to be friends, as if the word meant something to him.
Kakashi scrubs blood from his hands that never go away and he lives in the same house he’d found his father dangling from a rope in the living room. He doesn’t want friends.

But Minato pushes himself into his life and with Minato is Kushina who is bright and forceful and cheerily hauls him in when he attempts to dodge them.

Minato and Kushina who breaks into his house and nonchalantly sets the table for dinner and grins at him when he stumbles in after training and invites him and his teammates out for picknicks and festivals.

And a part of him hates them for it – wants them gone because his family is dead and he doesn’t want a parody of a new one.

But then Obito is dead and Rin links their hands together under the table during team dinner and her eyes are sad and her her smile strained but he never wants them to go home because it means they're not waiting anymore and Obito wasn’t supposed to be dead but right there with them.

Kakashi never forgives himself for that sacrifice.

Just like he will never forgives or forgets the feeling of his hand buried in Rin’s chest, her blood splattered across his face and her eyes becoming blank and glossy in death and oh god his hand is still buried in her chest.

He clings to Minato and Kushina after that but then one day they aren’t there anymore either.

It’s Danzo who knocks on his door and leaves him with a scroll and a new mask (his father’s mask) and it’s enough to pull him out of his bed as he puts everything he is into the shadow organisation.

It’s an escape and he recognises it as such these days but it’s so tempting not to have to think.

He owes Gai a basket or five of those sweetbuns from Kumo that he likes so much, Kakashi admits to himself as he listens to the squabble between two of his kids. He’d missed this. The noise and exaggerated body-language in response to whatever the two managed to get themselves wired up over.

All that’s lacking is the third to make it complete.

He’s got the new Icha Icha Tactics held up before him but it’s entirely for looks despite every line in his body slouched in the perfect picture of relaxation.

Jiraiya wouldn’t be back for several days yet and until then Kakashi was forced to rely on whatever information he managed to scramble up from his fellow shinobi regarding his wayward little student.

He doesn’t know what made Sasuke seek out his brother instead of returning to Konoha the second Orochimaru was dead (by his own hand, Kakashi thinks grimly, tallying another way he’d failed the boy with heavy heart) but he’s going to find out. Jiraiya had been equally concerned, his gaze heavy with a certain sort of guilt that makes Kakashi want to pry him open and shake him for secrets because Jiraiya knows something.

But he’s a patient man. He’ll get that and more if he so have to rip Konoha down by the seams to reach the deepest, darkest pits of the village to pry out its secrets.

There’s something foul afoot, just beneath his nose, and he’s concerned.

When he’d first learned of Sasuke’s kidnapping it’d been at the Hokage office accompanied by Gai,
Genma and Tenzo. All three men who he had an established good rapport with which had been enormously suspicious in itself.

He should have left that very second, torn through the window and hunted down all three of his kids.

But he’d stayed and the moment the news had registered and he was three parts out the window Gai had collided with him and they’d wrestled him down and made him fold under the command of his Hokage as anger and despair burns through him in equal measure.

And when Sakura tracks him down at the memorial stone he doesn’t know how to comfort her because he’s fracturing inside as he meets the eyes of his Godaime and her face is grim and knowing and pitying all the same. But she takes the only student he's got left in Konoha and draws her tight and Kakashi melts into the depth of ANBU because it is all that he knows.

Coward, he scolds himself and gives a little giggle as he flips the page to keep up pretence for the strange ANBU-not-ANBU that’s been trailing him the last couple of days.

Whatever the strange door and seal in Sasuke’s house holds he trusts his students to figure it out.

He’s more concerned by the secret meeting held between Tsunade and Naruto.

He also needs to figure what in the world had gotten into Sai lately because the boy was acting downright twitchy and if that wasn’t suspicious Kakashi didn’t know what it was.

Chapter End Notes

The entire Deidara and Sasuke interactions blossomed from the mental picture of Konan being a manipulative little shit.

Hinata deserves all the female love and support and I will fight you for it. Does she even talk to any female character outside Kurenai and, like, her little sister? Ino and Sakura at least had each other but Hinata? Her entire life is an entire red line of Naroothoo and Neji and that's obviously not a real thing that happens so I fixed it.

I also fixed Temari while at it bcs I could.

I got completely stolen away by the idea of Hinata and Temari cosying up as fellow ambassadors in foreign villages. You wouldn't believe the adventures the two of them have had. It's adorable and I'll probably work a story or two of them in somewhere because Hinata haveplans which means we'll see more of them.

Women supporting women makes me happy goddamnit.

Also, yeah, Sasuke, I knoooow - and Itachi who just wanted to help. He didn't mean to cause his beloved ototou to completely disappear from his senses for several hours (did Itachi freak out? Yes. Yes he did).

He does also have a lot of trauma and emotions to work through himself so I kinda threw him at Kisame.

(Also, the dino is totes an old present from Shisui who bought the brothers one each for Sasuke's first birthday and Itachi could never get himself to throw it away because he's
secretively enormously fond of it).

We also got some Kakashi who suffers from a really bad case of survivors guilt (it practically reeks of him in canon, gosh) and who is about to get shit done. Boom.

Kind thanks to all of you who got me up to date with the make-up lingo. Winged eyeliner (or even double winged eyeliner which was an... eye-opener) it is and I'll take care to remember it!

It's Friday which means I'm gonna splurge on sushi because I deserve it.

Cheers to you!

EDIT: I have properly managed to fix up my patreon page!
https://www.patreon.com/undeadartist

I think my main idea for it is to upload side-adventures and the like that don’t fit into my main-stories? Maybe aborted story-arcs and what-ifs and headcanons that can be fun but that I don’t necessarily want cluttering up my AO3 page. As well as keeping you up to date with what's going on and so on (╯дут丿�� consts)
Getting kidnapped by one of the council men appointed by the Sandaime hadn’t been anywhere on his to-do list. Uncovering conspiracies, yes, but this – this went beyond the name Uchiha Sasuke.

Kiba had gotten into a lot of trouble throughout the years but this might actually top it.

This was an entire division of ANBU-like soldiers rooted under the direct command of Shimura Danzo and operating under the nose of the Godaime Hokage. This was the full-scale action of a traitor on a level that was beyond anything he’d ever hoped to stumble upon.

He tried to stretch as best as he could in the bonds, his shoulders aching after being tied up for nearly two weeks. Even if he got out it would take time before he could use them properly.

He breathed carefully through his mouth to avoid the smell of sick and urine, grimacing where he lay. He’d been chained up with a thick clamp around the throat and if he heard a single more joke about being a good dog from the strange empty-eyed ANBU he would-

Do nothing. Because he couldn’t get out of these stupid bonds and –

He drew a large breath and gnashed his teeth together.

He was tired, aching, in pain and humiliated and he was worried about Akamaru. It had been weeks and he had seen Sai twice after the other boy was put in charge of putting things into motion.

He was furious.

And worried.

But mostly furious because they had trusted Sai and the boy wasn’t just throwing it right in their face but meant to use his death prevent Sasuke from returning to Konoha.

It was putting off so many warning flags that Kiba half-deliriously could almost claim he was happy that Sasuke was nowhere near the village.

It was fucked up.

He needed to get the information out to someone but he couldn’t even wiggle out of his underwear (which was just… ew… on so many levels and he tried his very best not to think about what it meant after so many days in a room without a bathroom anyway).

The lack of food was almost a relief at this point (or so he tried to tell himself).

He would never ever tease Chouji ever again. Clearly the other boy was onto something. Food hoarding. He could get behind that. And he’d carry a gourd as big as Gaara’s, just sloshing with liquid and-

Fuck.

*Focus*, he tells himself furiously. The lack of sleep, food and water was getting to him and he was familiar enough with it to pinpoint the effect it was having on his brain.
Hard to think, hard to reason.

They would be pressing him for information before they figured out the best way to load his death on Sasuke.

He really, really hoped that Sasuke didn’t make any public appearances for at least a month. Minimum. If Sasuke wasn’t seen then he couldn’t be blamed for Kiba’s death (if it came to that, he reminded himself forcefully, even if the small boxed room was making him want to claw it open and scream because the was getting tired of the bloody silence).

He wiggled his hands uselessly, sweaty and grimy and tired as he squeezed his eyes shut and breathed in the dust, his forehead flat against the floor and body bowed painfully.

He was slumbering when the door opened and cracked a single eye open to watch the not-ANBU step into the room carrying a bowl which he didn’t even have to look at to know it contained lumpy bits of fish scraped together with dry rice.

It wouldn’t be enough to even feed a small dog and he’d lost a drastic amount of muscle mass which decreased his chance of escape every day.

“Hello puppy.” He snarled weakly at the not-ANBU as they crouched down beside him, a gloved hand petting his grimy hair. “Have you been a good dog?” The voice was as indistinct as the body and the only tell he had of the person was their smell and Kiba would commit it to the very depth of his memory.

Once (if) he got out he would personally let them know just what a good dog he could be.

He bit his lip and remained mum despite knowing what would follow and he didn’t even flinch as fingers tangled into his hair and yanked hard to put them face-to-face.

Their entire head tilted in a way that was entirely unnatural and Kiba knew that something about this person couldn’t be completely right. The thought flashed through his mind at the same time the fist slammed into his face and he was getting so tired of having his nose broken-

“Have you been a good dog?” The question was repeated with the same blank voice and Kiba licked blood away from his lips as he glared.

Pride, he tells himself, have no place under duress.

“I have,” he bites out.

The not-ANBU released their grip and he slumped down, squeezing his eyes shut and ignoring the fingers that dipped into his curls and scratched behind his ear. Tugging at his hair and even dipping into the blood dripping from his nose and drawing out whiskers on his cheek (he half wished he could take a pic – he was sure Naruto would get a kick out of it). All the time mumbling the same soft praise.

It was a relief when they finally rose with a last pat (and just what the fuck had Danzo been doing these people?) with the door closing and locking behind them.

He rolled over awkwardly – struggling before managing to strain his neck to take a small portion of the food before collapsing onto his back. Chewing slowly as he glared up at the bright light and breathed blood from his broken nose and scrubbed his cheeks against his shoulders.

He’d fallen into an uneasy rest when cold fingers presses against his mouth and he’s sunk his teeth in
before he truly registers that he’s awake. The taste of copper spills over his tongue and threatens to slide down his throat as his eyes lock with eyes nearly as dark and empty as those of the member on the team he’d replaced.

Kiba bares his teeth in a mockery and a smile and gnashes his teeth down hard. He’s tempted to bite them clean off but he recognises the other as his only potential ally and reluctantly loosens his jaw enough to allow the other to pull free.

“That was unnecessary,” Sai says without any particular infliction.

Kiba doesn’t dignify him with a response.

He’s actually surprised he hadn’t been clocked the second his teeth met flesh and he’s suspicious as Sai settles himself comfortably on the floor. It’s a struggle to pull himself up and the other makes no move to help him.

They both know that Kiba never would have accepted it.

“You finally decided on how to kill me?” he drawls out in fake boredom, aware of how he looks, how he reeks even as he does his best to straighten from the forceful bow of his shoulders.

He hadn’t thought it possible to have eyes even emptier than Sasuke’s. But Sasuke’s gaze, while empty, like twin pools of ink, had been heavy with something indescribable that never failed to give him the chills.

Sai’s eyes? They’re just plain empty. As if someone had taken him and twisted the emotions out of him like a dirty rag.

“Your dog is alive.”

Kiba forgets how to breathe and when he remembers how he’s already slamming into the other and he’s being wrestled to the ground with pitiful ease as he snarls. “You bastard!” He howls against the palm over his mouth. “What did you do with Akamaru you-”

“I just told you he was alive,” Sai says, his tone unimpressed.

Kiba wants to deck him as he struggles to rein back the horror at Akamaru being here (but of course he is and Kiba wants to tear down the walls as horror and fury mixes together inside of him).

“Why,” he bites out, “are you here then?” He even aims for a smile and it must be as twisted and glass sharp as he feels because Sai’s brow actually dips and for a moment Kiba can almost believe he’s human and not a doll sent to torment him.

The thought dies as quickly as it blooms as Sai carefully shifts until he’s actually straddling his waist and Kiba feels his already hurting arms flatten painfully against the floor.

Belly up little doggy, his mind whispers in the voice of the guard and it takes everything he has to remain still.

Sai wants something – bad enough that he’d brought news on Akamaru and Kiba forces his limbs to loosen because he doesn’t have a choice.

Between the Danzo, the guard and Sai- well.

Kiba isn’t an idiot, even if people are quick to call him one.
He’s in a generation of geniuses – it’s hard to compete with the likes of Shikamaru whose IQ is among the highest ever recorded and Sasuke who makes everything look so easy.

Not to talk about Ino whose rise through the ranks of Torture and Intelligence makes him second-guess everything hidden behind a sweet smile. Different sort of cleverness in different kind of people.

“You don’t like me.”

Kiba wonders if he’s joking as disbelief and confusion wars. “No.” He agrees slowly, unsure of the aim.

“But Naruto is your friend.” It isn’t phrased like a question. “And Sasuke?” That one is.

“Sasuke belongs to Konoha.” Kiba bites out just a tad snappishly. “He’s one of us.” And he means it with every fibre in his body.

This time there’s definitively something stirring in those dark doll like eyes and Kiba struggles to make sense of it as he discreetly wiggles his fingers going numb beneath the pressure of their combined weight.

Sai’s nails scratch almost absently against Kiba’s bare chest as he thinks.

He’s tired and hungry and exhausted. It makes him sluggish, makes his brain feel thick and wrong – thoughts looping out of his control.

It’s the only explanation for feeling anything other than utter revulsion at the touch.

Sai’s hand stills and splays out against him chest as the other leans down towards him, their noses nearly touching. “Naruto is my friend, too.” It’s a whisper. A vulnerability and something fragile in a person not as much raised as moulded to kill without question, without feeling.

Kiba feels like an idiot for not recognising the emotion splayed so blatantly before him.

Resolve – born from envy, born from hope.

- “You alright there?” Kisame turns his head, fighting to regulate his breathing as sweat dripped from his brow.

Itachi barely grimaced as he pushed his right shoulder back into its socket and leaned back against the trunk of the tree, eyes closing. “I feel like I should be asking you that.” Itachi admitted.

“Hah.” Kisame dragged himself into a sitting position. “I’m not the one who lost control.” He points out, his eyes settling knowingly on his partner as he folds his legs together and drags a bloody hand through his hair.

“I am not the one with second degree burns over half my chest.” Itachi cracks one eye open when Kisame laughs.

“It’ll heal.” Kisame stretch his arms out with a satisfied groan. “It’s been a long time since we let lose like this.”

“Years.” Itachi agrees, something like a faint smile at his lips. “Thank you.” He says as wind tugs at his hair – the black strands pulled free from its customary tail.
“What set you off anyway?” Kisame raises an eyebrow. “It’s unusual of you to lose control like that.”

Itachi swallows as he looks down at his hand – dirty and covered in the red blood of his partner.

The same fingers that had curled around the frail neck of his little brother as he shoved him up and against the wall as tears dripped against his wrist and small hands scrabbled against him – wretched pleas digging into his soul.

“Sasuke had a panic attack,” he says.

Kisame makes a soft noise of realization. “You set it off,” he deduces and Itachi flinches. “I’m not surprised.” The large man continues and Itachi looks up at him. “If I’m honest with you I’m surprised it didn’t happen earlier.” Kisame leans back, supporting himself with one palm flat against the ground as he shifts his legs into something lose and relaxed.

“What do you mean?” Itachi asks, his voice coming out sharper than he means.

“Your brother is depressed.” Kisame says bluntly as Itachi goes very still. “He’s got issues with touch – real bad issues. The sort that only goes away during out training because his natural response to it has been conditioned out of him, likely by Orochimaru.” Kisame grimaces. “And that’s not even touching the surface of things,” he admits heavily.

Itachi’s fingers curls white-knuckled into the fabric of his pants.

“Tell me.”

“Itachi-”

“Tell me.” He swallows as his voice breaks. “Please.”

Kisame looks at him – across the clearing and its devastation.

They’ve been partners for years – the older man the only one he could claim to trust with any degree of certainty. Kisame had turned a blind eye to the hours of disappearances spent meeting up with Jiraiya and had indulged the side-trips near Konoha – allowing him to watch the sun settle over the village he had sacrificed everything for.

The older man might not know the truth of the massacre but Itachi doesn’t doubt for a second that he suspects.

Kisame pulls himself up and Itachi doesn’t realise he’s trembling until Kisame kneels down before him and takes his hands into his much larger ones.

“There’s no fixing this.” Kisame tells him and this close Itachi can see the grey in his eyes. “There’s no miraculous cure for trauma.”

Itachi knows but admitting to it feels like failure on his part even as he nods under the steady gaze of his partner.

“Okay,” Kisame breathes out.

- 

Sasuke drags herself from the bed in the middle of the night, too restless to sleep.
She doesn’t bother changing from the shirt she’d stolen off Kisame, only wraps her blanket close around her shoulders and pads out on bare feet.

Her feet hesitate at the mouth of the mess hall, her dark eyes lingering on the stretch of the cave leading to the library and the chakra she senses at the back of it.

Padding to the fridge she stares into the low light, blinking tiredly at the food crowding on the shelves. There’s a bit of everything—though she notes a suspicious lack of anything livery which probably accounted for Kakuzu’s disappearance. Hidan was outside in the rain and judging by the fluctuation of his chakra he was either training or taking out his aggressions on the wild life.

She wasn’t certain if there was a difference between the two for the man.

If she focused she can almost taste the death intimately entwined with his aura. It is a very peculiar feeling and made him hard to ignore on the best of days.

She sees the pile of chocolate and is reaching for it before the idea is even half-formed and it takes her several minutes to dig out the rest of the ingredients. She finds both nuts and thick cream that taste fresh when she tentatively dips a finger into it. She locates flour hidden behind some vanilla extract and she wonders who in the Akatsuki has an indulgence for sweets as she pulls it out.

The recipe from brownies comes to her like a struggle through thick syrup and she’s not entirely sure she’s correct on the measurements. But when it’s all whisked together and poured into its form with the oven heating up in preparation she licks the batter and thinks that, even if her body finds it too sweet, it does taste like it should.

She stills when a gloved hand closes around her wrist and a body presses close enough that her muscles knots up in protest. The mask is lifted and she watches from the corner of her eye as the whisk dips out of view with a soft hum.

“Sasu-chan is really good at making sweets.” Tobi sighs happily as he leans against her shoulder, releasing her hand to allow her to clean the batter under the stream of water with tense shoulders. “Did you make them all for me?” He whispers in excitement. “You know how much Tobi loves chocolate! And Tobi has been on his best behaviour for Sasu-chan.”

She drops the last of the tools into the plate rack and carefully extracts herself from his touch as she turns around and leans against the sink. “I still have some whisky in my room.” Her voice comes out more quiet and lacklustre than she means and Tobi rocks closer, his single eye darting between hers and she suspects he might pouting or even frowning beneath the orange spirals.

“Sasu-chan is sad.” Tobi reaches up with gloved hands to card his fingers through her hair. It’s such a practiced move from him, so familiar, that she barely feels the stirring of unease before she lets it slip out like sand between her fingers. “Did Sasu-chan have a nightmare? Tobi is really, really good at listening.”

She shakes her head and his fingers tug against the strands in the movement.

Tobi makes a low huffing noise as he lets his hand fall but then his entire body perks. “Tobi knows what will make Sasu-chan happy! Wait right there!” And then he’s bouncing down the corridor and Sasuke gives an uneasy shrug of her shoulders, as if she could rid of the feel of the phantom feel of his weight against her before she reaches up and plucks two glasses from the cabinet.

The brownies finish baking and she makes a pile of them on a plate and forewent the kitchen table for the couch. It only had a single blanket which she wraps around herself as best as she can.
Her yin chakra flickers as Tobi bounces into the room, a thick comforter over one shoulder and an assortment of little colourful bottles hugged together with a bottle of whisky against his chest. He stops to awkwardly juggle a movie into the old VHS and gets the television going, practically vibrating with excitement. He wastes no time jumping onto the couch, his knees hitting the space just beside her thigh as he carefully spreads it out on the table after handing the whisky over to her.

He’d changed out of Akatsuki cloak into sweatpants and shirt, gloves and mask still in place but his feet as bare as her own. He spreads the comforter over their laps and tucks himself so close to her side that she can feel him breathing as he snags the whisky bottle once again to top off a glass each, humming to himself as he does.

“Tobi is a good boy! He knows that Sasu-chan likes painting her nails in all the pretty colours!” The movie is starting and her mind mutes into a low buzz at the familiar opening screen.

A part of her goes very, very still – like a deer sinking into the grass at the sight of a predator– as the samurai princess kneels with her hands bound behind her back before the Emperor and the narration draws honey smooth over her.

The last time she’d seen it had been right before the chunin exam.

It was their movie and something cold slides down her back, her hand limp in the gloved fingers that curl around them – his voice muted into the background.

She recalls the nightmare after Naruto left, before Orochimaru, the feeling of hands helping her out of her jacket and touching her arms as she struggled weekly – as if through a haze of drugs. Remembers the terror that haunted her for weeks afterwards, the paranoia, the feeling of being unsafe even in her own home.

She’s distantly aware of the coat of paint being applied to her thumb as she reaches for her glass of whisky and downs half.

The movie spins in the background, the man beside her hums as he paints her nails purple, unaware of the muted terror threatening to pull her under as she desperately attempts to drown it out with liquid amber.

“Does Sasu-chan like it here?” Tobi asks as she fumbles to refill her glass. “It must be scary with Itachi-san here. Sasu-chan is always welcome to stay with Tobi if she's scared!”

She stares into her glass.

“I’m fine.”

“It’s alright not to be, you know?” Kakashi whispers. "We might be shinobi but we are human, too."

“Tobi is a good boy.” He blows on her fingers after pushing up the mask. “Tobi looks out for Sasu-chan. No one will hurt you while Tobi is around! I’ll keep you safe.” He looks at her through the hole in his mask, eye unfathomable.

“Come here.”

“You’re safe.”

Her hands shakes and she knocks back the whisky without tasting it, barely feels the burn as it goes down.
“Why me?” she asks as little orange spirals blossoms in the purple.

He pauses, studying his artwork for a moment before gently relenting his hold.

For a long moment he remains silent, something heavy in the air as the princess samurai on the screen spreads her arms and challenges the evil witch with her teeth bared as blood spreads down her side from her best friend’s betrayal.

She stills when he shifts, straddling her lap in a single smooth move. One gloved hand dips under the mask, teeth snagging at a tip to pull it off. The hand revealed is a spiralled mess of scars and she watches with whisky dulled eyes as he reaches out and presses it against her cheek, cradling it in a calloused palm.

He’s warm, his weight pressing down on her and he has to curl his back to put them face to face. Her panic drowns in the whisky and her right hand coils into the fabric of his shirt by his hip, as if to pull him off.

“I know you died.”

On the screen the samurai princess leans down to kiss the dying mouth of the witch, long red hair splayed out against the white snow and fingers tangled desperately together.

“There’s still too much of the boy inside of you but I know you’re in there.” The hand cradling her cheek trembles, something frail in the dark eye that searches hers desperately. “He’ll never touch you again,” Tobi promises feverishly. “I’ll rip the heart right out of his chest and- and you’ll be safe. With me. You just have to a little bit patient and then – and then I’ll make it right again.”

He reaches up to remove the mask from his face and she stares into a face that is entirely unfamiliar.

He drops it without care and the glass is tugged out of her hand before he cradles her face with both hands, his left framing the shell of her ear.

“I see you,” he whispers as his thumb strokes against the soft skin under her eye. “I see you looking out at me.” His eye darts between hers, searching, and she feels the way his fingers trembles against her skin when the soft pads of his fingers traces down and over the sensitive skin of her lips.

There’s a small nick on the side of it and for some reason it makes him smile, something soft and nostalgic.

“It’s not good to hide your wounds, you know? I’m looking after you,” he teases, something tremulous in his smile as his hand slides to the back of her neck, tangling in the long strands.

“I love you, Rin.” He pulls on her hair, arching her neck as he slants his mouth against hers.

- 

“What was in that letter anyway?” Naruto asks as Shikamaru scrawls down the characters on the seal, his brows dipped low in concentration as he mumbles to himself.

Naruto and Sakura were close to Shikamaru, the latter crouched down and occasionally breaking the Nara’s silence to murmur lowly about one of the words slowly getting drafted out as he worked through the translations.

There was an impatience in the air, a stirring of anticipation as blocky letters turned into elegant kanji intermixing with gentle hiragana.
Chouji and Ino were seated on the floor, the larger teenager slumped against her dead-as-sleep with bags beneath his eyes.

“Riddles.” Ino says dryly. “Really weird ones.”

Naruto stopped bouncing his leg long enough to stare at her. “Sasuke sent riddles to Gaara?”

“We’ve managed to solve two of them.” Ino informs him, tucking some of her hair behind her ear. “But there is no rhyme or reason to them.”

Naruto’s brow scrunched. “Like what?” He asked curiously, glancing at Sakura for a second before he shifted over to crouch down by his fellow blond when she pulled a wrinkled paper from her pouch.

“Why is a raven like a writing desk?” Naruto reads out slowly. “There are thirty white horses on a red hill: first they champ, then they stamp, then they stand still. What are they?” He blinked. “What has thirteen hearts, but no other organs?” He gave the letter a long dubious look and leaned closer to Ino. “You sure you translated these correctly?” he whispers.

“Sasuke wrote them out both in that strange language and common.” Ino says dryly. “It’s how Shika could break it down for translation.”

Naruto wasn’t sure what to do with the information as he stares at the letter and collapses down beside a visibly amused Ino, scratching at his chin.

“I take it none of these are familiar then?” She asks, drawing her left knee closer to rest her arm on.

Team 7 had been gone on a two week mission and hadn’t returned until earlier that afternoon just hours after Shikamaru fell asleep on the notes with a triumphant grin that drained out into an exhausted snore.

Shikamaru who slept often and shortly had been prepared when Naruto and Sakura stepped through the gate and so was Ino who was the middle-ground on the team but Chouji would be sleeping for hours yet if he got his will through – easily the one to last through long days but who slept deeply once allowed.

“I have never heard Sasuke ask a riddle in my life.” Naruto admits, mouth twisting with a bitterness that looked entirely off on his normally grinning face. “The more we discover about him the surer I am that we didn’t really know him that well at all.” He drags a hand through his hair, exhaustion visible in the lines on his face.

Ino considers him from the corner of her eye.

“I think,” she says after a moment, “that you and Sakura knew him better than anyone else in this village and that he certainly regarded you highly.” She tapped her index finger against her knee. “When we first saw you at the chunin exam I didn’t really believe my eyes. Not only was Sasuke allowing you both to touch him? But when he was at the brink of absolutely panic he reached out for you.” She met the blue eyes of the other. “Sasuke trusted you,” she says with surety. “And knowing what we do about Sasuke? That says a lot.”

“You think so?” Naruto asked with a wane grin. “Because sometimes I wonder.”

“You’re thinking about Itachi.” Ino decides as she studies him and Naruto grimaces in agreement. “I can’t say what brought Sasuke to seeking him out.” Ino tilts her head back against the wall, brow furrowing. “I think we’re lacking information. Either something is actively keeping Sasuke from
returning to Konoha or there’s something here that’s preventing him from returning.” She huffs. “It all seems to spiral back to that night of the massacre and the weeks following it and I don’t like it.”

Naruto turns fully to look at her. “You think someone is actively keeping us from finding out.”

Ino hesitates for only a moment. “Yes.” She agrees and then- “You know something.” Ino accuses as he turns away from her with a flash of grim knowing.

“It’s not-” Naruto blew air through his nose, mouth set in a straight line. “Let’s deal with one thing at the time.” He gives her a pleading look.

Ino narrows her eyes. “You better not leave us in the dark.” She warns him. “We’re sticking our necks out for you already.”

“I know,” Naruto agrees grimly. “Which is exactly why you need to be careful.” He draggs his fingers through his hair, meeting the concerned gaze of his teammate for a brief moment.

Shikamaru swears loudly, startling Chouji from his nap when the Nara rose and began scrawling something out on the wall in large sharp kanji as Sakura sidles up beside the others, shaking her head when Naruto raises an eyebrow in question.

I AM ASPIRED BY ALL

“...”

YET HARD TO FIND

“...”

YOU CAN SEARCH ENDLESSLY

“...another...”

BUT I HAVE LITTLE PEACE OF MIND

“...bloody...”

WHAT AM I?

“...riddle.”

The crayon drops to the ground.

Chapter End Notes

Now, where to even begin with this?

Kiba and Sai - well, at least he's alive? We'll get a better look at what Sai is thinking and plotting in the future but we needed to dip in and check with Kiba first.

Kiba has complaints about his current residency - low standard, one out of five stars maximum. For sure.
Itachi and Kisame are having a talk, finally, and we're going to be getting some things into gear following that which is fantastic. It couldn't take too much of this chapter unfortunately but be sure that both Kisame and Itachi are getting a lot of central space in the future.

Do you know how long and hard I had to think about what kind of thing you might ask someone to figure out they're from the same world as one self without explicitly writing it out? I felt so clever when it downed on me. And it's obviously written out in both English and Japanese because not everyone speaks English and Sasuke wanted to be sure Gaara could answer her if he actually had an extra soul tagging along after his rebirth (which he doesn't). So, tadaa?

And look at that - Tobi is Obito. Who'd have thunked.

It's bad when when even Sasuke is picking up on the warning signs. Her sense for things are messed up as it is (it's not in any way shape or form reasonable to seek out your murderous big brother, ok?). Or cozying up with villains.

Thank heavens for Kisame is what I'm sayin'.

Also, Obito - taking advantage of someone drunk is in no way, shape or form acceptable.

We know from canon how absolutely obsessed with Rin he was so I genuinely don't think this is a weird stretch but I'm looking forward to hear your thoughts on it, haha.

My birthday is actually coming up soon! 8th of March - and Markiplier is here just days before so I'm way excited! My sis bought tickets as a a Christmas present and it makes me wanna flail around in happiness.

Two things before I go worky-work:

I have a patreon now so just search Undead Artist if you want to take part of headcanons and tidbits alike.

SECOND: if you love the idea of Kuroko no Basket with a realistic and amazing OC - check out Vroomian. Their Horseshoes and Hand Granades is constantly open in one of my tabs on my phone because it's unbelievably good and is probably hands down my favorite story ever.

It's also a fem!OC/Momoi romance and it makes me so happy you guys ლ(๑°ộc๑)ლ

You are all fantastic as always, love reading your comments. It's very motivational and just, amazing in so many ways!

Cheers to all of you!
She falls in love at four.

“This is your brother,” they tell her. “Jake.”

He’s so small so small in her arms, little fingers chubby and weak where they curl around her index finger.

He’s too young to hear the whispers of a girl promising him the world.

-

She claws at the fingers that tear at her hair, yanking as he shouts at her with anger that burns so bright it threatens to turn him to ash. His nails buries into her skin and she twists and slams him back against the wall, choking the cry of pain as he tears out a fistful of hair and scrambles back to her feet as he lurches towards her with raised fists.

She wrestles him to the ground amidst screams and snarls of hatred, of despair that turns to wails as his arms goes slack and fists turns to desperate fingers buried into her ruined shirt.

“I’m sorry,” he cries. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

-

“There is something wrong with him,” she says to her mother’s smudged eyes as she falls asleep on the kitchen table, too tired to even remove her shoes.

“He needs help,” she tries as her father gently closes the door in her face and she can hear him sinking down on the floor on the other side.

“It isn’t his fault,” she tells the teachers as she picks him up from another detention.

-

“What’s wrong with me?” Jake asks her over dry spaghetti and cold tomato sauce in an empty house. The air smells of the pancakes she burnt and the window is cracked to chase it out.

“Nothing,” she lies.

-

She’s born to parents who were too young and too poor to have one child, nevertheless two.

They try their best but it’s not enough.

-

She buys him ice cream after school with money stolen from one of her classmates who though it was fun to pour food down the back of her neck. It’s enough to splurge on a scoop each and he’s clutching her hand as she leads them through the park.
She’s getting looks and she tugs her hoodie down as best as she can to hide the splotchy discoloration around her eye.

It’s a warm day and she’s the only one with long-sleeves. Her pockets are crammed with old bread from one of the cafeteria ladies and she’s leading them down towards the duck pond as she fiddles with it, shoulders hunching, ice cream finished.

Jake suddenly pulls her to a stop and he motions for her to crouch down. The cap he’s refused to remove for anything but bath time since their parents bought it for his sixth birthday is suddenly crammed on her head and he pulls at the bill until everything from her nose up is covered in shadows. “There! Now you won’t get any sun in your eyes.”

He looks up at her with trembling lips and eyes filled with a mixture of guilt and hope.

Her returning smile is bright enough to challenge the sun.

“You’ll always love me, right?” he asks her every night as she tucks him in.

“To the end of the world and beyond,” she promises him and presses her lips to his forehead.

She’s old enough to wonder if their parents resent them for being born before Jake even learns how to walk.

She’s old enough to know they love them the best that they can as she listens to her father break down in the kitchen while her mother does her best to comfort him.

“Jake is already running and I can’t even remember his first steps!”

“Is what we’re doing really enough?”

“I didn’t ask for this,” he sobs into her bruised chest.

“I didn’t either,” she thinks and immediately hates herself for it.

Her alarm rings at two am sharp, a lumpy buzz beneath her pillow, and she rubs her eyes as she trots down the stairs

She removes the shoes and glasses from her mother’s slumped figure, refills her pills and puts the coffee on the timer scrambled and bought from change carefully saved.

She wrestles her father out of his suit jacket and hangs it carefully on the chair to make sure it doesn’t wrinkle and fetches the second of his two button-up shirts, carefully scrubbed clean in the bathtub, to hang over it.

In the morning she rolls over and shakes her brother awake to an already empty house.
“I love you,” she whispers to the gangly figure of her growing brother clutching desperately to her chest as he cries and cries and cries.

The knife she’d been used for cooking is dripping with blood, shoved clean through her hand, and she does her best to hide it behind her back as she puts a clammy hand against his neck and clumsily pulls him closer to her with knees and elbows that knocks together. “I’ll never stop loving you.” She tucks him against her. "Never."

“I want to be good,” Jake says, stumbling back to slump against the wall with large horror-stricken eyes as she gasps for air, hand cradling her bruised throat on the hallway floor. “I want to be good-”

When she’s sixteen her mother draws her tight against her chest, sobbing into her hair. It’s the first embrace from someone who isn’t Jake that she’s gotten in years and her shoulders bunch awkwardly, unsure what to do with herself even as her father’s blood splatters upon them.

Her mother is pleading, tearing at the handcuffs keeping her trapped against the fridge, wrist dripping with red blood and tears leaving black trails down her cheeks.

*Mother is holding me,* she thinks as Jake slams the crowbar down their father’s broken body over and over again. *Mother is-

She meets the hand reaching out towards her as she’s always done, their fingers tangling, and she allows him to pull her out of their mother’s embrace and into the cold world.

His hand is warm in hers.

She wonders if he sees himself in the flames that tears their home as violent as the anger that blossoms as sudden and chaotic as the touch of a single matchstick against the gasoline drenched floor.

When she’s four-years-old she falls in love with the small wrinkly little thing that’s put in her arms.

She promises him she’ll be the best sister ever.

At sixteen she sits next to him on a grassy hill as flames swallows their home.

She doesn’t understand where she went wrong.

**I just wanted-**
The bed feels both too big and too small with their limbs tangled together, the light of the moon creeping through the window above them.

“You don’t have to run from us. We’re your family.”

Naruto presses his forehead against Sakura’s and she doesn’t as much as stir, the bags beneath her eyes deep enough that they look like smudged paint of purple.

“I wanted you to come home strong enough that it wouldn’t matter what they said.”

The anger that never seems to go away these days claws its way up his throat and he has to force it down least he chokes on it. The physical reaction of swallowing is useless against it but he does it anyway, imagining the paws of the fox getting pushed back into his gut and behind iron bars.

He breathes the scent of herbs and steel as he pushes his thumb against the wrist of his teammate. Allows the feel of her heartbeat to ground him.

When he opens his eyes he’s at least sure they’re blue.

“It’s not good,” Tsunade tells him after Shizune activates the seals. “There are folders missing – not just on Uchiha Sasuke.”

Conspiracies around every corner.

“Your parents-“

Naruto draws a shuddering breath and Sakura shifts, reaching blindly for him, pulls him against her chest with a low murmur of reassurance that’s barely coherent as her fingers dig into his hair.

“Go back to sleep,” he whispers, unbearably fond.

“You’re thinking too much,” Sakura grumbles through exhaustion as she curls around him with limbs deceptively strong. “Sasuke?” she asks, because their missing teammate is foremost at their minds at all times.

“I was thinking of the riddle,” he lies but then suddenly it’s the only thing he can think of. “It must have meant something to him, right?” he presses.

Sakura cracks an eye open and she’s far too knowing for being so heavy with exhaustion. He squirms closer to her chest in response, hiding his face in the warmth of her sweater as she tugs at his hair. “Your hair is getting longer,” she murmurs and he melts against her at the first scratch of her nails again this scalp, practically going boneless.

She makes a half-muffled noise of amusement and indulges him with tired fingers.

Naruto thinks of the years of pain and hatred – before Iruka, before Sakura and Sasuke and Kakashi-sensei. Before Tsunade and Jiraiya and Shizune and all the friends he’s made and keep making.

“I’m lucky,” he whispers with a sigh, closing his eyes. “Aspired by all...”

His eyes snap open and he pulls away so suddenly he nearly scalps himself.
“The thing about Uchiha Sasuke,” Kisame tells Konan over a cup of tea, “is that he has the capacity to become a monster.”

She’s twenty-seven the day she stumbles upon her ex-boyfriend on the street and he invites her along for a walk in the park. They parted on good terms after their break-up and they joke about joint custody of Jonah’s dog Patch over dark coffee and cake.

“It was a mutual decision,” she tells her friends and there’s talk of pizza and movies and enough ice cream to feed a small army. “Sometimes it just doesn’t work out.”

They broke up when she was twenty-five, it’s been two years and she feels her mouth pulling when he laughs, warm and bright.

She wakes with crusted blood on the back of her head, a collar around her throat and he’s straddling her hips, breaking her jaw as he forces the ball between her teeth with a brutality she doesn’t understand.

“You’ll never run from me again,” he assures her as he cuts the tendons of her feet.

She realises he’s still living in the apartment they bought together.

She’d painted the walls yellow to give them a bit of life.

They are the last thing she sees before she dies.

I just wanted-

What

Do
You
Want
More
Than
Anything
In
The
World
FAYE
?

FAYE?
“I just want to be happy.”

Chapter End Notes

I have had the single worst month of this *year*.

Which, seeing as it's march and I managed to somehow turn twenty-five in the heap of things, makes me want to take a long vacation with a bottle of whisky by a lake so I can stare into the distance and murmur about the loss of youth.

I actually have the next chapter just about done because it wrote itself before this which made this one about ten times more hard to cobble together because my brain gets grouchy when it isn't made in order. I'll *try* to get it up as soon as I can but we'll see.

Anyway.

Congratulations and welcome to the life of **Faye**.

You can all probably guess what the next chapter is about because we're about to get *down and dirty*. Well, not literally, and not figuratively either...? Hm. Maybe a little. Eh, it's an interesting chapter anyway which I can actually say seeing as it's about done! Hah. Go me. Succeeding at the small things in life.

Don't... have a lot to say about this chapter without getting on a tangent of things that's supposed to be brought up *later* so I'm just gone poke this entire mess in your general direction.

Will tell you this considering the chapter content: we are not done with the whole Jake situation yet.

Let me know what you all think, yeah? And keep an eye out because I've been trekking towards a conclusion to all of *this* and I'm curious to see if you'll put the pieces together before we hit the mid-point of this story. Until then, keep being awesome all of you and know that I read every review and know that they sincerely brighten my day.

Cheers!
“How are you today, Faye?”

She’s seventeen, hair shaved after someone put gum in it and with a black-eye that’s edging into a sickening shade of yellow. She’s got one leg pulled up to her chest and the other swinging absently. There’s a perfectly good couch beside her but she refuses to sit it and her therapist had finally caved in and bought her a ridiculous long-legged chair to perch on after weeks of sitting on the floor with a flat unimpressed look fixed on him.

“How are you today, Rajeem?” she mocks back in the same kind of pleasant tone.

“I am well.” He’s far too used to her by now to be even remotely affected by her stand-offish attitude. “Thank you for asking.”

She thinks he looks ridiculous smack-dab in the large couch and she’s told him so several times. Especially with the way he crosses his leg, pants hitching up to show off socks with ridiculous colours and patterns. Today there’s an empty-eyed dog with broad grinning mouth and a talk-bubble hidden just beneath the hem and she squints suspiciously at it.

“I see you got a new shirt.” It’s an old band t-shirt from her latest foster brother who had noticed her wearing the same two shirts for four weeks and handed her a pile of his own cast-offs with a hiss to stop embarrassing him. It was almost cute. “It suits you.”

It’s at least two sizes too big and hanging off her shoulder and she gives him a long look. “Thank you,” she says eventually. “I like your socks,” she lies.

There’s a brown paper bag on the table before him and she resolutely does not look at it.

Instead her gaze flickers between the large bookcases, the diplomas on the walls, the abstract pictures. The walls are some kind of soft very light grey instead of the sterile white that therapists seems so fond of and at least it doesn’t give her a headache.

“Have you thought about the question I asked you last time?” There’s something deliberate in the way he doesn’t move to touch the bag – his eyes pleasantly fixed on her.

He looks too young for all the diplomas, she thinks. His hair and stubble still black, silver just starting to creep in by the temples. Everything from the grey button-up and dark slacks are professional – everything but those stupid socks and the stupidly grinning dog.

“You ask a lot of questions,” she fakes glibly.

“Your homework.” Rajeem is well familiar with her games and actively works around them. “Page 36 in the small square red book with the little bunny on it. The one that looks sort of like it’s dancing.” She’d be impressed if he didn’t take the fun out of these mandatory meetings and her mouth flattens even as she grudgingly pulls her messenger bag into her lap and tears it open.

There’s at least some twenty plus notebooks and drawing pads crammed into it, lose pages, folded-up napkins and even a flattened paper mug covered in drawings. They keep getting exchanged, too,
for old ones, newer ones.

She finds the small red book and grudgingly hands it over.

“Thank you.” His tone is gentle, acknowledging things she’d rather leave unsaid and her knuckles whiten where they’re curled around the edge of the seat as she turns away.

He respectfully counts the numbered pages without looking at them until he reaches the right one and pries it open.

**THREE THINGS THAT MAKE ME HAPPY** is scrawled at the top-most corner beside the loopy 3 and the 6 grabbed in the hand of a large-mouthed little monster gaping to eat it up. His thumb flattens over the little creature before tracing down over the page.

The first drawing is a simple one of a neighbourhood cat with a missing ear – it’s sitting on a dumpster and she’d drawn little wings and a halo half-tipped over the spot of its missing ear.

“That’s Major.” She doesn’t look at him but feels his expectant eyes prickle at her neck. “I met her at the park.”

The neighbouring page is free of number but there’s a woman caught mid-movement, her palm flat against the ground and legs twisting through the air. The long black braids spins around her and there’s a mischievous grin half-hidden in the blur of a face clearly turning away, the arch of the body suggestion it’ll rotate into a spin.

He turns the page.

A boy stares back at him – twelve years old and grinning lopsidedly with a red gummy worm clenched between his teeth. His hair is plastered to his head and he’s holding up two fingers in a victory-sign by his eyes despite being drenched to the bone.

This time when he looks at her there’s a pair of dark eyes staring back, daring him to comment.

- 

At eighteen she moves into a small college dorm on a scholarship and works two jobs. She saves what she can, ignores the people around her and generally tries to keep her head down.

Her roommate is out more than in and she learns to keep headphones by her bedside table for the nights loud giggles are accompanied by whispers of beauty, of praise, of adoration while falling together on the bed.

Sometimes she turns the sound down just to hear the words, trying to understand what makes someone promise another their entire world.

It doesn’t really change until her second year when the two are accompanied by four more and she steps in after a long night into something that can only be a party. There’s alcohol, music pumping in the background, a bottle being spun, and there’s a boy gyrating half-naked over another who is clearly enjoying the show with much hollering from their peers.

Her roommate looks up, clearly startled at the sound of a door opening and the sight of her in a snow-covered hoodie.

“I didn’t think you’d be home so soon.” Someone turns the music off and they’re all looking at her.
There’s piles of pizza on the floor, all kinds of different sorts. She hasn’t even seen half of them, nevertheless tasted them. The last time she had pizza she was fourteen. They’d been celebrating although she doesn’t remember the specifics – just a general sense of happiness and enjoyment.

She’s tired.

“We can move to my place,” one of the boy’s suggest. His skin is nearly as black as his hair and there’s tiny little butterfly clips interspaced in the coarse curls on his head.

“Your place is a mess, Magnus.” The answering boy sinks down on Magnus with a little huff, settling comfortably on his lap. His voice is accented, something European if she was to hazard a guess. The sides of his hair is shaved, the rest pulled back in thick ropy box braids long enough touch his waist. His skin is nearly as dark as his companion, the flat nose and square jaw giving him a look of a lurking panther. “It’s why we’re at Ece’s at the first place,” he drawls, fixing her with a look as Magnus presses a hand against his bare back.

“Don’t be like that, Paris.” The boy twitches at the nickname as the girl that swans by him. “Hi, sorry about this – give us ten minutes and we’ll get it out of your way.” She’s easily the tallest on the room, the roots of her hair dark but spilling into a sharp red colour. Her arms are muscled, the tight shirt straining as she crosses them. “That okay?” she asks.

“She doesn’t really talk much.” Haley leans back against her girlfriend, Ece automatically spreading her legs to make place. “She’s as anti-social as they come. Ain’t that so Faye?” she drawls challengingly.

Her mouth flattens.

Stepping past the redhead she kicks her shoes off, pulls the hoodie over her head and drops it into a slouching pile on the ground. Grabs the pyjamas folded up at the edge of her bed and slams the door of the bathroom shut behind her and twists the lock – ignoring the barely-muffled voices that rise behind it.

She turns the water on to drown it out and struggles out of her pants and underwear, rubbing at her brow as she sighs. She’s exhausted – she’s barely slept for what feels like a life-time and she’s tired of customers who look down at their noses and demand she smile when she wants nothing more than to sew shut their gaping mouths.

The warm water makes her eyes flutter and she has to physically peel herself from the wall she’s half-slumped against before she falls asleep against it. Barely bothers to dry off before pulling on the boxers and shirt.

Both pair have seen better days and the elastic of the boxers are barely enough to keep them on her hips.

The room is empty when she steps out but someone had bothered to hang her wet hoodie and on her bed in a box.

Inside there’s enough pieces gathered together to make for the illusion of one whole pizza.

“I’m sorry about Haley.”

She pauses and turns, toothbrush in her mouth and froth at the corners of it. Ece fidgets, not looking guilty exactly but chagrined to have broached the subject.
Faye has barely exchanged more than a handful words with her roommate, it’s how she’d preferred it and Ece hadn’t seemed bothered. Each kept their side of their room clean and other than a few mishaps there hadn’t been anything worth bringing up.

She’d even been prepared to let the whole party-thing slide because she’d been let off nearly three hours early from work because of the brewing storm and it wasn’t exactly something the other girl could have accounted for.

She must have been staring because Ece is starting to fidget and so bends down to spit and rinse her mouth. “You don’t have to apologize for your girlfriend,” she says gruffly.

Ece steps back to allow her past, eyes following as she crouches down to rummage around in the lowest drawer of her bedside table.

“Are you heading out somewhere?” Ece pulls thick boots over her long rainbow socks and shrugs into a military-style jacket that drowns her already small stature and has both sleeves rolled up. “We’re having lunch at Lowman’s if you want to join?”

For a second she’s dead sure she’s misheard.

Ece looks at her with eyes painted neon green, the colour startling against her brown skin. There’s a neon orange cap on her head with thick blocky letters spelling out GEEK, fake screws giving the illusion of keeping them in place against a background of black leather.

She means to say no. She doesn’t have the money, the time, or need to interact with others.

“Lowman’s?” she hears herself asking.

Ece pops a gum into her mouth, nodding. “Yeah,” she says. “It’s that small diner downtown that make those tiny little pie things? Quiche? Paris adores them.” There is no judgement in her tone, just a factual statement as she chews her gum.

Faye has no idea what quiche is and she hasn’t had pie since her second foster home.

There’s a coil of bills in her pocket – tip from her waitress work that she hasn’t had time to step by at the bank for.

“They won’t mind, you know,” Ece says, picking up on her hesitance. “There’s plenty of room in Betty.”

“Betty?”

Betty, it turns out, is an old Volkswagen type 2 that looked rather like it belonged on the tip. Despite the grinding of the engine, the scrape of rust and sad looking seats there’d been plenty of care put into the artwork that decorated the sides of it and the buff redhead grins out at them from one of the open windows – cigarette clenched between her teeth.

“About time you got here, Ece!” she called, eyes flicking curiously to the lurking shadow behind her friend.

“Yeah,” Magnus sticks his head out. “I’m hungry today.” The butterfly clips she’d seen at the party had been exchanged for little blue flowers artfully creeping over the arch of his ear.

Paris, whose lap Magnus had climbed over, gives the other a long-suffering look.
“I didn’t know we were bringing people along.” Magnus folds his arms up, squinting at Faye as he lounges in the window. “You’re Faye, right?”

She gives a jerky nod in response.

Already this feels like a bad idea but before she can make an excuse she’s been boxed into the van, finding herself shoved up beside a small boy with dyed dirt blond hair, the roots visibly black, and he gives her a meek smile, Ece switching place with the buff redhead at the front to sit with Haley at the wheel.

Faye says nothing as she’s further squished against the blond boy who makes a distressed noise. “Valerie,” he reaches across Faye to give the redhead a shove. “You’re gonna make me into a pancake!”

“If I knew we’d be picking up a stray I would have emptied the last row,” Valerie grumbles as she shifts towards the door as best as she can.

There was only seatbelts for two but both Valerie and the blond boy has clearly done this before because neither hesitates to draw across her, looping their belts before clicking them in place.

On the row in front of them Magnus cranes his head to check they were in place before patting Haley’s shoulder in a silent signal and the van rumbled into movement.

“I’m Millialis,” blondie says as Paris and Magnus gets into a heated debate over a game and Ece speaks quietly to a tense Haley at the steering wheel. “Most just call me Miles.” He offers her a sheepish grin. “Valerie is the one beside you and the two in front of us is Magnus and Patrick – although we call him Paris.”

“It’s the accent,” Valerie grins at Paris as the boy slants her a look of contempt.

“I think it’s adorable.” Magnus crowds up against his grouchy companion who visibly relaxes with a huff.

“It’s unimaginative,” Paris shifts, his braids dragging against the leather seat.

“It’s accurate and you love it.” Valerie leans forward, leaning comfortably against the back of the seat with crossed arms “Anyway, did either you read the new book by –“

“You know Ece, of course, and… Haley.” Miles hesitates visibly at the last name, no doubt remembering the hostility of his friend at the party as he reaches up to scratch at the side of his ear. His skin is mottled with moles, looking rather like he carried around his own personal galaxy. Dark against a pale sort of brown.

She thinks she responds with her name, she’s not sure.

It had been a long time since she touched anyone other than a handshake, a bump in a corridor or a frisky costumer thinking she was up for grabs.

Valerie is big and warm beside her and even when leaning forward she crowds up the space. It makes her heart flutter and there’s a jittery sort of anxiety as she struggles against the urge to melt back against her and Miles who is smaller but just as warm if a bit knobbly.

The anxiety leaves her tense and awkward and she feels rather like an ill-fit piece of a puzzle as conversation flows around her and it’s a relief when the car parks carefully amidst criticism disguised as advice.
She slips out of the car after Valerie and Ece slides up beside her, Haley a reluctant shadow.

“I didn’t know you liked quiche.” Haley’s voice is polite even with her mouth set in a straight line and eyes aglow with dislike.

“Never had it,” she bites out in response, not bothering to look at her as she squints at the small corner shop they’re apparently entering. It’s a red-brick kind of place, a strangely homely sort of feel to a place who sells something with a name like quiche.

“Never?” Paris asks as he pulls the door open. “Where have you been living?”

“In a world where pie is pie,” she grumbles, gazing longing down the street before reluctantly slipping inside as Ece raises an eyebrow from where she’s holding the door open.

The others are already drawing tables together with Paris at the counter, leaning over to talk with someone with a smile. It’s the most animated she’s seen him so far and realises she’s been lingering awkwardly at the entrance when Magnus sidles up beside her.

“It’s just fancy pie,” he says, cheeks dimpling when he smiles at her. “You should ask Paris for a suggestion – he’d love it.” He winks at her and his palm is warm where it presses briefly against the small of her back, giving her a little shove forward.

The owner is a tall woman whose presence makes the wheelchair she’s in look small. Her mouth is broad and her nose is sharp and despite being in her forties her hair is grey, drawn back into a bun, and the crowfeet by her eyes are clearly visible when she smiles.

“I see you brought someone new along today!” Faye shifts uncomfortably and Paris visibly folds on himself when the woman’s attention shifts to her. “Paris, introduce us.” She beckons, urging Faye closer and she reluctantly complies with a wary glance at Paris.

“Fa, Faye. Faye, Fa.” Paris flicked his hand between them as he spoke. “Fa is the best quiche maker in the world.” His dislike for her isn’t enough to disguise the clear fondness that creeps into his tone.

“You’re as charming as ever, Paris.” Fa grins at him, leaning back as she rakes keen eyes down Faye. “It’s been a long time since these rag-tag bunch brought a new face along. I’m Fa Lowman and the owner of this fine establishment. You’ll find that I keep bits of everything on the menu but Paris here is particularly fond of the quiche.” She gestures to the chalky menu behind her and Faye feels Paris gaze burning against her neck.

She stuff her hands into her pocket, fingers curling around the money there as she mentally tallies out what she can afford.

Paris is making the order for the entire table and Fa grins as she pulls out little plates and loads them up as coffee brews new behind her.

Faye tries not to feel self-conscious. Tells herself not to count the seconds as she repeats the order in her mind, structuring up the sentence to make it sound lofty but not impolite – as if she’d been to cafés before and knew the rhythm.

She shifts anxiously as the chatter goes on and glances furtively towards the table as she recounts the bills and meets Magnus eyes.

Her palms are sweaty.

Fa excuses herself and rolls into the backroom to fetch something and Faye finds herself alone with
Paris who is absently turning a coffee cup while waiting for the woman to return.

“Do you—” she flexes her hand. “Do you have any recommendations?” she gets out, focusing her attention on the boy. “Magnus said—”

“No.” Paris interrupts her. “Figure it out yourself.” He snags the tray and leaves.

Humiliation kindles anger and it burns bright before fizzling out into a resigned sort of bitterness.

Faye stares after him for a long moment before her hand relaxes around the bunch of dollar bills in her pockets and she orders the cheapest thing on the menu with a glass of water and slides the money over without looking.

She’s so tired.

She settles into the seat left empty beside Ece and tries not to stare at the rich cups of coffees with creams and sugar as she sips her water and eats her quiche without tasting it.

Conversation flows around her but she hardly notices.

“Is it good?” It takes a moment for her to realise Miles is, in fact, addressing her.

Faye looks at the quiche, half-eaten with the rest sadly mutilated.

A waste of money.

“Faye?” Miles ventures and she realises she hasn’t answered him.

“I don’t know.” The words are dull and she puts the fork onto the plate, stomach like lead.

“What do you mean you don’t know?” Haley raises a brow at her from across the table where she’s on her second piece of quiche. “Either it’s good or it’s not.”

Faye’s mouth is nothing but ash.

“I don’t know,” she repeats, louder, and conversation dies as her chair scrapes against the floor and she’s standing despite not meaning to and someone is saying something but she’s not hearing it.

She trips over the leg of a chair in her hurry to leave and shoves the door open roughly, stumbling for the alley where she bends over and vomits up what little she had eaten. Her heartbeat is too loud in her ear and she fumbles for her phone, dials the number from memory and pushes the call button before pressing it to her ear as she sinks down against the brick wall and curls on herself.

She hums tonelessly to keep herself focused, tapping absently against her knee as she waits for the call to connect.

Her hands are shaking and she keeps biting down on her lip to keep from slipping as she stares emptily out in front of her.

There is no answer and she pulls the phone away, redials and pushes it back against her ear.

She’s entirely unprepared for the body that suddenly crouches down before her, blocking out the brick wall opposite her. There’s skin nearly as black as the eyes that swallow up her vision and a mouth that is moving.

It takes her a shameful amount of time to realise there’s actual words accompanying the movement.
Actual noise off-set against her own humming that slowly quiets as she struggles to focus on what is being said.

“- fifth of march, you’re at the corner of-“

*Oh, she thinks distantly, I thought that was just a thing Doctor Rajeem did.*

Which is ridiculous because Doctor Rajeem had talked her down from numerous panic attacks and had explained the different ways it could be tackled during long hours of her refusing to speak. The humming, the drumming. The grounding recount of information meant to bring her back to the there and then.

“-your name is Faye, I don’t actually know your last name but you share a room with Ece and-“

Panic attack.

She slumps back against the brick wall, squeezing her eyes shut.

“Faye?”

Reluctantly she opens her eyes back up, focusing on the lips rather than the eyes and a bit to the side – which is a mistake because of course they’re all there. Six pair of feet and the last pair crouching before her.

“I’m okay,” she mutters sullenly as she shifts her eyes in the other direction. “You can leave now.”

“Are you an actual idiot?” Paris voice makes her mouth flatten.

“Paris.” Magnus still hasn’t moved from in front of her and his voice is mild but with a clear warning.

Paris makes a noise and swivels around, long braids swinging on his back.

“What Paris is trying to say is that we’re taking you home,” Magnus continues in that same mild tone. “Ece is going to be driving and you’ll be in the passenger seat beside her. I’ll be sitting right behind you and either Valerie or Miles will be sitting beside me.”

Not Haley or Paris is what she hears and she wonders what conclusions, exactly, Magnus has been drawing.

“Can you stand up on your own?” It takes a moment for her brain to register the words but she gives a jerky nod and Magnus rises, taking a step back to give her space.

*Just like Doctor Rajeem.*

She slowly gets to her feet, palm against brick as she shuffles up on wobbly feet, refusing to look at anyone.

“Good.” Magnus keeps talking all the way back to the van and she lets it ground her, drawing her knees to her chest once the door clicks shut.

She feels eyes on her but she just wants to go home and not think.

This whole trip was a mistake.

The phone in her hand vibrates and she nearly drops it in surprise, fumbling a bit before managing to
press it up against her ear as she curls around it.

“Faye?”

“Rajeem.”

“I want you to tell me five things that you’re wearing today. Can you do that for me?”

She blinks. “The hoodie,” she begins slowly, haltingly. “I’m wearing the green hoodie I got from my second foster brother.” She stares down at herself. “I’m wearing – I’m wearing those stupid socks you gave me.”

“The striped ones or the dotted ones?”

“Yeah-huh.” She curls tighter around the phone.

“Faye. Does your socks have stripes or dotts?”

She tugs at the hem of her pants. “Dotts.”

“Thank you, Faye. And what shoes are you wearing?”

“The same one’s I’m always wearing.”

There’s an expectant silence.

“The leather boots,” she says, wiggling her toes inside them.

“What about your pants?”

“The greyish jeans,” she answers promptly, relaxing against the seat. “With the holes at the knees.”

“Any jewellery?”

“I’m wearing my watch – the silver one with the black face,” she confirms after a moment.

“I apologize for not answering the phone immediately. Did you have help talking you down or did you to the humming and the tapping?” Rajeem’s voice reminds her where she is and she stiffens, glancing to Ece who is staring firmly into the traffic.

“Both.” She shifts. “He did that thing you do – where you tell me things.”

“Is he near you right now?”

“Oh.” She deliberately doesn’t look back. “Yeah.”

“Would you be alright if you hand the phone over to him for five minutes?”

She stared down at her boots, mulling it over.

“Yes,” she says after a moment.

“Thank you.”

“Magnus.” She shoves the phone back blindly and after a moment it’s plucked from her fingers and she draws her arm back, wrapping it around her knees as she rests her chin on them.
She picks up extra shifts at work and after three months she’s fairly sure it’s been completely forgotten and she’s slowly starting to relax. She comes home late and leaves early and she gets a small bonus at the start of summer from her manager who pats her shoulder with a sweaty palm while using the other to tug at his dark button-up.

It takes a certain kind of cruelty to force workers beneath the sun in coarse cotton button-ups with long-sleeves.

Faye keeps tugging at her own as she takes another order for hot coffee, doing her best to twist her face into something agreeable as another repeat-joke breezes by. She resists the urge to glance at her watch as she bends down, gathering up the menus and disappearing inside to put the order through.

Pours the water carafe, brings it out, takes the complaint about the lemons, makes a new one and resists pouring the first one over her head and instead watches it spiral down the drain with a misplaced sense of envy.

She’s pouring coffee for a couple on the most awkward first date she’s ever been third-wheeling as a waitress when she turns around and very nearly runs into Valerie who didn’t even pretend to look guilty when Faye had to take a hasty step backwards, only reaching out and expertly steadying the tray she was balancing with a broad palm.

“Hey there Faye.” She’s wearing a white belly shirt which showed off a gathering of vines and flowers climbing down one large bicep and a golden navel ball piercing glittering in her soft belly. “I didn’t know you worked here.” She’s dyed her hair carnation blue since Faye last saw her and is carrying a large training bag on her back.

Faye shifts, unsure what to say, and she shoots a furtive glance towards the kitchen where her manager is before looking up at the other. “Uh, yeah…” she does another shift. “Listen, unless you’re here to eat-”

“I’m not, don’t worry.” Valerie reaches out and Faye blinks when she finds her shoulder gently squeezed. “Just wanted to say I’m sorry for how things ended last time. I know Ece has been worried about you so I was happy to see you here.”

Faye’s brain does the funny thing where it blanks and she stares at the other, at loss at what to say.

“Anyway, don’t be a stranger.” Valerie waves a hand over her shoulder. “I’ll let Ece know you’re alive!” Faye stares after her for a long moment before an impatient call from her co-worker gets her moving.

She sleeps to nine the following Saturday for the first time in months and wakes to the rustle of her roommate on the other side of her bedroom door.

She uncurls from her lumpy hide-out and spends a moment just breathing before reluctantly getting up and dressed at snails-pace. When she finally cracks the door open Ece nearly drops the phone she’d been fiddling with, looking over with wide eyes behind red-lensed sunglasses tipping down on her nose.

“Good morning,” she mumbles awkwardly, unsure what to do with herself as the seconds tick by.

“You’re here- I mean, of course you are, this is your apartment too—” Ece straightens, poking back
her sunglasses. “I mean, good morning, Faye. Glad to see you’re actually still living here, I was starting to wonder.” Faye feels an irrational pang of shyness at the open warmth in the other’s smile and to her consternation she feels her cheeks heating up.

“Been busy.” She looks at Ece – at her too large cap with blocky letters and orange rimmed eyes. There’s a bag packed at the end of the bed and she spies a towel at the top of it. “Are you heading to the beach?”

Ece bobs her head. “Haley insisted that we should have a picnic so a picnic is what we’re having. We’re celebrating one year together next week but since we’re both busy then, well.” She waves her hand in a what-can-you-do sort of way. “The others will probably crash it towards the evening, knowing them, but we’re aiming for a couple of hours of make-out and sand sex before that.” She says this, very pleased with herself.

Faye’s eyes widens but before she can open her mouth the door to their apartment slams open and Haley flounces inside.

She pauses for exactly a blink of a movement at the sight of Faye wide-eyed by her bedroom door, and the stretching grin on Ece’s face before rolling her eyes and dipping in to kiss her girlfriend’s mouth.

“How are you today, Faye?”

She’s eighteen, hair long enough to brush the tips of her ears and there’s bandages on her left hand from where her co-worker had spilled boiling hot water after tripping into her. She thinks the whole wrap-up is a bit of an overkill but she’d been sent home with full pay for a week so she can’t exactly complain.

She’s crouched on her long-legged chair, looking rather like a gargoyle, her feet bare and wearing loose shorts and another band t-shirt from her second foster brother.

“How are you today, Rajeem?” it’s routine by now and she thinks that maybe it amuses him, too, in the way he leans back in the middle of the couch. It makes him look more akin to a lounging king than a therapist in his neat crisp button-up with a vest and sharp slacks.

His socks have a lion and lioness respectively giving each other the finger across the distance of his feet flat on the ground in polished brown leather shoes which sort of off-shots the entire thing and she wonders if he’s doing it to make some sort of statement.

“I am well,” he tells her pleasantly. “My son graduated two weeks ago so I’ve had the entire family home to celebrate.”

She’d pegged him to be in his forties but the idea of him with an adult son makes her suspicious and tries not to be obvious with her doubtful once over.

There’s a brown paper bag on the table before him and she resolutely does not look at it.

“Large family?”

“Close-knit.” Rajeem folds his fingers together in his lap. “My son is actually the youngest – he has two older siblings. Unfortunately neither my wife nor I are very close with either side of our family so they make do the best they can without grandparents or cousins.”
Faye can only remember meeting her grandparents a handful of times. Most recently at her parent’s funeral where she’d stood by her brother, accompanied by police escort and in prison orange. They hadn’t looked at each other, hadn’t spoken a word, but she’d been aware of him with every second ticking by at the low murmur of the sermon as ash was lowered into dirt.

Her grandparents had spoken with her tersely, looking rather like they couldn’t believe they shared the same blood.

The grandmother on her father’s side had died years earlier and her grandfather had stood alone as they lowered his son into the dirt. His skin dark but washed-out, his hair robbed off all pigment and the picture of life-long regret.

Her mother’s parents had been white upper-class who’d resented their child’s childhood love and turned their backs when Faye had been born with brown skin and hair. The only thing she’d really had in common with her mother were the silvery eyes inherited by both herself and Jake.

Jake had been born with the warm skin of their father while she hers had ended up with an ashen tone that didn’t quite go away even under the bright sun.

“Me neither.” She doesn’t mean to say it out loud. “They didn’t approve of my parents falling in love, approved even less when it turned out Mom was pregnant with me but not enough to not drive home their pro-life agenda,” she clarifies because it feels important, somehow, that he doesn’t get the wrong picture.

“Do you think it was wrong of them to make your parents keep you?” Rajeem asks her, always with the patient, gentle tone that makes any anger at him feel irrational and displaced.

“They were young.” She looks away from him. “Not even in their twenties. They didn’t have the funds, didn’t even have a house, and the moment I was born my grandparents dropped any kind of financial support. Mom worked three jobs and Dad was regularly recruited away for months at a time. They were left high and dry, forced to make the best of what they had and they paid with their lives.” She curls on herself. “Maybe I do resent them, I don’t know. I like living and I loved Jake so there’s that.”

Rajeem looks at her and she flattens her mouth in response and looks away.

“Faye.” She hears the shuffle of paper, likely the pile next to the bag on the table, the creak of the leather couch as he shifts. “You can’t dodge it forever. You lived through something traumatic and I want to try and understand how it came to be.”

“Then why are you talking to me?” She refuses to look at him.

“I actually got the papers from your brother’s therapist right here. He gave his permission to have them shared with you.” She stills. “But I won’t open them without your permission. To be honest, I don’t think you’re ready to open them. Maybe you never will be. But it will always be your right to know.” She wants to refute it but she can’t find enough air to fill her lungs. “Faye,” he says gently. “Breathe.” And she does, gasping with the first too-hard inhalation of air.

He lets her take a moment to regulate her breathing, rising to fetch and pour two glasses of orange juice. She takes it gratefully, nursing it with slow little sips and eyeing the closed folder next to the paper bag with wariness before drawing her attention to her therapist as he drains his own glass with the sort of ease that makes everything he does look elegant.

“Have you thought about the question I asked you last time?” He puts the glass on the table.
“You ask a lot of questions.” Her bag is hanging awkwardly from her shoulder past her feet flat on seat of the stool and she makes no move to touch it.

“Burberry patterned, small, about the size of your hand. Page 11, I believe,” he says pleasantly and she huffs as she hauls the bag around, resting it on her feet with a little wobble as she digs at the back, stroking her thumb over the top of two equal sized before pulling out the one nearest her and handing it over.

He makes no move toward the paper bag, doesn’t even glance at it, but it feels enormous in the way it encroaches on her awareness as she waits for him to find the correct page. She could have made it easy for him but it isn’t the game and she’d loathe to break what they have. Instead of fiddling she puts her hand flat down on the seat and draws her legs out, seating herself properly with her knees bent, feet on the pins half-way up the stool and hunches with her elbows on her thighs, one palm cradling her chin.

The numbers are spread with several pages between and Rajeem finally the correct page near the very end of it, gently opening it, and his thumb finds the little creature snoozing on top of the two one’s before picking out the question beneath them.

**THREE THINGS THAT MAKES ME SAD** slants awkwardly, almost reluctant in the tight hurried scrawl from their last session.

On the first page is Major’s crushed body, flattened against the road with guts spilling out. It was clearly drawn just after the accident – organs still blank and the pool of blood thick where it was spreading around the bent body.

“Some kids scared her right into the traffic.” She doesn’t look at the picture. “She died instantly, I think.”

On the right page is a mass and row of shadowed backs, arms raised up and palms pressed flat over their ears. A small figure stands at the very bottom of the page, a blank jagged bubble crammed with unheard words overlapping into an indistinct mess extending from her.

He turns the page.

A boy stares back at him – twelve years old and grinning lopsidedly with a red gummy worm clenched between his teeth. His hair is plastered to his head and he’s holding up two fingers in a victory-sign by his eyes despite being drenched to the bone.

She starts running into Valerie after work and after the sixth time she must have let her wariness show because the now-pink haired girl laughs at her when their paths intercede. “I used to loop back to Miles place to drop him off and make sure he gets home alright since he used to work next door to the gym I’m at,” she explains as she steps off her bike to lead it beside her. “But he quit his job and is working closer to Magnus and Paris now so I take the shorter route home.”

Which she really can’t say anything about and it’s not like she’s opposed to the company.

Valerie is actually good company, talking about her day or about one of the books she’d finished. Faye has never been one for books outside the short stories she read or created for Jake but the other talks about expanses of numerous worlds and their people in the same way her professor’s talk about history: fondly and with great enthusiasm.

“So many dreams, so many disappointments, so many promises. And in the end, they all just
“They held a funeral for a discarded switch panel.” Faye is not convinced.

“It’s symbolic,” Valerie insists and Faye gives her a long suspicious look that makes her laugh.

It will take her months to realise Valerie’s stop was about ten minutes before her own and that she’d stuck with her to make sure she got home alright before making a loop around the area to keep it from being obvious as she backtracked the last bit.

She ends up being invited along again and it does okay. It’s awkward and she still don’t feel right being there but she leaves to work with an unfamiliar feeling in her chest.

And then it happens again.

And then a third time.

She stops keeping count after the ninth.

She realises what she’s feeling is hope when Paris shoves a grape juice into her hand before plopping down beside Magnus and Haley who help him distribute the rest.

“A man obtains a vial of the deadliest venom on earth. A single drop could kill a full-grown man within seconds. He drinks the entire vial and after a minute, he is not harmed. How did he do it?”

Faye blinks up at the starry skies above her and tilts her head just-so to see the lanky person stretched out beside her, palms flat against the sand behind in. He’s focused on the distant figures of Haley bosting Miles on her shoulders, his hands locked with Ece on-top of Valerie. Someone is shrieking, Magnus pushing his back against Haley’s to keep her from going flat under the strength of Valerie whose thick thighs flexes as she steps forward with a sort of terrifying ease that makes Haley and Magnus shout in protest as they slide across the sand.

“Venom needs to touch blood to be effective, I think,” she says after a moment. “It won’t do anything if you just swallow it.”

“What flies when it’s born, lies when it’s alive, and runs when it’s dead?” he takes a long sip of his beer, a fancy sort she can’t pronounce the name of.

She has to think about that one.

“A snowflake?”

“A horse jumps over a castle and lands on a man, then the man disappears. How can that be?”

“That’s chess,” she snorts. “Running out of good ones?”

“Brat.” Paris narrows his eyes and leans forward suddenly as Ece turns traitor and Valerie yelps as she’s dragged into the sand amidst whoops. “What do you say to helping a friend out?” His dark eyes glitter prettily under the sparkling light of the fire and she finds herself agreeing.

She gets to her feet, brushing sand off her shorts and opening her mouth only to yelp and getting a handful of braids when she scrambles for hold. Paris hoists her up, stumbling only for a moment
before getting her properly situated on his shoulders and by the way they shake he’s laughing at her reaction.

“Give a girl some warning,” she huffs but then she’s grinning, something daring and warm inside of her as she straightens and points with a holler as they tear across the beach.

-DO YOU KNOW WHY I DIDN’T LIKE YOU IN THE BEGINNING?" HALEY ASKS HER ONE EVENING WHEN IT’S JUST THE TWO OF THEM AND ECE IS OUTSIDE SMOKING. “AND WHY PARIS WANTED NOTHING TO DO WITH YOU?”

They’re playing some kind of boxing game that Ece picked with the sort of starry-eyed enthusiasm neither can deny.

“My parents both work as firefighters, you see.”

And Faye suddenly understands.

“When Ece first told me the name of her new roommate I was suspicious. Faye Henley isn’t just any name.” Haley says, a touch of wryness to her tone. “And then I met you and I knew.”

Haley pauses the game and Faye reluctantly puts her controller down and turns her head to the other when Haley shifts around properly to look at her. She’s not particularly tall but she’s broader than Ece who looks like a wind might do her over and her eyes are sharp despite the gentle shape of her face. She’s shorter than Faye who is all limbs.

“Your little brother beat your father and mother to death and put the house on fire.” Haley looks at her, eyes searching. “Mom said they found you clutching each other’s hands as the house went up in smoke. You understand how disturbing that sounds, don’t you?” Faye draws her knees to her chest.

“You had every right to not want me anywhere near Ece,” she agrees, feeling sick.

Haley lets out a breath of air.

“I know,” she says bluntly. “I’m not looking to justify myself but I want you to understand where we were coming from.” Her eyes are dark but not unkind, merely searching. “Paris has always been the most protective out of the bunch of us and I told him about you because I can’t always be here to keep an eye on Ece. But I never told her and you know why?” Haley gives a wry sort of smile when Faye shakes her head. “Because Ece cares.” She makes a move as if to drag her hand through her hair but the coarse curls are braided in tight cornrows so she lets it flop awkwardly into her lap instead. “She looks at you and she worries. I’ve never seen her smile Haley and She’s always working, Haley!” She lowers her voice in a mimic of her girlfriend’s. “She has nightmares, Haley and I heard her crying in the shower, Haley.”

Faye stares down at her hands, something awful growing inside of her.

“And then she invited you along and it went as well as could be expected.” Haley huffs. “I’ve never seen anyone as socially broken as you are and then you went and had a panic attack in the alley and Ece just about had a heart attack when she didn’t see you for three months – only to have Valerie of all people tell us she’d seen you. And she must have said something to you because you stayed long enough to make sure Ece knew you were alright the next weekend and that’s not something a bad person does. And the more we talk, the more time you spend with us, the more convinced I am that there's more to the situation.”

The silence sits heavily between them.
And then the door opens and Paris slips inside.

“You started without me?” he says gruffly and slinks down on the other side of Faye who wants to crawl out the window and never ever see a person ever again. Because this is clearly heading in a direction she’s not comfortable with and she can’t do this.

But then Paris is reaching out and his hand is curling around hers and Haley is there and they know only the worst of her and yet they’re there.

And words that always sits at the tip of her tongue during her sessions with Doctor Rajeem is suddenly spilling out of her mouth.

“I was four years old when Jake was born.” The words come out haltingly, never before voiced. “Our parents were poor and couldn’t really afford one child but they did their best-“

The words sounds strange voiced out loud.

She tells them how he’d go from a bright happy child to bouts of sudden rage. How the anger was disproportionate and, as he grew, turned violent. She’d wrestle him down, scuffling and holding him until it deflated out of him as sudden as it’d completely stolen over him.

“It was like he had two different personalities,” she tells them, so relived to finally have someone listening. “He didn’t like hurting things, not even the little things like beetles and worms. But then it’d flip and it was like a stranger looking out at me-"

Jake had never been a popular child. His temper was played off as a side-effect of boys being boys with a stern warning to not do it again and then finally, when he was ten, his first detention was followed by numerous more until he learnt to take the brunt of the anger out on himself in the boy’s bathroom.

“I wasn’t his fault.” She stares at her bare feet, nails painted purple. “Maybe it was mine, for not doing enough.”

Her knuckles whiten as she curls tight around her knees, chin tucked against the top of them and she realises she’s trembling, something wet and warm slipping down her cheeks. “He was my little brother.” She squeezes her eyes shut. “I loved him more than anything and I couldn’t – when he brought that bat down on Dad’s skull all I could see was his stupid smile and I – and I couldn’t do anything because he was smiling as he killed him and-

“she covers her mouth with her hands, shaking as tears drip over the ashen skin of her hands, her laugh wretched “and I still love him, despite everything. He beat Dad to death with a crowbar and put the house in flames with Mom chained to the fridge and I still love him-“

And then she’s drawn into someone’s arms and there are elbows and knees knocking together, more hands and limbs than she knows what to do with and she’s crying in the arms of four more people than who were supposed to be there.

She curls her hand into Magnus shirt as she gasps for breath, snot and tears dripping down her face.

"I'm sorry," Ece whispers into her ear and Faye wonders if she meant to wake her up. "I think you did everything you could have done but sometimes everything isn’t enough. It doesn't make it hurt any less so I'm sorry," she says softly. "I'm sorry that it happened. Sorry for the both of you."
Do you have any idea of how hard it is to flush out seven characters in two chapters? I try to level my chapters around ten pages but this one ended up nineteen because there was no conceivable way to do it.

Decided to just throw it at the lot of you because I'm the captain of this ship.

I'm a liiiittle bit nervous about this one, I admit. It's one thing to build a character in the Naruto world, another to expand her past in a believable way. Especially when the Sasuke we know it is a result. I'm relived to have another chapter handling this but it's big and I try to do the best I can with it.

Right now we're meeting Faye after Jake leading up to her twenty-seventh birthday in the next chapter.

Unfortunately, it also means the appearance of another character you're all not going to like...

This was Faye age 16-19ish. If you remember chapter 5 she visits Jake in jail when she turns twenty so I leave this chapter just before that.

I think the most important thing to take from all of this is that Faye didn't just go from one trauma to another. There is almost ten years between Jake and Jonah and that's important.

Paris (Patrick), Miles (Millialis), Ece, Haley, Magnus and Valerie. What do you think of them?

I don't think I did them all justice here but we have another chapter and I'll do my best there so let me know what you all think!

(Valerie is absolutely quoting a real book and, yes, they did have the funeral for a discarded switch panel. Kudos if you can guess it!)

ALSO: I posted the last chapter as 'The Key' by mistake. User ismellitblue remarked upon it so it's fixed now but so you know! 'The Key' chapter, as I've planned it, is just after the next chapter, I think. Depends on two things but I'm pretty sure of it. Like. 80% sure. Ish.

If you need a bit of a cheer after this I just posted The Adventures of Ambassador Hinata on my patreon (my patreon is completely free, my plan is to post side-adventures there, information and small tidbits relating to the stories on my AO3 account). It ties together with chapter 12 of this story. The link should be just below this note, I think.

Also, THANK YOU. Your response on the last chapter blew me away when I opened up my inbox after work<3

Cheers to every single one of you!
“Christmas present?” Something inside of her freezes and she starts tallying her savings as anxiety constricts her chest.

They’re outside at Lowman’s, waiting for Paris to finish his shift. Fa, who had finally been introduced as his aunt, had lost one of her oldest workers as he went into retirement and Paris had stepped in to help out as she sought someone new for the position.

It’s early November and her birthday is just around the corner.

Magnus is wearing a soft black sweater and jeans, a blue butterfly seated on the arch of his ear, as if ready for flight. They both have thick boots but his is neat while hers are getting with the years as much as she tries to take care of them. There’s golden painted by his eyes, contrasting against the dark of his skin.

She hasn’t celebrated Christmas since Jake.

On both occasions at her foster homes she’d snuck out and spent the evening power walking through the cold until it got late enough for the cheer to drown out. Ece had clearly spent Christmas elsewhere so it had been easy to spend the nights studying, treating it like just another day.

“Miles is heading back to Germany to celebrate with his parents.” He wrinkles his nose in clear dislike and she wonders just how bad Miles parents really are. From what she’d been able to gather he came from a rich family who stuffed him into prim and proper suits and paraded him around, all pride for his academic success and for graduating top of the class from MIT.

If she and Ece were the youngest of them then Miles, surprisingly, was the oldest followed by Magnus and Valerie. He was already twenty-three years old and had a decent job in IT at a well-known corporation.

“Anyway, since he’s leaving late November we figured we could have a little present exchange before that.” He takes a sip of his coffee and she copies him with her own cup sweetened with about seven cubes of sugar and a generous dash of cream as she tries to hide her unease. “I can practically feel you stressing yourself up.” He sounds amused and she grimaces guiltily, turning away from him to watch a cyclist dodge a low hanging branch. “Don’t worry. It’s all supposed to be handmade – more symbolic than expensive.” He leans back, stretching out his long legs, crossing them by the ankle. “We tried to do the other route and both Miles and Haley out priced the rest of us by miles.” He blows on his coffee before taking another sip, frothy milk marking his lip before he swipes his tongue over it.

“Handmade?” she repeats, cautiously hopeful but a bit bemused.

“Yeah.” He glances inside for a moment, checking on Paris, before he pulls out a necklace. “We draw a name from a hat – kind of like secret Santa? And then you make them something – doesn’t have to be good just, genuine.” In his hand on a carefully handwoven string is an amber glass cube woven in a net of black. “He made me this one last year.” He tucks it away and takes another sip.

She used to make all sorts of things for Jake.
Made him a bunch of red blocks during crafts, little figurines in metal thread, an entire chessboard which had been made into a soccer field and, later, a stage for elegant bronze threaded men and women acting out dramatically after the wooden pieces got stomped to pieces. She’d been lousy at stitching and fixing with fabrics but she’d enjoyed working with wood, metal and even glass. It was Jake who had made the clothes for the figures from scraps and thread smuggled in her pockets.

When she looks up he’s watching her with a quirk of his lips and it crosses her mind that Magnus understands her, perhaps, the best of them. He seemed to have a sixth sense for her spiralling thoughts and she strongly suspects that someone in his family work as a psychologist with the way he bothers to work around her when she’s at her worst.

“It sounds fun,” she says and means it.

“Brilliant!” He places his cup down with a clatter. “That makes all seven of us.” It warms something inside of her to be included so easily. “I’ll have Ece get you an envelope with a name before the end of the week.” He fishes up his phone, typing something out before slipping it back. “We’re doing the whole thing at my place this year and both Paris and Ece has promised to help me clean up.” For someone who looks so effortlessly put together Magnus apartment is a hopeless mess.

- 

Ece slides her an envelope two days later as they cross paths at the door opening.

She’s dressed up enough that Faye suspects a date, her normal boots swapped for a pair of low-heeled ankle boots. The neon blue by her eyes are entirely Ece but she’s swapped her cap for a knitted beanie and she’s wearing a neat but warm sweater over a button-up shirt coupled with tight jeans.

“You look pretty.” The words slip out of her before she has time to think them over and Ece pauses, blinking at her. “Not that you don’t do normally,” Faye backtracks. “But – it suits you.”

Ece tilts her head but then she smiles and Faye blinks as the other pushes forward to press a kiss to her cheek. “Thank you, Faye,” she says and gives her a little wink as she slides past her, disappearing down the hall with a hum.

Faye stares after the other for a long moment before closing the door behind her and pressing her fingers softly against her cheek with a small grin.

After a short shower and changing into one of her old boxers and t-shirts she curls up on her bed and opens the envelope.

- 

Christmas at Magnus is an affair of fast-food and salad in equal measure because none of them are good cooks and she’s got a large box of fries with her, leftovers from work she’d gotten cheap before closing.

It’s Miles who opens the door and the tips of his ears goes pink at the sight of her.

“Faye!” he squeaks and she blinks at him, caught off-guard as she slowly closes the door behind her after he takes two hurried steps back.

“Miles,” she greets back mildly bemused. “Everything okay?”

“Never better!” he assures her, yanking the fries out of her hands before fleeing to where Haley and
Paris were arguing over the punch, Ece sipping a fancy glass with a reindeer rump sticking up from the piece of lemon on the edge of it.

By the window Valerie got Magnus hoisted on her shoulders to hang the glittery decorations, bright red and green tinsels and a light made to look like dripping ice.

She toes her shoes off and hangs her jacket among the others.

“Looks good,” she says, sidling up beside Valerie as Magnus slides off her back. Her hair is bright red for the day, eyes drawn black and a tight red shirt with a reindeer on the front of it. The Santa hat slanting on her head in enormously charming and Faye finds herself smiling even before the larger girl pulls her into a hug. She knows just how to shift to best get her arms around the other’s broad shoulders now and she hugs back with equal tightness before she’s dropped down to Magnus who throws an arm around her shoulder and gives her a squeeze in greeting.

“You get here alright?” Valerie asks as she shepherds her towards her table, Magnus at their heels. The first snow had arrived just a week earlier and Paris had taken one look at her snow covered hoodie when he caught her after work and promptly made her adopt one of his old jackets so she’d been unusually cosy.

“Yeah,” she accepts the glass Ece hands her. “There was some issue with one of the buses so I had to walk the last bit but it was alright.”

She hasn’t celebrated Christmas in years and she’s nervous but it eases as the evening goes on. Alcohol gets passed around and there’s enough food to feed a small army, the games they play are familiar and Magnus is the triumphant winner of a game of Monopoly.

She’s half-curled against Valerie, just a bit sleepy and very much content, Paris stretched out beside her, when Haley claps her hands together.

“You know what time it is!?!” she raises a hand to her ear.

“PRESENT TIME!” it’s clearly an inside joke of some sort by the laughs and shared grins but she’s had a fair share of drinks and Valerie is warm beside her so all she does is press closer, enjoying the clear joy and ribbing whilst reaching into the pocket of her jeans and wiggling out the small box carefully wrapped with a little ribbon on top.

“Who got who this year?” Haley turns dramatically before she pins Paris in place and he grins as he throws a large box to Miles who yelps when he has to hit it straight up to avoid spilling his drink. It nearly hits Magnus but Haley is faster, snagging it mid-movement with a dry look at her unapologetic friend.

When Haley looks to her she holds her hand out to Magnus who has to reach over Paris, turning it this and here once he got it in his hand. Paris watches him fondly, reaching out to squeeze her calf when she makes a little nervous shift.

He finally pries it open and he makes a soft noise as he lifts the little dragonfly up. She’d made the wings in soft green glass, mixing yellow and blue into it carefully and gotten a result she’d been happy with on her third try. It had cost her a roll and a half of tip to borrow the space to make it but the woman in charge had been most helpful, explaining how to get the wings carefully flat and then how to stretch them out from the round golden upper body and then get the long thin tail just right. She’d wrapped it in metal, to make the legs and a hold for the small metallic beads she’d chosen for its eyes.
Ece makes an surprised sort of noise beside him.

“You made that?” Haley looks between the little dragonfly carefully fastened to a hair clip and Magnus grins with clear delight as he lets the small hooks sink into his hair.

“How does it look?” he asks, turning this and there to several thumbs-up and grins. “Thank you – I had no idea you could do anything like this,” he tells her, eyes crinkling.

She flushes, pressing against Valerie who brushes a hand over her hair fondly.

“T-This isn’t nearly as fancy-“ Miles shoves a long thin box to her, looking embarrassed when she takes it. “Merry Christmas, Faye.” He smiles a bit helplessly at her.

When she carefully cracks it open she finds a mustard yellow scarf, the holes uneven but – it’s warm and she can’t quite help but bury her face into the downy softness after she pulls it over her head after giving it a little twist to make a single hole of the looping pattern.

“I love it,” she tells him, eyes bright.

Miles goes so red that Ece chokes on her drink as she laughs.

- -

She turns twenty in November and visits her brother in jail.

He’s tall and looking just as awkward and gangly as herself. She’s wearing a grey hoodie and the jacket she’d gotten from Paris along with the mustard yellow scarf Miles had made for her.

*Why didn’t you kill me?*

The question lingers at the back of her mind but never makes it past her lips.

“Jake-“ she hesitates at the end of the hour as guards make their way to them but then she steels herself and meets his curiosity with resolve. “You’ll always love me, right?”

His eyes widen and he stares at her as if he can’t quite believe the words but then he’s smiling and she feels like she’s sixteen again and he’s twelve and not a day has passed since they sat curled together on the couch, Metropolis in the VHS-player and a box of strawberry ice cream on the table to share.

“To the end of the world and beyond,” he echoes her childhood promise and there is something frail in his eyes when he looks at her, something hopeful and broken all at the same time.

- -

The first time she meets Rajeem she’s gone through five therapists and she drops to the ground, ignoring the couch, her eyes dark and unimpressed as they settle upon him.

She doesn’t speak for the entire session.

The pattern continues for five more meetings and she waits for the questions, the condemnation.

*He burnt your parents to death-

That scar on your hand-*
Why didn’t you-

Whywhywhy-

But instead there’s a ridiculously tall chair waiting for her on the sixth meeting and she climbs it cautiously, waiting for the other shoe to drop as she kicks her leg into a swing. It’s a four legged thing with pins, no back, and if she puts her feet on the top pin she’ll practically turn into a ball.

But he looks at her, lounging in the middle of the couch like a misplaced royalty in ridiculous socks and-

“How are you today, Faye?”

She looks at her hands, covered in scratches and small scars that climb up her arms and the thick lines from a kitchen knife shoved clean through.

She’d put the stapler to her skin and kept it wrapped for weeks afterwards, dosing it with alcogel stolen from the teacher’s bathroom. The scar tissue from it is broad and ugly, white and stretched against the darkly ashen tone of her skin.

“The night he killed our parents we’d fallen asleep together on the couch watching Metropolis,” she tells him without looking up. “We did it every year since we first saw it on my seventh birthday. Sometimes,” she says slowly, “it feels like this is all just a bad dream and maybe – maybe we’re still asleep on that couch together.” She clenches her fist. “It feels like… It feels like if I just sit down I’ll know for sure.” She looks up at him, her smile frail. “But it’s not a dream, is it?”

“No,” Rajeem tells her. “It is not.”

“And he really did kill Mom and Dad.”

“Yes,” he says. “He did.”

She stands there for a long moment, beside the table with the brown paper bag in the office with soft grey walls.

He smiles gently.

“Why don’t you have a seat, Faye?”

-

She turns twenty-one and graduates college.

She’s two years older than her parents had been when they had her.

She wonders if they would have been proud of her – if they would have screamed just as loudly as those around her as they’re called onto the podium one after the other to receive their diplomas.

She stares straight ahead and swallows her nausea when it’s finally her turn and she follows her classmates down the long red carpet. Someone is crying, sniffling, proud shouts and cameras going off all around them.

Someone is talking, names are called.

The whole process feels like a crawl and she forces herself to breathe slowly, in and out, counting them carefully as the line before her thins out until there is only her and the steps leading up to the
principal.

“Henley, Faye.”

She accepts the paper and its neat bow with surprisingly steady hands and the principal squeezes her shoulder as cameras dutifully goes off in the crowd.

And then – her name rises like a cry and she turns wide-eyed to find Valerie, Paris, Magnus, Ece, Haley and Miles cupping their hands around their mouths to rise over the noise of the crowd. They’re all grinning, their cheeks flushed, Ece in her own graduation blacks and waving her own diploma.

Her answering grin blossoms wide.

- 

Rajeem pours them a glass of orange juice and she drags the paper bag towards her, opening it slowly and carefully under his watchful eyes.

She stares for a long time at her mom’s smiling face, nineteen years old and cradling her little baby self. Her dad stands beside her, his face filled with a helpless sort of love.

She puts it carefully aside, her fingers a bare tremble as she pulls another picture up. Of herself, four-years-old and clutching baby Jake with a gap-toothed grin aimed right at the camera. Their parents kneel on either side of them and she traces their smiles carefully, the budding tiredness beneath their eyes.

Carefully puts them on the table.

“How do you feel?” Rajeem asks her.

She draws a trembling breath. “I’m okay,” she says and draws another breath, lets it out. “I’m okay.”

“You’re not.” Rajeem says gently as he leans back. “But you will be.”

She clenches her trembling hands in her lap and nods.

- 

“A vivid reality, a naked morality, a place where wishes come true.”

They’re sitting on the roof of the van, a bottle of fancy beer each between them.

She’s twenty-three.

Below them Magnus is curled fast-asleep in the lap of Valerie, the rest of them crowding around an upside-down box with chips and cards. They’d been banned from playing after the second time Haley caught Paris cheating and he’d sold her out without hesitation.

Miles had scrawled CHEATER on both their foreheads with neon orange lipstick – hers smudged from where Ece had planted a wet kiss.

The fire they’d been using to make s’mores is nothing more than dying embers but there’s just enough light from the lanterns in the trees to read the cards if they squint.

“A dream,” she answers after a moment of contemplation.
He’s wearing a button-up with the sleeves rolled up to the elbow, looking fairly relaxed with his head tilted towards the stars, long thick box braids spilling down his back. He’s got one leg pulled to the chest, the other dangling off the roof of the van.

“Hey, Faye?”

“Mm?”

“I think I’m going to ask Magnus to marry me.” She nearly drops the bottle she’d lifted to take a sip. “No, I know I’m going to ask Magnus to marry me,” Paris corrects himself. “I can’t think of anything I want more than to spend the rest of my life with him.”

She looks at him and the softness of his mouth, the little crinkles by his eyes and the warmth in them as he looks down at his snoring boyfriend.

“He’s beautiful, isn’t he?” There is drool dripping down Magnus chin and the little butterfly clips in his hair are all askew. By his ear is the green dragonfly she’d made out of glass and metal for their first Christmas together.

She still wears the scarf Miles made for her.

She turns her head when she feels him watching her and she tilts her head just in time to catch the gentle look in his eyes before he turns away.

He lifts his beer to his lips and takes a slow sip.

Below them Haley finally notices her girlfriend has been sneaking cards all along and Miles bemoans them all as he throws his cards into the air. Ece throws her hands up and backs slowly away from an advancing Haley, a sheepish look on her face.

There’s a yelp and a scramble for movement, cries for mercy intermixing with Miles grumbling and Valerie’s laughter.

“Hey, Faye?”

“Mm?”

There is a splash as Haley throws Ece into the water with a roar of triumph.

“Be my best man.”

-

Ece marries Haley.

Magnus marries Paris.

Valerie and Miles finally gets together.

Faye meets her murderer.

-
“What do you want more than anything in the world, Faye?” Jonah whispers into her ear as he tears into her.

She can’t answer, tears and snot dripping down her face, her broken jaw locked uselessly around the ball gag in her mouth. Her mind is screaming, a white noise of pain and desperation.

“I didn’t have an answer before I met you,” he tells her. “Just another day in an endless loop of nothingness. But you gave me a taste of life, Faye. You gave me reason.” He digs his fingers into the gaping wounds in her back. “And then you took it away.”

“But you’re mine now.”

Happiness.

“Mine forever.”

A promise.

“Mine, mine, mine, mine.”

- 

“Hey, Faye?”

“Mm?”

“Given to all man then taken away, you can beg for more time but I never stay. What am I?”

That one is easy.

“Life.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm a bit bemused by the fact that a fair share of you were surprised that I decided to detail out her past like this. I thought it was fairly obvious that Faye was going to matter from the get-go because how can we get to know Sasuke if we don't understand that part of her? How can we begin to deal with the trauma if we don't know the depth of it?

Then I was like, right, I'm the author.

Had to erase a comment or two because wow, some of you got enormously spiteful over the direction of the last chapter of this story which, at that, is something that's entirely free and I was like nah. Critique is one thing and you can be how bitter you want, but try to refrain from name calling, yeah?

There are different kind of traumas - there are the obvious kind, like that left in the wake of Jake and Jonah. But there's a devastation in spending years trying to rebuild and then having everything torn away a second time. That is, it hurts. And for that to impact we need to understand just what she had before she died.

Anyway! Next chapter we're back in Konoha and, more importantly, Naruto, Sakura
and Kakashi which many of you have been waiting for. And in the chapter after that we're back with Sasuke and things are about to go down. We're about to reach a turning point and I'm so ready for it you don't even know. We're also getting back to poor Kiba and Sai very soon but there's a lot to tie together as we reach the mid-point of this story and I mean, Konan? Kisame? Itachi? ... Tobi, unfortunately.

The things I've got planned.

Next chapter: The Key.

Now I just need to cram approximately 1000 years of history before Tuesday and this Easter will have been a success.

Cheers to you!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In the beginning, they are equal.

Their body sits in a boneless slump against the wall of the living room opposite the collapsed corpses of his parents. Blood drips from their ears, running from their nose and mixing with the drool slipping from an unhinged jaw.

Their eyes are empty, fixed on the pale corpses of Mikoto and Fugaku.

They don’t acknowledge the shadow that reaches out with a trembling hand to brush away a wet trail beneath their eye.

- 

The boy is an aching trauma of why and the question resonates inside the broken pieces of what had once been Faye Henley.

Why did he do it? She does not know, she tells him, but he loved you – he loved you so much.

Why are they hurting me? She doesn’t know, she tells him, some people – some people just want to hurt.

It isn’t enough.

She claws her way through the cracks of Sasuke and Faye and she clings, keeping them glued together with pure desperation. Tells them it’s okay, it’s okay, it’ll be over soon and we’ll be free and we won’t let anyone hurt us again-

They’re a mishmash of ill-fit pieces brought together and Danzo smiles at her when he kneels down to clasp her shoulder and says that if he tells anyone-

Sasuke has no one left to tell, it’s an easy promise to make.

- 

When the boy’s body turn eight years old she drags all the furniture out of the house and buys an enormous couch.

She tears down the mirrors and never bothers to replace them.

She picks out one of the storage rooms beneath the house and drags it all out, over wooden floors and dead grass to store it in one of the many abandoned houses on the compound. She edges carefully around the dead bodies that never quite go away and when the moon stands high she wipes her dirty hands on her pants.

She paints the walls of the room yellow, the ceiling red with black clouds.

It becomes the Key to the existence of Uchiha Sasuke.

I AM ASPIRED BY ALL
**YET HARD TO FIND**

**YOU CAN SEARCH ENDLESSLY**

**BUT I HAVE LITTLE PEACE OF MIND.**

**WHAT AM I?**

Naruto hands the pot of ink over to Sakura and sticks his thumb into his mouth even as the wound steams, sealing itself much faster than it had when he was thirteen and just learning how to tap into the Kyuubi’s chakra.

Sakura bites her own thumb open, squeezing a generous amount of blood out before sealing it shut with an absent flicker of her chakra.

They crouch down, shoulder to shoulder, as they mark out the spot just beneath the last line of their third.

“Okay,” Naruto breathes out and draws the bottle-brush he’d received from Jiraiya.

“Let’s do it,” Sakura agrees and holds out the pot.

こうふく

**HAPPINESS**

The seal burns a violent sort of blue, hissing as the ink bubbles and steams before turning to ash that disappears before it can touch the ground as it flakes off the door.

The hallway is empty, covered in the dust that had accumulated since they unsealed the compound and they remain still for a long breathless moment.

“It worked,” Naruto says, tone layered with disbelief.

Sakura bumps her shoulder against his. “You did good.” She’s smiling despite her exhaustion and he feels momentarily guilty for tearing her out of the bed in the middle of the night.

“You both did,” a third voice agrees.

Kakashi has to snag them both by the forearm – one hand alight with the rasengan, the other flared with chakra hardy enough to take down a mountain.

“I miss the cute little genins who stumbled over their own feet,” he says mournfully, releasing them as the chakra crawling beneath their skin dies almost sheepishly. “So violent.”

“Naruto is still your cute little genin,” Sakura points out smartly.

Kakashi side-eyes him and Naruto flashes him the puppy eyes.

“This is why Sasuke was my favourite,” Kakashi sighs.

This earns him twin flat looks which he ignores in favour of studying the door, as if he could somehow unravel its secrets from the expanse of light wood.

“There’s a saying,” Kakashi says with a levity that contrasts with the tension in his shoulders, “that some secrets are better left untold.”
It feels like half a lifetime since they became his.

Naruto had been everything he’d expected him to be – loud, lonely, a desperation to be acknowledged. Sakura had been insecure, childish and clinging to the idea of recognition from the dark broody Uchiha as a means for acceptance.

Sasuke had been everything he didn’t want him to be and then even worse.

They’ve come a long way, he thinks as he looks at them.

Naruto is the tallest of them now, no longer the short runt after nearly three years with the Toad Sannin who’d forced him into a regular diet and a healthy exercise program. He looks so much Minato that something inside of him aches – the sunshine yellow of his hair, the blue of his eyes. His nose and jaw is all Kushina, the shape of his eyes, too. The best of them both.

Sakura, likewise, had been put on proper nutrition and training under the Slug Sannin. No more dieting meant that her body been allowed to grow the muscles it wanted and it was impossible to think her anything but the kunoichi she was with the straight back and a look in her eyes that spoke of a surety and self-confidence her younger self had lacked completely.

Kakashi dreads to learn that two years under the Snake Sannin had done to the last of his students.

They exchange a look.

“Maybe,” Sakura acknowledges.

“But he’ll always be our Sasuke, no matter what,” Naruto says with a strength and surety Kakashi can be nothing but proud of.

“There’s nothing that will change our minds,” Sakura affirms and he smiles at them, a curve beneath his mask.

Truthfully, he expected nothing less but old fears are hard to shake off.

The tension in his shoulders ease.

“Let’s go, Kakashi-sensei!” The command is an echo, two voices layered on one, but for a second he swears he hears a third in it as they push the door and tumble into a reality none of them could ever have imagined.

- 

It isn’t a big room.

The walls are painted yellow, a soft kind of colour that bellies the aching anguish that pervades the air around them. A layered loneliness, an ache of regret, a despair and horror that weights their very steps and fills their lungs.

Above them, the ceiling is painted red with black clouds.

Cluttered in piles are notebooks in all sorts of sizes – some of them open, as if thrown aside or abandoned half-way through. There are large scrolls in the right corner closest to the door, two of them gently rolled up and held together with neat bows.

There are paintings on the walls, small canvases crowding together with sketches under and over them, notes, words in that strange language scrawled over and over in repeating patterns.
Itachi stares down at them from some of them, Uchiha Fugaku and Mikoto as well.

But there are other people too.

In one of the pictures closest to them a dark skinned man with flat nose and almost cat-like features is sitting on a roof with a bottle of amber liquid. His hair is long and drawn back in a style favoured by those in Iwa, the thick braids spilling down his back. His eyes are dark and fond, captured in a moment of gentleness, a single knee drawn to his chest.

In another picture he’s slumped asleep against the shoulder of another dark skinned boy, younger with a lingering boyishness. This boy has skin nearly as dark, his hair is coarse and short. Little butterflies creeping over the arch of his ear and his eyes are clear and bright, something almost like awe shared between the boy and the watcher.

A third picture holds a large woman with a soft belly where golden glitter in her navel. Her hair is a vivid red, her skin a soft brown colour and she’s reading a book titled in that foreign language. There is a girl tucked against her side, a spindly looking thing with sharp orange around her eyes, clothes that drown her skinny shoulders and hunched over a little green plastic box with a small picture on it, thumbs on colourful buttons.

In another picture the large woman is on top of a metal contraption with two wheels. There is a small man seated on the back of it, one arm looped around her midriff and the other clutching a large bag against his chest where he sits with both legs thrown over the side of the seat. His hair is dyed a yellowish sort of blond with the roots black. His skin is mottled, dark brown spots against skin just a shade lighter.

Another picture and one more stranger, a girl with brown skin and hair braided tight against her head. She’s surrounded by the five other caught between the ages of early twenties to late twenties in the pictures around them. She’s soft flesh and a round face with a sharp pair of eyes and she’s reaching out with a hand unfurled. There’s fire traced in the brown of her eyes but her smile is kind.

The pictures of Fugaku and Mikoto mixes with a couple, the man with hunched shoulders, dark skin and dark hair and neat foreign sort of suit, the woman in a skirt and blouse, her skin pale and hair long and blonde. If Fugaku looks stern but proud and Mikoto with crinkles at the corner of her eyes this man and woman look nothing but tired, as it the feeling encompassed their entire being and erased all else that was to them.

There are pictures where their expressions mix, smiles becoming identical, eyes caught in wrong faces and torn asunder where they lay discarded on the dusty floor.

And then there’s the boy.

His skin is a warm sort of brown, his eyes liquid silver caught in a narrow face. Twelve or thirteen, on the cusp of becoming a teenager, caught between all ages up to that moment in time but never older. His hair is black and there’s a heaviness in the way he looks out at them.

There are pictures of him as a baby, little fingers wrapped around the finger of someone just a few years older.

A drawing of him leaning against a shadow of someone curled up in the corner of a large couch, a television with a picture of a metallic woman, between them a table with the flat crusted bread Sasuke was so fond of and a box of something pink and melting.

In one picture he’s standing on a cliff over a large expanse of dark water, arms extended and large
brown wings shadowed out around them.

In another he’s standing in front of a burning house, everything but the smile on his face erased and a bat dangling from the tips of his fingers.

The boy is everywhere, intermixing with pictures of a young Itachi.

There are pictures of Itachi smiling, index and middle-finger extended out and clearly about to touch the watcher.

In one he’s sitting curled up on a bed, a scroll spread out from the palm of his hand and over his knee, a small yellow dinosaur tucked up beside him and, next to it, an identical green one.

In another he’s kneeling, forehead pressed against the ground while three shadowed people look down upon him.

There’s one where his headband has been turned away, blood on his cheek and the comas of the sharingan twisted into a three pronged spiralling shape and a single tear falling from his left eye half-hidden by the shadows.

There is a picture of Itachi and the boy, side by side, twelve or thirteen years old, identical in height. Everything is perfectly detailed in neat methodical lead pencil except their mouths.

Instead of lips there’s just a stretch of dried blood curling up at one end, flaking from the time passed.

In the middle of the paintings and notebooks, the yellow walls and the red and black ceiling is a single mirror, easily the length of an average person. Matching its size is a canvas discarded belly down on the dusty floor.

Sakura is the first to move, bending down to gently pull it up and fold out the wood crafted to the back of it. Once rightened it stands completely straight, putting it in front of the mirror like a mirage.

It is completely torn apart.

Violent claw marks raking down what it had once contained, blood and ink absolutely drenching the picture, making it impossible to make out any of the previous colours. The wood is shattered where fingers had dug in and torn it asunder.

Sakura raises a hand to her mouth, eyes wide.

Naruto reaches out, snagging the other and squeezing it tight in his, both his knuckles and skin stolen of colour.

Kakashi crouches down and carefully shuffles some of the paintings aside, reaching for the small one turned away and tucked at the very back. He pulls it out slowly, a heavy feeling in his chest as he stares down at the blood splattered on the back of it, staining bright wood.

He turns it.

Inside it is a man, his hands folded carefully in his lap and smiling pleasantly out at the world. He’s sitting on a chair next to a bed, a dog bowl by his feet meticulously traced, his shoes spotless.

Behind the man the walls are painted the same soft yellow as that of the room.
Welcome to the turning point of this story!

I'm posting this about five days early because I was pretty much finishing up chapter 18 and 19 in my documents because of no-sleep and I was like; well then.

Remember how Sasuke is an unreliable narrator? Yeaaaah, that's a thing to keep in mind as we go along. Sasuke is a mess and a half and I'm trying to level it out with you as we go along but, I mean, I like to think my tagging was very on the nose from the get-go regarding the whole identity issue. As in, it's a thing.

But it's very possible to put the pieces together, I'm just not gonna confirm anything. We get there when we get there.

I'm just a tiny bit excited about next chapter because wow let me till you we have things happening (yes, it is mostly done and I'll throw it at you as soon as I can because you're all brilliant and this story was still supposed to be, like, three chapters, five at most, and look at me go).

This ties in with the next chapter as we get back to Sasuke and it's pretty important for the development of things so, yeah, once I'm done with the last part I'm just posting the hell out of it. Just need to wrangle Kisame down properly when I have time to sit down and do it and I have a part I'm a bit iffy about still so I'm still poking around with it. Several familiar faces are about to return in chapter 18 which I know a bunch of you have been anxious about.

We're also getting back to the normal rhythm of things!

Time for another attempt at convincing my dog that me trying to take a bath does not mean I'm drowning.

It's a work in progress.

I just want some alone time with the new One Piece damn it.

Cheers to you!
It’s raining.

Sasuke knows she’s dreaming even before opening her eyes.

There’s a flatness to the sound around her – a lack of echo, a noise like drops against windowpanes but without a room to look out from.

When she opens them it’s to a static emptiness – a white expanse of nothing and the ground stretching like the reflective surface of an enormous mirror where rain falls like drops of liquid mercury that disappears into the spider-thin cracks within it.

She stretches out her arm, watching as it slides right off her skin, pooling in the palm of her hand and spilling over with only a lingering coolness in its wake.

When she looks down there is nothing there to meet her gaze.

“Do you remember how we used to sing?” The voice in an echo in the expanse. “He would thrum his guitar with clumsy fingers – insistent even as we told him we could do another song.” A step. “We used to find it endearing.”

Faye Henley steps up beside her, the same grey hoodie and jacket she’d worn the day she visited Jake in jail on her twentieth birthday. Her hair long and swept to the right side of her neck, mustard yellow scarf looped twice.

“Do you remember his favourite?” Her voice is a reverberation of an old wound, head tilted, hands clasped behind her back.

She hums and Sasuke picks it up - a slow whimsical tune that sounds flat in the expanse of nothingness - rising and falling with the echo inside her own mind of another voice, another time, another life.

“Just like that,” Faye says quietly as it tapers off. “Just like that.” It’s a whisper but it flares across the metal water, like the ripple of a stone dropped into a pool of water. “I was starting to wonder if you’d forgotten all about it.”

She turns to Sasuke, her eyes a mirror of the liquid mercury falling around them.

“But you wouldn’t do that, would you?” Her tone comes out flat, at odds with the smile on her face.

When she tilts her head to the sky Sasuke looks down at her hand and then the silver slipping between the cracks of the web beneath her feet.

She looks up and only has time to catch a flash of Faye’s smile as the palm of her hand presses against her chest.

The world tilts and she falls, hitting the ground hard, eyes open and locked on the white expanse. Rain falls upon her, drops of liquid metal that she does nothing to shield herself from.

Faye takes a slow step over her, one booted foot settling on either side of her hips.
Sasuke’s arms lay spread wide where they’ve fallen as she stares up at her – at what she had been and missed every single day, mourned and hated and loved all at the same time.

“They would have wanted us to move on, you know?”

They stare at each other.

“They would have wanted us to be happy.”

“But we were.” And there’s something in her throat, something thick and broken. “We were happy.” And her voice cracks, something young and aching all at the same time.

Faye sinks to her knees, settling on her stomach and bending over her, palms coming down flat against the surface of the lake on either side of her head, her hair spilling down to tickle against Sasuke’s chin.

She’s so close that Sasuke can feel her breath on her lips.

“And you can be happy again,” Faye says and there’s something desperate in the way she searches her eyes. “You can.” Her forearms presses against the side of her head and Faye hunches over her, an arch in her back, bent over and around her, blocking out the world until all she can see is silver.

“He kissed you.”

There’s a look in those eyes – something wretched, an echo of a pain so encompassing that it had left her in bits and pieces afterwards, unable to put herself back together as she drowned in her own blood in a room of soft yellow walls.

Sasuke knows because that memory is as much her own as it belongs to Faye.

“I didn’t want him to.”

Faye watches her, something dark in her metallic eyes.

“I have to get stronger,” she whispers. “Strong enough that no one can hurt us again.”

Faye smiles and it is all sharp teeth and jagged pieces.

When she bends down her breath ghosts over Sasuke’s face as she presses scorching lips to the shell of her left eye and Sasuke struggles not to flinch because Faye is suddenly too hot and her ashen skin is cracking, a glow of red and yellow snaking through the gaping maws as smoke crawls from the depth of her lungs to curl out at the corners of her mouth when she draws back.

The silver of her eyes glitter.

“Isn’t it their turn to burn?”

Sasuke stumbles out of her bed, barely getting the door to the bathroom open before her legs folds, knees colliding hard against the cold floor as she bends over and vomits, fingers clenching tight against the porcelain. Her stomach cramps, muscles clenching, forcing more of it past her lips as she shivers, cold sweat beading at her brow.

She stares blearily down at the dark mess from alcohol and chocolate that she’d barely felt the taste of as she slumps against it. She spits, grimacing at the feel of acid in her mouth and nose, flexing her
hands as they shake.

Her shirt is wet, plastered against her back from perspiration.

She stays until the idea of moving doesn’t make her green, climbing carefully to her feet with her palm pressed against the wall. Takes a moment to just breathe.

She rinses her mouth with water, blowing her nose and grabbing tiredly for the toothpaste, the bathroom silent save for the sound of pouring water and the brush scraping against her teeth, her eyes closed and half-slumped with one hand on the counter to keep herself upright.

Another rinse.

Spits.

Splashes water into her face and wipes it away with a tired hand, tilting her face up to look into the mirror.

She reaches up, touching the bruised skin beneath a single silver eye.

-“That’s an insane plan.” Kiba stares at Sai. “No, scratch that, it’s beyond insane. We’ve gone right into a bag full of cats madness and don’t look at me like I’m the dumb one here!” Kiba rolls over the best he can with his arms bound behind his back, struggling to get up on his knees even as his back bends awkwardly.

“If you don’t quiet down I’m going to have to hit you,” Sai informs him bluntly.

“And then hit me!” If he had his arms free he would have thrown them up in frustration. “What you’re suggesting is suicide.”

“Danzo-sama has already been informed,” Sai says and Kiba wants nothing more than to scratch his stupid blank eyes off his face as the information registers. He snarls, swivelling around and twists, aims to at least kick Sai’s knee out.

The heel against his forehead sends him skittering back, arms colliding harshly against the floor and he bites off a whine because fuck. But at the same time he gasps as chakra rolls through his system and ow.

The kunai that thuds into the floor beside him narrowly takes his ear off and he bares his teeth at the other.

“Three hours.”

A bundle of jerky and chakra pill rolls across the floor as the door closes.

Kiba rolls to his knees, pressing his forehead against the planks as he squeezes his eyes shut and wheezes, an unhappy laugh slipping out of him.

“Sure,” he hisses as he snags the kunai with his mouth and throws it back to bruised fingers that catches them with a weakness he wants nothing to do with. “Give me three hours and I’ll be ready to take out any ANBU guard.” He tells the floor. “Can barely move my arms and I’m not even a jounin but, by the joys! An ANBU guard will be easy.”

The rope spirals into a pile behind his back and blood floods through his arms and he has to bite his
tongue not to scream as he gingerly begins forcing them forward, sweat at his brow and nausea rising with agony.

“Fuck,” he sobs. “Fuck.”

Kiba isn’t wrong, Sai thinks as he hoists the thin body of the ninken closer while tearing through the forest with Ne members Dokueki and Choukai spreading out to make sure they weren’t seen. If Danzo picked up on the fact that the rumours of Uchiha Sasuke in Otogakure was a false trail before Sai got him out from Konoha they were as good as dead.

And Danzo was meticulous – checking and rechecking, working through information and constantly covering his trail.

It wasn’t a matter of if they were going to be discovered but when.

It was as good as a death trap.

He knew that.

But it had been weeks and Sai looks at Kiba and knows that they don’t have another choice if Kiba was even supposed to have the slightest chance at a future as an active shinobi. And Sai doesn’t understand much but he understands duty and he understands giving your life for your village.

Kiba couldn’t see the mottled bruised mess of his arms behind his back but Sai can.

Three hours isn’t nearly enough.

Which is why he drugged the guard.

All Kiba has to do is get outside the walls and into the right spot to wait for Sai to get rid of the other Ne members far from where their bodies could be discovered anytime soon and they would at least have a chance. He had to make it look like an escape attempt, he would send a bird telling Danzo-sama that he’d gone off in pursuit off the prisoner.

He would not need backup, he’d confirm, because Dokueki and Choukai were with him.

Sai has a plan.

It’s a bad plan – it’s half-wrought and desperate but it’s the only thing he has.

He touches the back of his pouch and the information it contains as he speeds up.

Three hours.

“I don’t even have a watch,” Kiba groans, staring down at the ruined mess of his arms. The loss of muscles, too tightly bound for too long and the way his chakra struggles sluggishly through his system isn’t… it isn’t good.

It’s actually really, really bad.

He bites his lip and keeps slowly closing and opening his hands, the slow thick feel making every little twitch an agony, everything from his shoulders down to the tips of his fingers burning with
pain. He presses his head back against the wall with a hiss and a glare up at the ceiling, his body sticky with sweat.

He counts internally, tries to track it the best he can.

Half an hour, he thinks and desperately hopes he isn’t off.

He wants to sob as he forces his arms back against his back, gripping his left wrist with his hand and clenches his muscles to try and prevent the trembling as he pushes them flat against the wall even as everything inside of him screams at the feeling.

He closes his eyes and slumps as the door opens and there’s a crash of steps and a wet sound.

He cracks an eye open.

Stares.

“Fuck did you give them, Sai?” he whispers at the sight of the Ne skittering awkwardly on unsteady hands and feet.

Their head jerks towards him. “Pup-**py**?” Their voice breaks and the hand reaching towards him is kicked away with vicious satisfaction. He pulls his arms back, swearing and pushing back tears as he sinks down on his knees before the Ne-guard.

There’s something vicious and ugly in his chest as he sinks bruised fingers into the edges of the mask and tears it off.

It clatters to the floor.

Kiba stares at the wild hair, the narrowed pupils and the fanged marks on the other’s cheek. Yellow, not the main-house red, but very much Inuzuka. Old enough to have been marked. Old enough to have been given a puppy and – lost it.

“Pup-**py**?”

Kiba opens his mouth, closes it.

“You can smell it on me, can’t you?” he asks. “I smell just like a puppy.” Puppy, dog, traces from an old canine contract rooted into the very depth of their blood.

There’s something helpless in the way the Ne member bobs their head

He searches their face for any trace of familiarity but the Inuzuka-clan is large and they could be a bastard for all he knew. It happened all the time - his mother tended to haul them up when she caught the scent trail and adopt them into the clan.

His sister used to joke that they were all a bunch of bastards.

The fact that they didn’t share a father was an old joke.

The chakra burns through his system and he knows that there’s only a matter of time before the blocked tenkatsu in his nose and ears pops.

Three hours.

The Ne-member practically collapses against him, rubbing their chin against his bare leg and Kiba
stares at them.

Inuzuka always had peculiar reactions to herbs of all sorts – it was why they preferred their own vets before the hospital.

“Sai is going to kill me.”

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Sasuke blinks as Kisame drags the hat down over her ears before reaching for the long thick scarf half-thrown over his shoulder and giving it four looping wraps around her head.

She has to reach up and pull it down to see over the edge of it.

“Kisame?” she asks unsurely.

“We.” The large shark man ties his own scarf tight. “Are going on a mission together.” He reaches into the wardrobe, pulling out two pair of thick snowboots. “Those are Itachi’s – see if they’ll fit you.” He pushes them roughly into her arms and she hesitates before pulling them on, pressing down at the front and wiggling her toes.

She reaches up to catch the thick woollen socks before they could collide with the side of her head. Removes the shoes, pulls them on and stomps her feet in properly as she straightens.

“We’re in Ame,” she reminds him as a bag is thrown out, landing roughly by her feet. “It won’t be snow for days – no matter how fast we are.” She’s still wearing her own jacket, the thick Akatsuki cloak Konan had given her secured properly over it.

Unlike the high collars of the other members hers had a large hood, the collar of her jacket and her mask hiding everything up to her nose anyway.

She blinks when Kisame pulls her hands up one at the time, firmly securing thick gloves to them.

“Tobi is taking us.” Kisame says as he reaches out and turns her this and here, giving her a dubious once over as she stares up at him. “He’s got this teleportation thing going for him, apparently. He’s dropping us straight into snow country.”

“What about Itachi?”

“He’s doing a mission with Konan.” Kisame drags his hand sideways over her forehead beneath the cap, fingers large and calloused, disappearing before she had time to react to them. “They’re making a move for the Gobi.”

It takes her a moment to realize he’d fuzzily swept her hair in place properly beneath the beanie, the motion entirely foreign.

“What are we doing then?” she asks as she crouches down to unseal a notebook and some pencils, shifting them to one her supply scrolls.

They could easily have skipped the bags entirely but civilians tended to get iffy about travellers walking around barehanded – a sure sign of shinobi.

Most nukenin tended to use it to their advantage. It was cheaper to hire nukenin than it was to hire Konoha-nin, for example, but it could be a double-edged sword too since Konoha nukenin, for one, had an especially bad reputation.
It wasn’t really a surprise with the likes of Uchiha Itachi, famous clan killer, and Orochimaru who’d experimented on children.

And hired or not nukenin were still traitors and murders.

Akatsuki turned this to their advantage. Recruiting the best of the worst and putting them under the illusion of obedience, cloaking them in black with red clouds. They offered cheap service to poor villages and as they grew reaped the benefit of being the sole center of business. They were also, infamously, nukenin who hunted other nukenin – cashing in large sums of money and good reputation in one broad swoop.

It was a long time project, Orochimaru had said, a quiet admiration and something almost like envy in his yellow eyes.

Otogakure had been an attempt at something like it with himself as Kage but it had never born fruit and Sound had become a whisper of ill-ease as people disappeared into his laboratories.

“Do you still have your Konoha hitai-ate?”

She does.

After she got her black jacket with the Konoha plate already secured on the arm she’d removed the hitai-ate fastened on her first blue one and kept it in her back pouch. She’d worn it only once since then but she still had it – just a touch away.

She nods.

“Scratched though?” He steps before her, seeking her eyes – easily towering above her.

His skin is rough, blue, different from anything she’s ever seen and she likes it. She likes the cleverness, the unapologetic way he keeps his back straight, the way he bares his too sharp teeth. Kisame is Kisame.

There is something in her chest – an anticipation, a daring, a shift and a change. It burns through her chest as she looks at the man she’s going to ask to become her shishou.

“Yes,” she admits, tilting her chin to meet his eyes.

She sees the way he lingers on the silver of her left one but he doesn’t ask and Sasuke wouldn’t have any answers anyway.

Chapter End Notes

Have I been rocking Marina and the Diamonds for the past hour and cleaning up this chapter for posting instead of sleeping? Yes. Yes I have.

I have missed Sasuke - have you? I bet you have. I know you have because I read every single little review and let me tell you, there’s been an outcry to know what the hell happened after the kiss (which was a Bad Thing).

Way, way, excited to finally pin this chapter down because?? So much happening???
Can't contain excitement, will combust like whooosh.

You've also been impatient to find out what's going on with Kiba and Sai so look at me just presenting you with both in this chapter! How exciting. How awesome I am. Sushi for me this Friday in celebration!

(On a side-note I have to read 600 pages by Monday with the joy of also working through the entirety of Saturday. If you're reading this, Dumbledore, I'll kindly accept my letter to Hogwarts and a time-turner before noon tomorrow please-and-thank-you).

As always your response is golden and I am lucky to have so many fantastic people to share my joy of writing with.

Cheers to you!
Sasuke leans against the door opening as she waits for Kisame to pull supplies from the lower cupboards, sealing away most of it and only leaving enough for a meal or two in the backpacks by his feet. It’s easy enough to use sealing scrolls but it’s easier to pre-sort the food. Sasuke had never bothered with it, adapting her own seals minutely with small keyed tells, but she knows it’s something of an oddity because Kabuto had never managed to unseal hers when he tried.

So she leaves it to Kisame and fiddles with the gloves he’d given her. They’re hand-knitted things, blue and strangely adorable with the little sharks on the back of them. By the size of them she guesses they’re the man’s own and she wonders if he’d bought them himself or if they’d been a gift.

The very front of them can be folded back, easy access for shinobi who used summoning, and there’s a metal plate encased in leather on the inside of the back.

Cute and practical.

“Sasu-chan.” She turns to the voice, meeting his gaze blankly.

There’s something strange in the way he pauses to watch her – a tension that comes and goes and edges into something dangerous the longer he stares at the scratched through hitai-ate slanting sideways over her left eye.

Kisame had been the one to pull it down after she secured it, saying nothing as the silver eye disappeared from view. She’s got her mask pulled up over her nose and she doesn’t have to look into the mirror to know who she shares an uncanny resemblance with.

The anger shifts into something else, an anticipation, something she doesn’t like.

“Tobi is very happy to help Sasu-chan and Kisame-san!” He claps his hands together and there’s something almost like glee in his tone as he spins on the spot.

She flares her yin chakra, tracking Kisame’s position carefully as she lowers her hands, dipping them beneath the Akatsuki cloak and into the pockets of her jacket. “I didn’t know you could teleport that far,” she says. “Impressive.”

The eye visible in the hole of his mask practically sparkles.

“Sasu-chan really thinks so? Sasu-chan thinks Tobi is a good boy?”

Kisame cuffs him on the back of his head as he steps past, pushing one of the bags into Sasuke’s arms. “Don’t be a creep.” The shark-man gives him an unimpressed look as Tobi clutches the back of his head in comical exaggeration.

Sasuke shifts her body towards Kisame, pushing away from the wall she’d been leaning against. “We ready to go?”

Tobi sniffs about being ignored as Kisame pulls on his own gloves, a simple dark grey pair with blue stitching. “Yeah.” He slings one of the straps of his backpack over Samehada’s handle and it dangles pitifully on his large broad pack. “No funny business,” he says to Tobi. “I want us about two weeks
away from Yuki.”

Tobi straightens. “You can trust Tobi, Kisame-san!” He stretches out a hand in either direction. “Hold on tight because we’re going for a ride!”

Kisame and Sasuke exchanges a look and Tobi wiggles his fingers.

They reach out, palms clasping, and Tobi pulls them towards him as the world distorts into a spiralling vortex that sucks them in, eats them up and spits them out momentarily into a black expanse before they’re shifting again and Sasuke lands in the snow with a flump of surprise when she goes knee-deep instead of hitting solid ground.

Kisame hoists her up by the back of her cloak and jacket and she brushes snow from her gloves while circulating chakra through her feet and lands easy as a cat on the surface when he drops her.

Tobi has flopped down to make a snow-angel, spreading his arms wide with childish giggles as he rolls out of it, spinning beneath the fluffy snow falling slowly from the skies.

“Look, Sasu-chan!” Tobi’s voice is an echo of delight. “An angel!”

She looks around them. “I’ve never been to Yuki no Kuni before.” The trees around her aren’t nearly the size of Konoha’s and there’s a lot of pine trees, green and brown clashing against the bright snow. Some are small, other’s looking more like Christmas trees meant for some fancy big city hotel, others with their trunks bare for the very top.

There’s little frosted berries growing on some of them and her hearing is sharp enough to pick up the rustle of movement beneath – likely rodent judging by the scritch-scratch of tiny claws.

Tobi bounces up to her. “Does Sasu-chan like the snow?”

“Shouldn’t you get moving?” Kisame steps up beside her. “I heard you’re taking the zombie duo to Kiri.”

Tobi folds his arms, shoulders hunching and clearly pouting behind his mask judging by the way he turns away. “Kakuzu-san doesn’t like Tobi. He’s mean. And Hidan keeps asking to cut poor Tobi up!”

“Not my problem.” Kisame pins him in place with a sharp look.

Sasuke feels a flicker in Tobi’s chakra for just a second before he points dramatically “Kisame is mean!” he says loudly and turns to Sasuke. “This is why Tobi likes Sasu-chan the best,” he says feverishly before his chakra twists and he vanishes without a single trace to be found.

There’s a stretch of silence.

“There is something seriously wrong with that man,” Kisame says with sharp dislike when she glances up at him. “A thirty year old man has no business hounding around Itachi’s sixteen year old brother.” He sounds mildly disturbed.

Sasuke looks down at her gloves. Then up.

“Kisame-san?” He glances down at her. “I read the book. Twice.”

It’s just the two of them, the scritch-scratch of tiny claws beneath the snow stilled as whatever creature responsible settled down in its cold nest.
She pushes the hitai-ate up with her palm and he turns to face her fully as she straightens her back. “There is something you should know about me before I—” she bites the word off. “If you still want me to, after—” she hesitates. “I—” she breathes in carefully. “I’m a girl.”

Kisame stares at her.

“I know – I know I don’t have the right body, biologically,” she gets out as the silence stretches out around them. “And I – I don’t really dress like one, I suppose.” Her mouth twists in self-deprecation. “But I know – I know I’m a girl.” She clenches her fists, eyes fixed on her boots. “I know I am one.” There is iron in her mouth and glass in her throat as everything inside of her twists up. “I know—“

“Oh,” he interups, as if it’s that simple, and she jerks, looking up – finding eyes without judgement looking back. “The only one who knows you is you,” Kisame says gently. “If you tell me you’re a girl then you are.”

He takes a step forward, crouching down, and she blinks wetly when he reaches up gently to wipe the tear spilling from beneath her left eye.

“Who else knows?” he asks her - voice levelled with an empathy Sasuke doesn't know what to do with.

She stares at him, more tears spilling to join the first and she gives a little hiccup, hands coming up to mute the sound as she squeezes her eyes shut.

Another broken noise crawls up her throat before she can stop it.

Kisame remains where he is, watching her silently as she struggles to get hold of herself. “It’s okay to cry,” he tells her. “Even for nukenin.”

She shakes her head, afraid to open her mouth as tears trail wetly over her hands, sinking into the fabric of her mask and freezing against her lashes.

“You know, Itachi,” he says slowly, “he never forgot about you.” He rises from his crouch, turning his attention to the stretch of white snow and the flakes spiralling slowly from the sky. “Whenever we had a mission even remotely near Konoha he’d look at me with those eyes of his and he was so damn young - how could I deny him?” His mouth ticks. “We’ve made more trips to Konoha than any other village these past nine years.”

Kisame quiets for a long moment.

“He broke into Konoha a couple of weeks after your meeting three years ago, you know?” he asks rhetorically as she scrubs a furious hand against her eyes. “Barely slept and then just left – in the middle of the night. Had to hunt him down and haul him away before he tripped at least five different alarms while hounding through Intelligence.”

Kisame quiets for a long moment.

“He’s not a violent person, your brother, no matter what you might think of him.” His mouth twists. “But seeing you – what had happened to you – it set something off in him. So he came back to the village and he hunted for any sort of information on what might have happened to you, on what had gone wrong, and do you know what he found?”

He turns towards her, pins her in place.

“Nothing.”
She stills.

“Everything in your files had been completely erased.” Kisame tugs a hand through the dark blue of his hair, something flat creeping through his tone. “There was nothing in them but your name, a note on the fact that your family were dead, and then nothing up until you hit twelve where someone had noted your graduation and team assignment.”

She reaches up, wiping absently at her eyes with the knitted shark gloves and he gives her a wry grin.

“Do you know what I hate more than anything?” She shakes her head. “Liars.” His mouth twists, teeth bared and something dark in his eyes when he looks at her. “And Konoha just keeps piling up with them.”

“Do you think I’m a liar?”

He looks at her, wrapped up from head to toe in coat, scarf, gloves and hat, hitai-ate pushed up awkwardly, mismatched eyes bruised from stress and bad sleep - red from the scratchy surface of the knitted shark gloves Itachi had bought him years earlier to replace the ones he lost during an ambush.

Young, just like Itachi had been.

“Everybody has secrets,” Kisame says plainly. “It doesn’t make you a liar.”

She makes another swipe at her eyes, shoulders hunched and a sniffle beneath the mask.

He makes a soft noise, any remaining anger draining out of him as he beckons. “Come here.”

She hesitates for only a moment before closing the distance between them and Kisame plants a hand on her head, pressing down, her hat slanting as she tilts her head up towards him as he leans down.

“Listen here, kid, because I’m only saying this once, alright?” He waits until she nods. “I think that you’re a good kid that was dealt a bad hand and I think that goes for both you and Itachi.”

He searches her eyes.

“I think you’re lost, I think you’re afraid, I think you’re feeling lonely and I know you miss that team of yours even as you desperately tries to not think about them. It doesn’t make you a bad kid nor does it make you a liar.” He gives the hat a ruffle, mussing up the hair beneath it before he releases her. “If I’m not asking questions you have nothing to answer to,” he tells her firmly. “And you always have the choice not to answer. But as your shishou it’s my personal recommendation that you talk with your brother when we get back.”

Her eyes widen and he gives her a fiendish grin.

“Well?” he raises an eyebrow sharply. “You did tell me you read the book. Twice.”

She lurches into movement, pushing back her shoulders, places a hand over her heart, fist closed. “Thank you, Kisame-shishou!”

Sai does not kill him.

Kiba finds himself wondering if Sai is capable of the kind of anger that pushes others to murder because all the other boy had done was twitch, mouth dipping, an inability to make sense of the
guard heaved over Kiba’s shoulder.

“You were supposed to kill them.”

“Think of them as leverage,” Kiba says as he drops the guard to the ground and sinks to his knees.

“Danzo-sama will execute them for being weak.”

“And we’re not.” Kiba pushes a trembling hand through the dirty limp fur of Akamaru, struggling against the emotions inside of him because he knows now is not the time.

“They’re Inuzuka, Sai.” The boy stares back at him and Kiba is starting to understand that the emptiness is a creation, wrenched out of those in Ne and, when it failed, twisted into something not quite right. All in the name of Shimura Danzo, close friend of the old Sandaime Hokage and a valued and respected member of the Konoha council.

Kiba feels something hysterical bubbling in his chest and forcefully pushes it down as Sai re-evaluates the situation.

“You’re carrying them,” Sai says finally. "We're heading to Kawa."

“Kawa?” Kiba makes sure to rub his scent in properly before he steps back from Akamaru, biting back a whine, manages to sort of hunker down and wiggle the guard over his shoulder. He bites back a flash of nausea and dizziness as he stands up and knows that the only reason he’s moving is because of the soldier pills.

Sai already has Akamaru over his shoulder when he manages to straighten out.

He doesn’t look very impressed and he offers no answers.

Kiba forces a grin onto his lips. “After you.”

- Sai has to help him wash down in the evening.

They travel for hours, until Kiba’s reserves are almost completely burnt out and the guard thrown over his shoulder feels like a stone, his vision is tunnelling from exhaustion.

Sai places Akamaru gently down in the small clearing by a small lake and then catches Kiba as the other practically stumbles into him, already slumping and gasping as the forced focus that’d kept him moving drains out of him.

Sai lowers him down and hauls the guard over to the nearest tree, securing them quickly.

They can’t risk a fire but he rummages through his backpack for the soft berries he’d gathered into a jar and the bag of water skin and returns to Kiba who is sweating and shivering, a side-effect from being locked away from his chakra for so long.

Sai settles behind him, one leg thrown out on either side, and nudges the other back until he’s leaning against his shoulder, head slightly tilted and mouth open. When he presses the back of his hand against Kiba’s forehead it’s warm with fever.

Sai tilts the water skin to his lips, keeping his left arm secured around Kiba’s chest to keep him still and prevent choking. Puts it aside and scoops a handful of barriers which he squishes carefully in his palm and tilts against Kiba’s mouth, red spilling down his chin as his tired mouth works around them.
It’s not nearly enough and Sai frowns as he tilts the rest to his own mouth and swallows it down when Kiba shakes his head with a grumble of nausea.

He fetches soap, a small towel and a handful of tools and strips them both down before dropping into the lake and drags Kiba against his side, scrubbing him down in the cold water while ignoring the weak protests and battering away the hands that pushes against him. He works through the mattered hair, clips his nails and sets his nose properly with a twist of his wrist.

At this point Kiba is so out of it he barely even twitches.

Sai unseals the thick shinobi pants, shirt and sweater along with underwear and two pair of woollen socks he’s brought with him and dresses him. Gets the thick boots, hat and cloak and gets Kiba into those as well, frowning as the night gets colder.

Shinobi used chakra to help regulate their core temperature but Kiba doesn't have enough to even try and he's too out of it and too weak anyway.

Chakra fevers were best helped by keeping warm and he unrolls his sleeping roll and helps Kiba into it after tucking the other into his own cloak as tight as he can. He lifts the ninken up and deposits it beside him.

Sai hesitates but kneels down by the guard – checks their pulse, presses against the back of their head and the blood crusted there, and finally pulls down the front of their shirt down enough to draw a bastardized chakra-seal. It would at least give them a heads-up when they awoke but few had the skills to actually completely recreate a proper one. Instead he checks the ropes around their wrists and fingers, tied to prevent them from making seals, and unties them because it had clearly been made in a hurry.

He forces one wrist down to their left thigh, secures it and then ties it down around their foot. The other rope he loops around either upper arm and twists the left wrist up against the back in the middle of it and ties it up securely, checking to make-sure there the blood flow wasn’t being cut off before reaching into his pouch for tape which he wraps around the fingers tied up two-by-two--by-one.

Secures a large stripe over their mouth, around their head and touches briefly against the fanged marks on their cheeks.

_Inuzuka._

Sai doesn’t understand the worth in a name.

He’s a number in the ranks of Ne under the command of his Master. He’s worn numerous names, done endless missions, a tool in the hands of Konoha. His life is expendable, his worth none, fall in rank, follow orders. It isn’t about loyalty, it’s about existing for a single reason and living for that duty.

He thinks of Naruto and Sakura, of Hatake who’d slipped through the small window of his apartment with a box of _momen tofu_ to split between them and Sai wonders when he became a person with something like a favourite food.

“How do you know you’re doing the right thing?”

“Mah.” Hatake considers him. “You make sure you don’t regret it.”

He thinks about Tenten who invites him to lunch, Neji a silent company beside her and himself mildly bemused to have been included.
“I don’t know if anyone has asked you but – how does it feel to be on Team 7?” Her eyes are earnest, open, different from the blank stares of his fellow Ne. “It can’t be easy, filling the empty space left by Uchiha Sasuke.”

Sai supposes she isn’t wrong, that it’s how it looks. But he was never assigned to Team 7 to become a part of it and he’s already betrayed them by several times over with the mission reports that piles up on Danzo-sama’s desk.

But Team 7 makes him want.

“Naruto is my friend, too.” It’s a lie he tells Kiba as he forces the boy to the floor, presses his hand against his chest - feels the rise and fall as he breathes, the pounding of the heart keeping him alive.

Naruto isn’t his friend. He looks at the blond during the weeks as Kiba gets worse, wasting away in a small room and something ugly grows in his chest.

Naruto offers his hand out in the seal of reconciliation after spars even when his dislike is so clear and Sakura wrestles him down beside the blond and make sure they’re both equally free from wounds and bruises, shoving their shoulders back in place and healing broken fingers.

Hatake offers advice even knowing that Sai isn’t his, not really.

Because Sai belongs to Danzo-sama.

It has been the truth his entire life. He is nothing without Ne. Just a number, not even a name.

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But Team 7 makes him into Sai and Inuzuka glares at him with eyes that challenges him to be better.

“Who are you really, Sai?” Sakura asks after their first mission together, Naruto cradled in her arms, his backpack filled with the scrolls Danzo-sama had sent him for. “Because I look at you and I don’t know.”

Sai doesn’t either but as he slips into the sleeping roll beside a feverishly hot Kiba he thinks that he’s taken the first step to finding out.

He shifts, curling around the other carefully to share his body heat and wrinkles his nose at the tickle of hair in his nose as Kiba presses against him. Sai struggles briefly against the odd feeling of having someone tucked so close before he forces himself to relax.

Kiba is heavy, warm. His chest rising and falling, breath puffing against his Sai’s throat.

Sai would have regretted leaving Kiba in Ne.

- 

“We are not the ones responsible to get the Gobi jinchuuriki,” Konan tells him six days into the trip. “Pein-sama is handling it on his own. We are counting on your discretion.”

Considering they’re on a fast track to Kawa Itachi is inclined to believe her. “What is our mission?” He tilts his straw-hat, further hiding his face with a jingle of the bell as one of the civilian children tries to peer beneath the paper charms.

The father reaches down and drags them away with a mumble of hurried apologies and scolding followed by cries from a child feeling unfairly scolded for mere curiosity.
“We are meeting up with an unknown that has been reaching out to us.”

He glances over at her.

From the night of the massacre there had only been a matter of months before Akatsuki had extended their hand and he’d been slotted into their ranks and partnered up with Kisame. They had split up during missions but never once had they been assigned to others and he finds himself mildly discomfited by the absence of the other.

“They specifically asked for you.” Konan doesn’t look at him, doesn’t need to, he can practically feel the burn of her interest layered in the low tones of her voice. “If the information they claim to have is true it is worth the risk but it could very well be a trap.”

Information valued enough to catch the personal interest of Pein and paramount enough not to risk any foul-play by sending Konan.

And the contact had requested him by name.

It means that the contact is, most likely, from Konoha – something related to someone high-ranked enough to be of interest. There is a wide variety to choose from there – clan leaders, commanders, high-ranked shinobi in T&I, ANBU, in the ranks of the Hunter-nin. There is the civilian council and then shinobi and kunoichi who’d carved their flee-on-sight orders into the Bingo Books with blood. There is the Sandaime. There is Danzo.

Konoha secrets are a dangerous thing, Itachi thinks as they leave civilian roads and take to the trees.

He is, after all, one of the best kept ones.

“What kind of information?” he asks as he seals away the straw-hat into the black seal melting seamlessly in the dark fabric of his cloak in a copy of the other.

Konan is faster and has more endurance than him but she has not commented on the coughing fits that plague him at the end of the days, merely pours him an extra cup of willow bark tea, and she’s slowed down just enough to keep the stress from getting to his lungs.

It says something of Kisame’s character, Itachi thinks, that he hadn’t even noticed just how badly his sickness had ravaged him.

He doubts he’ll ever get his vision back but he’s gotten used to working through the blurriness and the inflammation in his lungs have lessened considerably according to Kakuzu who had done a rough check. He’s even having an easier time circulating chakra through his system and he doesn’t feel as nauseous and tired as he had.

“Need to know only.” She glances back at him, a shift of movement he barely catches with his right eye and he turns so he can see her properly with his left. “I’ll make you a trade.”

“Trade?” he echoes.

Itachi thinks of seeing Sasuke with dark around her eyes, painted identical to the woman beside him according to Kisame’s meticulous description. Cat eyes, he’d called it.

“It’s fitting, isn’t it?” Kisame had mused over breakfast. “I’m a shark-man who summons sharks and now I’ll have a cat-eyed student who summons cats.”
“If the information turns out to hold true it will be of interest to you personally.”

There is only one person in Konoha who would have fit within that criteria.

He stops dead and Konan lands several branches away from him.

She knows exactly what kind of territory she’s threading on and she’s looking at his chin at the first touch of red that spreads through his dark eyes in a web of danger.

There is a tightness to his jaw and she wonders what kind of look he has in his eyes.

Knows better than to satisfy curiosity.

“Pein-sama has agreed to share the entirety of the information with you should it prove to be what it is.” There’s a slight flutter from the paper arks lifting cautiously along her back. “In return he asks only that you to share something of your own.”

“What interest could Pein-sama have in the massacre of the Uchiha clan?” Itachi asks with a crease in his brow.

“Idle curiosity.”

There’s a breath in the silence, something sharp, and then his body language relaxes marginally. She thickens the protective seals of the papers that make up her eyes and meets his without reservation, catching the slight surprise in their red depths.

There’s a pause, a tick of amusement, before the red disappears behind closed eyelids and opens back up to the dark eyes shared with his younger sibling.

“How long?”

Konan very carefully doesn’t smile.

Chapter End Notes

Kisame is being very mindful of the fact that Sasuke doesn't like being touched in this chapter and that's very important to me.

I have always thought of Kisame as a man of action. He's absolutely not the sort to make empty promises and when he sees a problem he figures out a way to deal with it because he's not the sort to offer empty platitudes or stand around gawking.

I'm not sure if it comes across but what Kisame is giving Sasuke is important and we'll be getting deeper into this as we hit his POV somewhere in the next two chapters.

Is this plot going where you think it's going?? Oh it is. It very much is.

I feel kinda bad for Kiba's stress levels.

On a side-note, I don't know if you all remember but Itachi's break-in is brought up in in chapter 3 and 5 respectively and ended with Inoichi in the hospital. We're about to hit 20 chapters so it might need a reminder.
I have a headcanon that Itachi sees better through his left eye - Tsukuyomi - than his right - Amaterasu - because I figure he uses one more than the other and I'm going by cause-and-effect here. If you were wondering about that in his POV.

Anyway, I'm about to spend some hours napping and watching Steven Universe and after that I'm all geared up to reply to your reviews because I have been looking forward to it and finally have the time.

Cheers!
Orochimaru visits her in the late hours, his hair pulled back into a ponytail and reading glasses slipping down the arch of his nose. He seats himself beside her on the cold floor of her cell.

Her body keeps jerking, after effects from her panic attacks, and her eyes are fixated onto the corner of the room.

It’s been five months.

Orochimaru has a cup of tea and he cradles it between both hands as he raises it to his mouth to take a sip.

She’s only wearing loose black pants over her underwear. No shirt, no socks. She’s folded into herself, hands tucked into her armpits to prevent her nails from tearing into her skin that won’t stop crawling.

“Good evening, Sasuke-kun.”

Her body twitches, head jerking minutely to the right, eyes never leaving the dark corner.

He offers her his cup, pressing it gently against her mouth and tilting it carefully. She swallows automatically as something lukewarm and bitter spills over her tongue, wincing as it goes down her torn throat. He gives her a pause as her muscles tenses and then he presses it back and she drinks until the entirety of the cup is emptied.

He turns the mug thoughtfully in his hands as he leans his head back against the wall.

“It’s willow bark,” he tells her. “It’ll help you sleep.”

It’s an acknowledgement of what he’s doing to her but there is no apology or regret in his voice and he doesn’t look at her.

Her body twitches, head jerking minutely to the right, eyes never leaving the dark corner.

“Darkness,” he muses. “When everything that you know and love is taken away from you harshly.”

Outside the cells there is the low rustle of heavy coils against stone floors, a low dragging noise. They’re deep enough that any sound from the other prisoners and experiments captured within the walls of the inner sanctum of Otogakure are completely blocked out.

“You have suffered. You will continue to suffer. That will never change.” His voice rolls in the silence, something distant twisted into the sound. “To be alive is to suffer.”

Her body twitches, head jerking minutely to the right, eyes never leaving the dark corner.

“You understand that better than most – so well that you’ve resigned yourself to it.” Orochimaru stills the cup. “Tell me, Sasuke-kun, how far are you willing to let the world push you?”

He puts the cup on the floor with a gentle ‘click’.
“Or did you reach your breaking point a long time ago?”

"Caring is not an advantage."

The words are spoken to him through blood as he twists his sword, severing the spine of the man he’d thought of as his teacher.

Subaki had been a liar, a traitor and a fool and Kisame had not mourned him as he left Kiri.

Kisame slants a look at the figure sprawled in the snow, Akatsuki cloak half-shrugged off her shoulders, jacket half-open and mask pulled down. She’s talking in low tones with a ninneko in yukata, the Uchiha ichizoku standing out proudly on its back.

In her lap is the squashed tabby, large enough now that it’s getting long-legged and gangly, sprawled out on its back and lapping at a small wound on the hand tracing circles on its tummy.

He’d joined the *Kiri no Shinobigatana Shichinin Shu* during the Third Shinobi War and it’s not until Subaki’s dead that he discovers the book.

*Our students carry our marks to honour us and we, in return, owe them to be the best that we can be.*

The words are written by Hoshigaki Taisei on the very last page of the book and Kisame rips the golden stud out of Subaki’s ear and wears it as a reminder of the ugliness of the world.

The piece in his pocket is carefully chosen to stand for something else entirely.

“We still have another week until we’re at Yukigakure.” Kisame swallows one last mouthful of water before slinging it all back over Samehada’s handle.

He’d requested the extra mission time to give him some alone time with the kid and Pein had been more than willing to grant it, had even sounded approving which was suspicious in itself. “We’ll reach a small village tomorrow to restock and clean up.”

Due to his bloodline Kisame sweats a lot less than regular humans but the kid was starting to look downright scruffy, nose wrinkling beneath the dark purple fabric of her mask.

**Her** mask.

Kisame doesn’t know what to think of the fact that he’d been the first one to be entrusted with the knowledge but he’s not one to dwell of things either - he leaves that firmly to Itachi. He likes the kid, wouldn’t have taken her under his wing if he didn’t.

In the end, that’s the only thing that matters to him.

“You still haven’t told me what we’re doing there.” She shifts the tabby onto her shoulder where it slumps, looking enormously dissatisfied thanks to its squashed face, and brushes snow from the back of her cloak as she climbs to her feet. “Or is it secret?”

“Not sure myself,” Kisame admits easily. “We’re meeting up with a client of Kakuzu’s and we’re supposed to receive further instructions on spot.” Which wasn’t unusual. Kakuzu tended to attract the most paranoid of contacts, the sort that had a lot to hide but whose greed ultimate won out over even that.
Kakuzu had a reputation that made him reliable and, considering Kisame knew from a secure source that he’d recently hit his nineties, he’d been alive long enough to cultivate those contacts for a long period of time.

It made him invaluable to the likes of Pein and Konan considering Akatsuki relied heavily on being the first to get the information and the first to act on it.

“Kabuto used to deal information with Sasori but he didn’t like doing it.” Sasuke easily falls in step with him and she’s quieter than even Itachi without notable effort.

It was sometimes eerie the effect summoning contracts could have. The Hoshigaki Clan had had the shark contract for generations, before Kiri was even an idea, and he has a blurry memory of a woman with skin as blue as his own before the war took her.

“Sasori didn’t like it any more than he did but he wasn’t the kind to let personal conflict come between him and the mission.” It had been one of the few things Kisame had respected about him.

Considering the scene he and Itachi had been sent to clean up… well.

Nukenin wasn’t the sort of occupation normal, sane shinobi aspired to.

“What was it like?” he asks. “Training under Orochimaru,” he clarifies when she looks up at him in askance.

A strange look flitters across her face.

“I know you didn’t go there willingly.” He thinks of thighs so layered with scars it was just a thick mess of ugly mutilated flesh and the clear intention of the lines on her back, deep enough to hurt but not nearly deep enough to let her bleed out. Four lines crossed by a fifth. Tally marks.

He suspects Kabuto – he’s seen the way she’d internalized healing chakra to seal up wounds, shrugging a bit helplessly when he asked if she could do the same for him.

It had been a long-shot – medic-nin, especially good ones, were rare. Konoha and Takigakure were the only ones who reliably tanked out any of quality and of them Konoha was the better by miles. Having the Slug Sannin taking the Hokage seat was one of the cleverest moves he’d seen any village make in ages.

“Quiet,” she says after several minutes of silence. “Lonely.” Her brow furrows. “I didn’t see anyone but Kabuto and Orochimaru for a very long time.” She reaches up to touch her fingers against the chin of the small tabby, receiving a swipe of a tiny pink tongue in return. “Orochimaru did, occasionally, visit me but –” she visibly hesitates. “He did talk to me,” she murmurs as he slants a look at her. “But mostly he just read from books he brought with him or about one theory or the other – failed experiments, successful ones, asking what I thought about them.”

Considering what he knew of the man he wouldn’t be surprised if Orochimaru idealised something of himself in the kid. He’d always fancied himself a genius, and he was, just not in the league of the likes of Itachi and Namikaze.

Sasuke, on the other hand, was terrifying in her aptitude and he hadn’t known her long enough to measure the true extent of her genius. But at sixteen she could go toe to toe with Hidan, easily, and she was picking up his teachings with a proficiency that was both impressive and alarming.

“Do you know the last thing he said to me?” Sasuke asks. “Just before I killed him for the fourth and last time?”
Kisame raises an eyebrow.

“He told me I had to make a choice.” Her only visibly eye furrows with the dip of her brow. “And then he was just laughing, down to his very last breath.”

“A choice?” he echoes.

“Mm.” Her hands slip into the pockets of her jacket, chin dipping down behind the collar and there is an unfamiliar glimmer in the dark of her eye. “A choice.”

“Got anything to do with that eye of yours?”

She angles her face up to him.

She really does look a lot like her brother – the same nose, the same exhaustion lined in their face. The dark paint around her eyes doesn’t as much soften her face as narrow it, the impression gentled only by the pink bunny head painted an inch below and to the right of her visible eye, a little ‘x’ for its nose and eyes staring out emptily.

Kisame is thirty-three years old – old enough to have participated in the Third Shinobi War and later the internal conflict of the Kiri Civil War that had reached its lowest point in bloodline exterminations not even a year after he’d chosen the life of a nukenin.

Kisame likes to fight – craves it. *The weak are meat, the strong eat* he mocks as he tears into his opponents with a savagery that earns him the title of *Kirigakure no Kaijin*.

But he doesn’t approve of senseless torture – pain for the sake of pain.

Sasuke is empty eyes and a ravaged soul, the younger sibling of his partner and visibly lost – hounded by a person dangerous enough to put even Itachi on edge and seeking the help of the person responsible for her parents death.

A person pushed to the very last stringent of their sanity.

“*The thing about Uchiha Sasuke,*” he tells Konan, “*is that he has the potential to become a monster.*”

There is no quick-fix for trauma so Kisame gives her the book and through it offers her a ground for stability. Rules, regulations, a goal to strive towards and a person to turn to.

*Maybe I’m getting sentimental with my old age,* he thinks, mouth twisting sardonically as the kid looks away with a shrug, visibly disappearing into her thoughts without answering.

- 

Sasuke pokes life into the bonfire as Kisame strips down.

The moon is nearly full above them so despite the darkening forest the shark-man stands out easily to her. He doesn’t look overly bothered by the freezing air as he bends down and wipes the snow from the ice to peer into the depth below.

“Aren’t you cold?” she asks as he removes a kunai from the holster on his thigh – the only thing on him except underwear – and starts carving a sharp circle in the ice with easy familiarity.

“I don’t feel it the same way you do.” He turns just enough to flash his shark-like teeth.
Which makes sense, she decides as she draws her knees to her chest and tucks her chin on top of them in a small huddle. He had gills which allowed him to breathe under water and the ocean is a cold dark place – the blue skin had to be for more than just aesthetics.

She focuses back on the fire when he slips into the water with nary a splash.

She’s boiled a kettle of water and pushed in a handful of tea leaves to steep when he finally breaks the surface after a good twenty minutes. He’s got a string of some eight fish on a line of ninja wire in one hand and he trades it for the towel she holds out for him.

It’s cold enough that his hair is already freezing and he crouches down as he scrubs through it quickly before roughly pulling his hat down over it.

There a curl of something in her chest as she looks at him through her lashes.

He changes into dry clothes and seats himself beside her on the blanket she’d spread to keep the snow from seeping through her clothes, close enough that she can almost feel the expand of his chest as he breathes in.

She huddles deeper into her cloak, wiggling her toes inside her boots to keep circulation going as he skins the fish and dumps it together with the roots and vegetables in the pot boiling on the fire.

“You have any milk?”

She jerks from where she’d been half-dozing and pulls her backpack closer, rummaging around for the correct scroll and pulling out a bottle of heavy cream.

“You’ve been holding out on me.”

Kisame pours a good third of it into the water and she trades it for the half-empty jar of dried plums with a yawn that makes her eyes water.

He hums, an absent melody she doesn’t recognise and she twitches her fingers against her knee in accompanied rhythm. It’s a slow relaxing evening, her muscles aching from the training he’d pushed her through at lunch.

He pours them a bowl each and they eat in companionable silence, scrubbing them out in the snow afterwards. Kisame boils another kettle of tea, this time something floral from his own pack, and she accepts it gratefully – wrapping her cold fingers around it and cradling it against her chest as she listens to the crackle of the fire, admiring the glow of the snow beneath the moon.

For once her anxiety is silent and her mind calm.

She startles but doesn’t flinch when Kisame brushes his fingers against her ear, angling her face to look at him from the corner of her eye without disturbing him. “Did you bring the tools to do it?”

“You trusting me to shove a needle through your ear?”

Sasuke feels a spark of something warm and content in her chest as she nods.

He presses a small box into the palm of her hand and she turns it in her hands without opening it as he digs forth a thin sharp needle from the side of his pack. He takes the time to press snow against the lobe of her ear to numb it.

“You can look at it before I put it in,” Kisame says quietly.
She stills the box, stroking her thumb over the blank black surface before tracing down to find the small latch and clicking it open.

Inside is a tooth.

“They used to tease me, you know.” He looks at the small lime green stone shaped into a perfect replica of a shark tooth netted in thin black cord. “For looking the way I did. Said I wasn’t human – shouting stupid stuff after me down the street. Monster was a dedicated favourite of theirs and I can still remember how much I loathed them – how much I loathed myself for looking the way I did.”

He meets her startled eyes with a wry grin.

“Sounds familiar, doesn't it?” He rolls his shoulders with a crack. “It was actually your brother who snapped me out of it,” he admits with something both sardonic and fond at the same time colouring his voice. “How does it feel, I asked him, to be partnered with a monster? And you know what he answered?” There is something heavy in his voice – something she struggles to understand – before it’s replaced by a nettled sort of admiration. “If you’re a monster then what does that make me?”

He taps his finger against the shark tooth.

“This is a show of claim,” he tells her bluntly. "But it's also a promise."

She gives up on trying to understand the bubble of emotions inside of her.

“Why green?” she asks.

“Blame that on Itachi,” Kisame says dryly. “He was very insistent.”

Sasuke looks at – stroking her finger over the curve of the tooth.

Remembers a small green dino clasped in a sweaty palm outside his brother’s room in what feels like a life-time ago.

-

Tsunade pours herself another cup of sake, ignoring Shizune eyeing her over a pile of files on the other side of the room as she frowns at nothing.

She had left Konoha after breaking down in the hospital bathroom where Shizune had found her hours later beneath the cold water of the shower. Hiruzen had only made a half-hearted attempt to stop her at the village gate but he had been old even then – tired and resigned to watch his students vanish one after the other through the village gate.

“I can’t stay here,” she tells him.

“I’m surprised you lasted as long as you did,” he admits, words meant for only the two of them as Shizune keeps an eye out for any potential eavesdroppers. “I’m sorry.”

Sorry for Dan, sorry for Nawaki, sorry for not taking the rumours about Orochimaru seriously.

Always ready to shoulder the burden himself.

He had resigned once – the title given over to Minato who is a legend with the flee-on-sight order issued through every Bingo Book there was, Kushina a red-hot danger by his side.

The two of them promising to lead Konoha into a new era.
Hiruzen was never meant to take up the hat a second time and the deeper she digs the more convinced she is that something has gone very, very wrong in her absence.

Uchiha Sasuke is a mess of contradictions, his file empty, left at six-years-old without anyone to care for him. The fact that Uzumaki Naruto is a jinchuuruki becomes the worst kept secrets within days of his parent’s death and Tsunade reads through the piles and piles of documents of punished civilians and wonders what the hell Hiruzen had been thinking.

The second she realises her honorary nephew hadn’t even been told of his parentage she’d sat him down in her office and explained it herself, ignoring Jiraiya who climbs through her window later that week with sad eyes and frowning mouth.

The Intelligence division had been scaled down to the bare bones, the mandatory psychological tests scrapped and some ANBU so maladjusted that she doesn’t know what to do with them.

It takes Gai and Hatake over a year to get it back to an acceptable level. At that point Uchiha Sasuke has already been kidnapped, Sakura is her student and Jiraiya is far-gone with Naruto in tow.

She puts Hatake under the direct command of Yugao who she in turn puts in direct contact with Ibiki and Inoichi - both to keep an eye on them and to give her somewhere to turn for support and advice in dealing with the best of the worst.

It works out better than she ever dared to hope which she’s smug about for months.

But Sakura is a constant reminder of Konoha’s failure and something far worse.

The empty file on Uchiha Sasuke, the lack of investigation regarding the massacre, it won’t stop nagging at her.

And then Naruto and Sakura drags her to an empty compound with the creepiest room Tsunade has ever had the displeasure of taking a step into and she doesn’t know what to think other than well, this isn’t good.

Which is such an understatement that she’s very happy to have kept the words to herself.

She puts her feet up on her desk, ignoring the baleful look of her assistant as Hinata steps through the door with an armful of files.

Uchiha Itachi.

He’d erased his entire clan at thirteen, killing everyone but his little brother who he’d tortured to the brink of sanity and left slumped on the floor across their dead parents for hours before anyone even notices the eerie quiet of the Uchiha compound.

There is a short note jotted by a Yamanaka on his reaction afterwards but it is never followed up and the bareness of the file is a mockery.

And they’re not the only one to notice.

Tsunade thinks of the report from Inoichi who’d come between Uchiha Itachi and the files in Intelligence. How he’d only taken a single file from piles upon piles of information that could have put Konoha in a really bad state.

“He was upset.” The Yamanaka shakes his head. “It if hadn’t been for Hoshigaki-san I would be dead.”
So Tsunade summons Jiraiya back to Konoha because her teammate has been dodging his responsibilities for too long and if there’s anyone Hiruzen would have entrusted with the information – well.

Hinata and Shizune bids her goodnight and Tsunade raises an absent hand as the door clicks shut behind them, ANBU dispersing at her command.

Downs the sake.

It’s been a long-time coming, she thinks, as she angles her face to meet the troubled eyes of her teammate as he climbs through the window.

- 

“Do you have a name?” Kiba prods tiredly, struggling to focus through the fever.

The Ne-guard sits easily silent beside him and he stares at the yellow marks on their face.

“I can’t just keep calling you ‘Guard’,” he tries a new angle. “Surely you had something-?”

“That’s #789.” Kiba turns to Sai who is crunching nuts into a pasty mess. “We are given temporary names during missions but we’re primarily identified by numbers with very few exceptions.”

“Wait, you mean Sai isn’t your real name?” He startles. “Do you even want me to call you Sai? This is so weird.” He lifts a hand to rub at his brow as Sai pushes the nutty paste into the boiling water.

“My name is Sai.” There is something defensive in the way he says it and Kiba grimaces in apology.

He turns back to the guard who is tied up in that ridiculously paranoid fashion Sai had left them in, sitting awkwardly beside him. There is something morose in the way they’re watching the fire – perhaps in the slump of their shoulders because the blank eyes and face is an eerie copy of Sai’s.

“So, #789 – that’s obviously not an Inuzuka name.” He aims for levity even as sweat crawls down his back. “Take my name for example – Kiba, means ‘fang’ and my sister Hana has her name written out with the characters for ‘nose’.” He struggles against the nausea, simultaneously too hot and too cold. “Kaa-san is named for the sharp claws on her fingers – baa-chan used to say she nearly tore her from the inside out.”

Zero response.

He snaps his fingers, enjoying the twitch. “Well, as your future Clan Head it only makes sense for me to give you something to call you.”

“Isn’t your sister the next Clan Head?” Sai says as Kiba mentally thumbs through a list of names.

“She would have been but Nee-san decided that she’s not interested in it,” he replies absently. “She’s our best veterinarian and more interested in taking care of and raising our future ninken than she’s in handling the whole human part of the deal.”

He struggles down a grin as the guard looks sharply to him.

“How about Shippo?”

“‘Tail’?” Sai echoes.

The guard simply stares.
“Bikou then?” Kiba offers. “We could write it out like ‘Shadow’ if you want to be all dramatic about it.”

“Or ‘nostril’.” Sai offers as he kneels down with a bowl each, ignoring the guard completely as he spoons a large helping into his mouth.

Kiba eyes his sceptically, nose wrinkling.

Sai has this funny idea of nutrition first, taste – well, if he's lucky it won't make him throw up.

“Hanasaki.”

It takes Kiba’s tired mind a full five seconds to realise it was the guard and not Sai who’d spoken and he reaches up to wipe sweat from his forehead.

“‘Nose tip’?”

The guard says nothing.

“Hanasaki.” He tastes the name thoughtfully, making sure to wrinkle his brow with thoughtfulness – aware of both Ne-members watching him. “Inuzuka Hanasaki.” He turns his head back and fro. “I think Nee-chan will approve of another ‘Hana’ in the family.” He nods, aiming a tired smile at the guard who meets his eyes for a long moment before looking away.

Sai prods at him until he spoons fish, nuts and bitter roots and something that can only be chili – fighting back tears as he swallows desperately, coughing as his mouth and throat burns.

Sai finishes of his portion and refills the bowl for the newly minted Hanasaki who obediently opens their mouth without having to be told to.

Neither make a face as they eat.

Kiba really, really misses normal people.

Chapter End Notes

There's a trivia on the Naruto fandom page on Kisame that says he felt self-conscious about his blue skin. I didn't really see that at all in canon and my Kisame is very unapologetically himself anyway but I can see how growing up with the characteristics of a shark might not have been the best considering how much humanity dislikes anything that can be considered different. It's not the same but he understands enough.

Kisame is sharp, he's intelligent but he's no saint. He takes care of his and his own.

Tsunade is probably one of my all-time favorite characters in Naruto. She called Jiraiya back somewhere in chapter 10, I think? When he was in Otogakure, anyway, and he's been dragging his feet all the way back because he knows this isn't about to go down well for him.

The Cost of Duty indeed.

Tsunade has had a lot to deal with after taking up the mantle of Hokage but she couldn't
be more perfect from an outsider-looking-in perspective. It is only when we take a step back we can look at something properly and her time outside Konoha has allowed her to do just that.

I'm not saying there's a Danzo POV coming up but there absolutely is a Danzo POV coming up very, very soon (there is a reason for everything I do and Danzo is the key to a lot of things here).

I also named the guard Nose Tip because it's adorable and they heard Kiba go 'my sister Hana works with dogs' and you can't tell me that they wouldn't grasp onto that. So, Hanasaki.

And, yes, Shizune and Hinata dine out together, frequently.

I'm gonna surround Hinata with all the positive female influence just you watch me.

I have a test and some cinema tickets from Christmas so I'm going to see the new Tomb Raider after it for some mental recharge.

Cheers!
Violent Acts of Unhinged Minds

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sasuke’s eyes open, shifting to the side as she flattens herself against the ground, muscles tensing as she reaches up and pulls at the edges of her mask while flaring her yin chakra in a low ark around her. Her muscles ripple with tension as she registers eight figures – quiet but not quiet enough.

Her sharp hearing catches the sound of crunching snow beneath chakra coated shoes and they flare sharp on her senses.

A to S-rank, she decides as she traces them in the darkness through scent and hearing, breathing carefully into the pillow of her sleeping bag.

She shifts, just enough to get her palms flat against the ground, rolling her back to get the edge of the cover away from her shoulders. Her sharingan bleeds red in her right eye, her left itching before sharpening into the eerie clarity as a familiar sort of calm settles over her.

Her nose flares and she zeroes on the closest one – notes the way they’re creeping towards them.

The second the first boot touches past the last tree of the clearing she flares her yin chakra, yanking and snagging the one closest to her and breaking their legs with a twitch of her wrist while simultaneously colliding with the second one with a crunch as she bring them down to the ground while pulling down hard towards the earth, feeling the snap of their ribs and meeting wide-eyes with her open palm already crackling with electricity.

Sasuke bends nearly flat backwards, rolling and throwing up a wall of earth to block the spears of ice to her left while twisting to intercept the large sword bearing down on her right by arching her back, legs hooking around their arm with a snap and a cry as it breaks in two places and she vaults away from a third adversary wielding a saw-like sword made of ice.

Someone gets their arm around her neck, air cutting off, and she reaches back, slams her palms over their ears and burns electricity through them, holding firm as she vaults over and back, shoving them forward into the large sword that goes through their chest with a shocked gurgle of blood.

Fire licks over the snow and she goes high, yanking hold of the tree just behind them and their mask flattens against the trunk, head exploding out in a mess of brain and blood as the skull concaves beneath her boot as the scroll containing Kuzanagi rolls through the air and with a swipe of her thumb it’s in her hand and she turns, looping the head of the two behind her.

She zeroes on the figure yanking their sword out of the chest of their teammate with hatred in their eyes as they turn towards her.

Her fingers twitch into a chain of one-handed seals and she drags her index and middle-finger along the blade that roars beneath her touch, burning white with the electricity coursing through it.

Her yin chakra rolls around the area, tracking the two who’d taken to the trees – one of them hidden beneath a thick cloud of genjutsu that shines to bright to her senses they might as well be shouting out their location.

She pushes against the tree behind her and Kuzanagi sings as it meets the sword narrowly thrown up in time and they have to take several steps back, heaving desperately as lightning flares though the
metal of their blade, saved from certain death only because of the bandages wrapped tight around the handle.

She swipes her fingers over her blade, catching a handful of electricity and throws it back with a sharp snap of her wrist – saw toothed blade landing in the snow with a flump, body following in a twitching mess and frothy gurgle.

She folds with the push against Kuzanagi, allowing herself to bend into an abnormal degree as the shinobi above her roars with triumph but her back never hits the ground and their chest heaves, arms straining as they push desperately down on arms that strain against them without effort, chest rising and falling calmly.

Their eyes widen and hers glitter.

She drags the kunai from her thigh-holster with her free hand and blood splatters upon her as she shoves it into their eye. They stumbles backwards, dropping their sword in favour of grasping at the handle of the kunai with a wail of shock and pain.

She flicks her finger and it digs clean through their skull.

The person covered in genjutsu creeps towards her on her left flank and she turns and slams a fist deep into their chest, her fingers curling around their heart and with a pulse of chakra it explodes in her hand.

She yanks her hand out and they tip back into the snow in a boneless heap.

Kuzanagi drags against the snow behind her and she wipes her hand absently on her thigh, eyes fixated on the person crawling backwards through the snow with their broken legs dragging and eyes wide with horror behind the mask.

They freeze when their back collides with something, face tilting back to meet the sharp-toothed grin on the shark-man as Samehada presses down against their chest – devouring their chakra with greed that makes their eyes roll back in a dead faint.

Kisame hefts Samehada over his shoulder and secures it with a wrap of his chakra.

Sasuke watches with her Sharingan still spinning as he bends down, yanking the body up and securing their arms roughly behind their back, breaking their fingers with sharp snaps that rings through the sudden silence left behind in the wake of death.

“Good work.”

She stares at him for a long moment before closing her eyes, allowing the drain of her chakra to cut-off before opening them. The world returns and it feels strange and distorted without the clarity offered by the sharingan, as if a dull sort of film had settled over her.

She reaches up to drag a hand through her hair, scanning their surroundings listlessly as Kisame ties them to the trunk of a tree.

Slowly becomes aware of the fact that she’s only wearing boxers and t-shirt, barefoot in the snow and covered in blood.

Shikamaru sits quietly in the middle of the room, legs folded, fingers cupped.
Ino keeps watch over him from her place at the door, her eyes tracing slowly over foreign figures and faces painted over and over again on canvases, notebooks, in led sketches and finely made art with expensive paint.

There is a pile of notebooks beside her, respectfully leafed through, and a single one resting open in her lap.

“No matter how you look at it,” Ino says quietly, “this can’t be the work of only Uchiha Sasuke.”

Her eyes linger on the large painting of two dark skinned men grasping hands on an altar, golden rings on their fingers and sharp foreign clothing. The person behind them is just a blurry shade, the arch an intricate network of white flowers stretching over them. Every leaf, every petal a work of art.

There’s care in the picture, hours upon hours of painstaking work to bring something to life.

“But they’re unmistakably made by the same person.”

She’s only voicing what they’re both are thinking - the evidence is unmistakable.

It doesn’t explain the way Uchiha Mikoto’s face intermixes with a woman with blonde hair and metal grey eyes or the blurred out faces and identical smiles shared by a preteen Itachi and a young black boy.

It could have been mistaken for madness.

An entirely new language, a world beyond recognition, people they could find no record of, creations and sketches and blueprints of things that are foreign and strange. Flora, animals, things that do not match up, some with shared familiarities, others beyond anything recorded in their books.

Ino works in Intelligence – she knows just what kind of brilliance lurks in the minds of those worn thin by the world and their very bodies. Brains that became unable to differentiate between tricks conjured by the mind and reality beyond them. Flashbacks and triggers, psychosis and hallucinations.

It is her first guess but the pieces doesn’t add up.

The language is too intricate for notebooks dating back to just months after the massacre. It isn’t a language under construction – it is a language that is consistent from the very first notes in shaky ink.

But then there’s the crux of the sharingan.

According to Tsunade-sama it had been noted on Sasuke’s file that he’d been tortured by something called the *Tsukuyomi* on the day of the massacre – the same genjutsu he’d been exposed to again at thirteen and had left him bedridden for weeks before Tsunade could bring him out from it.

Uchiha Itachi was a genjutsu master on a level far beyond anything ever recorded and it had taken a physical form with his Mangekyou Sharingan. Ino had browsed the notes pieced together from scraps of information recorded by Senju Hashirama and empirical evidence supplied by Hatake Kakashi and there wasn’t any sort of consistency to be found in what the Mangekyo actually *did* from what little was *known* outside whatever records the Uchiha kept themselves.

So, they had Itachi with a genjutsu they did not truly know the effect of save from what little Sasuke had shared and they had Hatake who could shift entire people into some sort of side-dimension that existed outside of time.

Naruto had also noted that Sasuke had the Mangekyo but that he never used it during their fight.
For all Ino knew Itachi could have implanted the language into his younger brother on the night of the massacre – there just wasn’t enough information to work with for her to rule it out even if she couldn’t for the life of her figure out why he would do something like it after tearing his little brother to pieces.

There is a nagging suggestion of sleeper agent but it doesn’t feel right and it left too much unanswered.

Her eyes drifts back to Shikamaru.

Sasuke had spent enough time in the room for his grief to worm into the wood, tainting the air they breathed. She could feel the way it weighted down on her shoulders, a horror that had buried beyond skin and rationality until it seeped through his very being in a way that was downright alarming.

And it had been going on right under their noses, had gone ignored for reasons Ino is wary to question.

They count nine unfamiliar people alongside the faces of Uchiha’s, ten when they start finding pictures of a man seated smack-dab in the middle of a leather couch with colourful socks.

And then eleven with the painting Hatake hands them three days into their investigations.

She looks to it – the small painting with the man seated with his hands folded together in his lap. There’s nothing inherently off-putting just looking at it. The man is tall, polished shoes flat against the floor. The dog bowl stands out starkly in what could have been just another portrait, no dog visible.

The shade of yellow behind him matches the room perfectly.

It was the only painting of the man they had found. And it says something in a room where the same people are painted over and over again, as if afraid they’d be forgotten.

She looks down at the sketch of a cat with glowing ring tipping over its missing ear. She knows that if she flips the page the same cat will be lying against flat stone, body crushed and guts still shining from its sudden death, blood dark red and wet around it.

“What the hell happened that night?” Ino pinches the bridge of her nose. “This is beyond us, Shika.”

“It is,” he agrees with a groan as he folds from his slumped position. “But Godaime-sama is trusting us to unravel whatever this is.”

“You think Sakura and Naruto already figured it out?” Ino asks as she cracks her neck, rubbing absenty at it as Shikamaru reaches for one of the notebooks, pulling it from beneath a little tower of them beside him.

“They certainly have more information to go on.” It’s not a no. “And you know how obsessed they are with Sasuke. It’s our job to consider all the options they won’t.”

“This doesn’t feel right, Shika.” Ino admits. “This is really personal.”

He doesn’t answer her but the tense shoulders say more than his silence.

- 

Danzo’s first meeting with the Uchiha Clan leaves a bitter taste in his mouth that never truly goes
away.

He’s just one of many orphans left in the aftermath of the Warring State Era. Not lucky enough to be assigned to the great Hashirama despite being second in his class but instead left to struggle to catch-up to Hiruzen who flourishes under the deaf touch of the Shodaime.

“What clan do you belong to, boy?” Words spoken by the great Uchiha Madara himself, dismissed the second his name left his trembling mouth. “Another no-name, Hashirama? Are we accepting any hopeful soul into our ranks now?”

Danzo bows his head and bites his tongue and in the silence of his apartment he begins to plan.

The Uchiha had never, truly, belonged to Konoha.

Uchiha Madara had been the adversary to Senju Hashirama’s heroism – their pact never anything but a smokescreen to end a drawn out war. Danzo sees the evidence painted on the very mountains overlooking the village – Senju, Senju, Sarutobi, Namikaze, Senju.

Never Uchiha.

The massacre was always written into their destiny – Danzo just made sure it happened sooner rather than later. The last will of Hashirama carried out through his hands.

He should have killed the boy years ago.

Should have killed him before he was old enough to cause trouble.

But Itachi had been through in the aftermath – returning after the massacre with enough leverage that Danzo had been forced to back down or risk all his plans crumbling to dust before they could bear fruit.

So he concedes to let him live.

Danzo would have found a way to work around it – could have had the boy dead on his first C-rank mission outside the village walls. He’s used to playing the long game and another six or ten years means nothing in the long run. But then a dead man climbs through his window and makes him an offer even Danzo can’t refuse – as bitter the taste it leaves on his tongue.

Itachi tells him to keep the boy alive.

Madara tells him to make it hurt.

Let it not be said that Danzo isn’t a man of his word.

And how it reeks of irony.

The mighty Uchiha Clan destroyed in a single night in the hands of the boy they had adored to the point of fanaticism.

The last survivor left alive because of a misplaced sense of love and left to suffer on the behest of another Uchiha who promises him the last piece to his plan of getting Konoha back to its days of glory.

And it’s so easy.

Danzo tells Hiruzen that Itachi, surely, must have done something to the boy – why else would be
have been left behind? Itachi who had murdered his best friend and parents in cold blood.

“Just… just keep him alive, Danzo. We promised.”

Hiruzen meets the boy once and never asks about him again, content to let Danzo deal with all underhand matters – just like he pretends Ne doesn’t exist just beneath his nose.

It’s easy to push the boy past the last shreds of sanity.

He doesn’t leave any marks – no. Danzo doesn’t need to make him bleed to make it hurt. The lack of food and sleep, distorting reality until he barely knew up from down and breaking bones with careful deliberation.

Pushing, pushing, pushing until the boy doesn’t know how to push back.

It’s a dangerous game to play but Danzo plays it well and he’s patient – content to wait in the shadows as weariness creeps upon his old friend and he makes sure to always be by his side, to offer his thoughts and carefully worded suggestions.

He knocks on the door with his cane, sinking deeper into the warm robes he’s wearing as he waits for it to open.

The secretary is Ne and she doesn’t look at him, hadn’t even raised her head as he stepped into the room. Her eyes are just a tad too blank to be normal but even the most perfect soldiers have their issues – it’s just a matter of working out the kinks.

Danzo opens the door at the call and smiles genuinely as the man behind the desk straightens, the creep of tension by his shoulders quickly hidden as he rises to his feet.

“Danzo-sama.”

There are those who think the Hyuuga are the most dangerous clan in Konoha. Their eyes had never reached the fame of the Sharingan but their sophistication in brutality was well-recognised. Few clans could claim to rule their family members so ruthlessly.

There are those who think the Nara’s are the most dangerous in Konoha. Revered for their intelligence Nara Shikaku was a war hero who’d turned the tide on the western front in the Third Shinobi War with his tactics and his son was a genius with previously unrecorded level of IQ.

The Yamanaka with their mind-reading.

The Aburame with their versatile insects.

But Danzo sees the same techniques being used over and over again. Sees the way Konoha ceases to surprise and the way the other villages learns to work around them with flashy explosions that temporarily rob the Byakugan-users of their vision and prevents shadows from creeping upon them.

How there’s always a five-man team sent to deal with the Yamanaka – one creeping through the shadows to search out the host body as one of their own turns against them.

Special repellents developed to confuse the noses of the Inuzuka and the insects of the Aburame.

No other village have a clan system the way Konoha does and it’s becoming a weakness that is costing them new blood into their ranks.

“Good evening, Hiashi-san.”
The brat steps from behind his desk, his face a smooth mask – always the superior.

Konoha has become stagnant. **Predictable.**

It isn’t the clans that will lead Konoha to greatness.

It is new blood, the likes of Namikaze and Haruno who will be the true geniuses on the battle field.

It’s his Ne picked from the orphanages of Konoha where they would have gone forgotten if it weren’t for him – put aside in favour of the litters of Inuzukas and Hyugas who took pride in their large clans.

It’s just a matter of proving just how far they’ve fallen and it’s a lifetime of planning in the making.

It begins and ends with the Uchiha clan.

He already has a back-up team sent to intercept Sai on orders to get the Inuzuka boy to Yukigakure where two of his Ne had picked up evidence on the boy travelling with Hoshigaki Kisame. They were under strict orders not to engage – Hoshigaki was a monster that needed to be handled with care.

They just needed to get the Inuzuka there and shaved to bits in a mirror of the famed sword belonging to Hoshigaki. The Clans of Konoha, arrogant as they were, would never stand for the death of one of their heir’s and there would be a full-scale war on the Uchiha who would be backed by the Akatsuki and Uchiha Madara.

Konoha would be forced to confront its own weakness and just when they were on the edge of succumbing Danzo would be there with his Ne.

He would lead Konoha to its days of glory – everything Hashirama promised it to be and with the Uchiha’s eradicated from history.

Danzo twitches his fingers and Ne members settles on either side of Hiashi, roots crawling from the palms of #17 to wrap around his arms and chest in a flurry of snake-like movement.

“What’s the meaning of this, Danzo!?” The veins around his eyes bulge and then he’s screaming because #45 on the left has a single finger pressed against his skin and Danzo very carefully doesn’t smile as the proud Hyuuga Clan Head sinks to his knees.

“It’s nothing personal, Hiashi-san,” Danzo assures the man as he signs for #45 to stop and reaches up to unwind the bandage around his head. “I’m merely doing Konoha a favour.” He lets it spiral to the ground, revealing the closed eyelid. “And turns out you’re just the man to help me take the first step on the road to make Konoha great again.”

Hiashi attempts to jerk away but there’s a reason why the wood release was so feared before it died out with the Senju. Its capacity to feed of the chakra it touched had made it a monstrous weapon in the hands of Hashirama.

“You should feel honoured,” Danzo tells the man as the branches wraps around his chin and neck, forcefully tilting his head up and digging into his eyelids to keep them open as Danzo pries his eye open, revealing the four-pronged mangekyo that had once belonged to Uchiha Shisui.

“It’s such a pity you won’t be alive to see it.”
Sasuke scrubs her face in the cold water - circulating her chakra through her body to keep her limbs from growing stiff even as she shivers. Brushes her make-up off, the tiny bunny on her cheek, and spends several minutes trying to get the blood from her hair before deeming it a lost cause and dunking herself under the surface for a last rinse.

Kisame throws a towel at her when she resurfaces.

“If you weren’t so impatient I could have heated up a small pool of water for you,” he points out wryly.

“I’m fine,” she bites back.

He gives her a long look when she stumbles, muscles cramping despite her best effort, and throws another towel at her as she sinks down before the pile of unlit sticks.

“Yes you are.” Kisame makes a seal and then snaps his fingers and the fire flares bright, igniting the dry lump of grass in the middle as she struggles out of her wet boxers and into dry ones. Her jaw keeps cramping and her it’s an awkward struggle to get even a t-shirt over her head. “Your hair is going to freeze,” he points out helpfully.

Sasuke makes a frustrated noise. “Then help me!” she snaps.

Kisame raises an eyebrow and she deflates, her breathing hard as she reaches for her hoodie, her mouth pressed into a thin line.

He sighs as he rises to kneel down before her.

He gets her hair swept up and tucked into a hat before helping her into the hoodie and then her jacket. Hauls her up to her feet and she curls a hand into his cloak as he helps her get one frozen leg and then the other into the warm soft pants she’d stolen from his brother. He gives her feet a good rub, pinching her toes to make sure she had proper circulation going before tucking them into two pair of socks each and then help her cram them into the thick boots.

She remains silent, her eyes fixated on the large fingers that deftly ties them up in a neat bow before give the side of her shin a pat.

He leaves her gloves in her lap and she stares at the little sharks for a long moment before pulling them on and practically curling into her Akatsuki cloak.

“You ready to talk about it?” he asks an hour later when they’ve finished their food.

They’re just outside Yukigakure waiting for Kakuzu’s contact to get in touch with them after dropping of a letter at one of the bars. They had decided to camp out to get some more training done before they would have to focus on the mission and instead-

Sasuke looks at the woman slumped at the tree, tied up, both legs broken and still out cold. There’s blood splattered on her chest from one of her companions and Kisame had been through in breaking all ten of her fingers.

“Why are we keeping her alive?” she demands, clenching her fingers in the fabric at her thighs as she leans forward.

Kisame hums as he takes a sip of his tea. “We need to make sure the mission hasn’t been compromised.”
“By torturing her?”

He slants her a look. “If we have to,” he tells her she clenches her teeth, glaring down at her boots.

It’s the most distressed he’s seen her, agitation running through every inch of her body, and he takes another sip of his tea as he keep a careful eye on her. “I don’t agree with pain for the sake of pain, kid. But we’re shinobi – we do what we have to.”

“I know,” she bites out. “I know I just –“ and there’s something so lost in the way she hunches over herself that he can’t help but sigh.

“It’s perfectly alright not to be here when I do it.”

She flexes her fingers. “I didn’t have this problem when Orochimaru did his experiments.” She glances at their captive. “And she was going to kill us.”

“You were a fellow prisoner.” Kisame leans his chin into the palm of his hand as he peers at her across the fire. “This is different and it’s perfectly natural to be upset about it. I don’t like doing it any more than your brother does and frankly? It’s the people who do enjoy causing pain that you should be wary of.”

“But I had no problems killing them.” She bites down on her lip and doesn’t even seem to notice she’d activated her sharingan.

Without the hitai-ate Kisame can clearly see the way her left sharingan keeps warping from red and black to yellow with mercury tomoes and back while the right sharingan spins with her agitation.

“Because death is final.”

The strange yellow and grey sharingan stops, sharpens, and her mouth twists before she can stop herself.

“Final, right.” She scrubs at her face and when she looks up at him her eyes are once again a duo of black and silver. “All lives ends, all hearts are broken.”

“It’s the way of the world,” Kisame agrees, covering his ill-ease with a wry grin.

Chapter End Notes

So, we're not going the canon route here obviously but I mean that's been obvious for a while I think. But look at that! Danzo and we've got the name Madara sneaking through his POV. Twisty.

And Sasuke isn't alright but that isn't exactly new.

She's also a bit out of touch from normal people - going from the likes of Kabuto and Orochimaru to Itachi and Kisame and the rest of the Akatsuki.

I really hope the fighting scene wasn't terribly confusing but I've stared myself blind on
it and I'm just done with it. Feedback would be appreciated if it's a complete mess.

We also got Ino and Shika being R E S P E C T F U L bcs important.

We have so many things happening and I promise that Sasuke will get back together with the rest of Team 7 soon-ish. But this story just keeps growing. I tell myself three chapters and then thirty and now I've stopped guessing because really.

Regarding Jonah:

There's a saying in Sweden, roughly translated: *everybody knows a victim of rape but nobody knows a rapist.*

But he isn't just a faceless entity. He's pleasant, well-dressed and well-spoken, the next-door neighbor you introduce your partner to. He's not the shadow you meet in an alley on a dark and rainy night but the man you share a drink with after work. The kind of man that you'll shake hands with more than once in your life.

I have a month of nothing but tuna and eggs to look forward to so no treat for me today but I do think I'll watch some GTLive.

Cheers!
Sasuke dreams of the boy.

Sasuke dreams of the woman.

Lines are blurred.

“Why did you kill me?”

“Why am I alive?”

- 

Akatsuki is their creation.

*World Peace.*

It’s a whisper and a hope and a gathering of ill-fit people under one roof. People that mean little in the long run as long as they get every single bijuu sealed into that statue.

No more leverage, no more war.

A single world united under one leader.

Konan had thought the man calling himself Uchiha Madara understood their goals. He had, after all, once united with his worst enemy to create one of the most infamous villages in all of the Elemental Countries and put an end to the Warring States Era.

When Pein demands to know why they should trust him when he had, ultimately, betrayed Senju Hashirama in the end despite the promises the man says that Senju betrayed him first.

*Just look at the mountain.*

Konan doesn’t like him and she trusts him even less but they concede to the logic and an alliance is formed.

Meeting the man under the guise of Tobi for the first time makes her pause, unnerved. But she’s met stranger shinobi and she will meet stranger still and she shakes it off, moves on, keeps working from the shadows as Pein starts actively moving towards their goal.

But then one day it isn’t Tobi or Madara looking back at her but a man calling himself *Obito* and he clings to the lapels of her cloak with tears in his eye and a question on his tongue.

Uchiha Sasuke is the victim of rape and violence and a broken soul edging into something dangerous.

Konan sees the signs as clear as day when he tilts his head to look at her with eyes that are too old for the body and a smile like glass threatening to shatter into jagged pieces ready to devour.

And when Konan watches from the shadows of the library as the man (Tobi? Madara? Obito?) curls
tight around the broken boy there’s enough humanity left in her to think this is wrong.

Konan receives a letter from someone who claims to belong to the Ne of Konogakure. An organisation that was supposed to have been dismantled soon after Orochimaru’s escape.

He tells her he has information on Uchiha Sasuke and Shimura Danzo.

Danzo is a dangerous man and the prospect of an underground network too interesting to ignore.

Pein means to send Kisame and Itachi to deal with the gobi but Konan interferes and Pein stares at her when she tells him that he’ll have to get the beast himself because both Kisame and Itachi are busy for the foreseeable future.

It’s unusual enough that he pauses and concedes without question at the look in her eyes.

Konan thinks of it like this:

Madara is too close to their plans for her to not take the situation seriously and she leaves a small note into Deidara’s pouch before sending him off with Tobi while removing Sasuke for the foreseeable future by sticking him close to Kisame and sending them to Yuki to deal with one of Kakuzu’s more interesting contacts.

This Ne member have information on Uchiha Sasuke and Shimura Danzo but won’t meet without the elder Uchiha brother so she takes Itachi for herself while sending Pein to deal with the gobi.

Uchiha Obito is a name that had died with the Yondaime Hokage but Kakuzu hoards information and he’s agreeable enough for the right payment.

Konan touches a hand to the small notebook tucked into the back of her pouch to be perused as soon as they’ve got the Ne-member securely into their grasp and smiles to herself at the sound of clashing weapons ahead of them.

- Sasuke dreams she’s standing in the middle of a round room.

On the floor are five arrows.

She turns on her heel

to Itachi,

to Jake,

to Orochimaru,

to Tobi,

to Jonah.

“We are the creation of many,” the boy says on her right.

“We are the creation of none,” the woman says on her left.

-
Sai gently settles the half-delirious Inuzuka on the ground at the trunk of a tree and drops the guard over him as a shield while the large dog crouches before them with bared teeth and a rumbled snarl.

The ninzen is mattered and weak but there’s a fierce protectiveness burning in its eyes and Sai looks to the trees as five Ne drops from them, as silent as the long corridors that are their home.

“#341.”

“My name is Sai.” He raises his head and looks at the gathering of blank eyes with a challenge in his own.

“You can still return with us.” #62 takes a step forward and Sai recognise them, had worked with them on several occasions when he was younger. “Surrender the Inuzuka and #789.”

He thinks that maybe he should be hesitating more than he does but Sai chose his path with sweaty fingers pressed into the seal of reconciliation hidden behind his back as he lowers his head to his former master and he’s gone too far to regret it now.

Sai knows that he’s hopelessly outmatched even before he reaches for his brush and scroll.

There is no logic in his actions but there’s a stirring in his chest, a daring unlike anything he’s ever felt as the ink bursts into movement with a swipe of his hand.

- She dreams of his parents and his big brother weeping.

She dreams of her parents and her little brother smiling.

- The world is alive with papers that are quickly painted red as it snakes around bodies with explosions that tear limbs from bodies before eyes has time to as much widen and the world is alight with screams and sobs before Konan as much touches the grass of the clearing.

Itachi kneels beside the feverish Inuzuka and his companion – muzzle wet with blood but who covers when he turns sharingan eyes upon it.

“You came.” Eyes black and skin so stark white that Itachi doubts he’s seen sun for much of his life – this is the Ne then, he thinks, scanning the boy over before dismissing him in favour of the other.

Elevated heartbeat. Body clammy with sweat. Itachi rolls up the sleeves of his shirt and sees arms so bruised they’re practically a blotchy field of red, purple and yellow.

Itachi frowns as he sends a spark of chakra through his fingers and the muscles cramps badly with a gasp and feverish eyes flicker open.

“Sasuke?”

Itachi stills.

The name is spoken with familiarity and there’s no fear in the eyes that seek his red eyes, just a weak smile.

“Knew you’d come back.” Itachi blinks at the fingers hooking into the collar of his shirt and resists drawing back when he’s pulled down, practically putting them nose to nose. “You have some
‘splaining to do,” the Inuzuka gets out and looks at him expectantly until he slowly nods.

Practically collapses boneless with a relieved huff, his chest expanding and contracting too fast with little puffs of air.

“He’s been delirious for the last five hours,” the Ne informs him, looking remarkably calm for all the paper arcs keeping him from moving courtesy of Konan.

His hair is scruffy, red dripping from his temple and there’s a gaping wound on his upper bicep that needs stitching. Other than that, mostly bruises and nicks.

He’s lucky they had been as close as they were.

“Who’s this?” Konan asks and Itachi tilts his head to look at the prisoner tucked close to the ninken.

Another Inuzuka, the fangs yellow instead of the main-house red. Brown hair, brown eyes, nothing particular remarkable about them. But this close to the Ne-member it’s impossible not to note the similarities in their straight backs and blank eyes and Itachi gives them a long considering look.

“They’re mine.” The Inuzuka beside Itachi practically growls and does such a pitiful attempt at getting up that Itachi doesn’t even bother to push him back down in favour of watching him keel over with a woozy groan.

Itachi exchanges a look with Konan.

-

Sasuke dreams of mirrors.

Grey and black, grey and black, grey and black.

Hundreds, thousands of eyes staring down at her.

Everywhere the world is breaking, cracks crawling up her skin, shattering it like porcelain as mercury drips from the sky and salty water turns pink beneth her bleeding feet.

-

Deidara might be young but he’s not stupid and the door clicks silently shut behind him when he wants nothing more than to slam it firmly shut.

In the beginning he hadn’t thought much about it. Tobi was odd, yes, all nukenin were and he’d been too caught up in the strange emptiness after Sasori-dana’s death to pay it any mind.

But then Itachi’s little brother had entered the hideout and Tobi had grown stranger.

Deidara wasn’t easily creeped out but when he’d woken up to an empty room he’d stalked through the corridors, intent on making sure Tobi wasn’t doing anything he wasn’t supposed to, and had instead found him practically moulded around Itachi’s baby brother in the library.

He might be a nukenin but it had set off warning bells that he couldn’t shake off. The boy was what – fifteen? Sixteen? Between the boy being entirely too messed up to consent to anything and Tobi being at least thirty according to Kakuzu who’d given him a long look when he asked, well-

And maybe it’s part of the reason for saying yes when the kid asks if he can keep the paint in Sasori-dana’s part of the room.
He doesn’t use it much anyway – doesn’t feel right after his death - and Leader-sama had said nothing when he claimed a second room for himself and Tobi to sleep in.

He glances at the door and draws his hood up over his hair with an impatient noise as he steps away from it.

It’s none of his business.

He loathes Itachi and he wouldn’t shed a tear if the younger Uchiha ended up dead.

But Deidara thinks of Sasori-dana who’d been impatient but never cruel when Akatsuki forcefully recruited him at thirteen and who’d chased away more than one man who’d wanted more than Deidara ever wanted to give.

Sasori who’d mutilated the Suna nukenin who’d drugged Deidara when he was fourteen so brutally that they hadn’t even been able to cash in the reward.

“You have to decide your own values, your own set of morals,” Sasori-dana tells him when he’s fifteen, the corpse of a dead child on his shoulder and Deidara’s harsh glare digging into his back. “If you don’t stand for something you are no better than a worm in the mud.”

Murder is easy – every shinobi knows how to kill. Through brute force, through poisons and explosions. Violence isn’t uncommon between the members of Akatsuki but none of them are rapists and even Hidan, for all that his mouth works, draws a line at sexual violence.

Children are disposed of but their deaths never drawn out.

He’s been with Akatsuki for six years now – has seen it grow from nothing to something in the hands of Pein-sama and Konan-sama.

Whatever Tobi is he doesn’t fit the narrative.

Sasuke dreams and dreams and dreams.

“I’ve never been to an amusement park before.” She cranes her head to look at the explosion of sound and noise, the spinning lights and people clutching sticks of fluffy cotton and large stuffed toys.

Jonah keeps a firm grip on her hand to keep her from getting lost, tugging her out of the path of a couple that she shoots a sheepish grin at as he draws her closer. “I’m happy I can be here for your first then,” he tells her earnestly.

“So am I,” she flashes a grin at him before she’s distracted by screams swooshing over their heads.

“I really want to try the roller coaster.”

“Oh, so we’re not doing the middle-thing here? No gentle Tea Cups to start off with or cramming ourselves onto small plastic animals alongside the children on a wonderful ride that take us round and round and –“ he pauses at her look, both her hands in his now as she draws him towards the waiting line. “What?” he asks suspiciously.

“Are you afraid, Jonah?” Her eyes glitter. “A bit unnerved to get yourself strapped in and go up, up, up into the sky maybe?”
“Nothing wrong with a healthy dose of self-preservation,” he huffs dramatically as he tugs her to a stop and she blinks at the seriousness that settles over his face. “If you want to do the roller coaster first then we’re doing the roller coaster first,” he says firmly.

“You sure?” she asks as she searches his eyes. “I don’t want you putting yourself in a bad position because of me.”

“It’s fine.” He gives her nose a little tap – his smile crinkling the corners of his eyes in that way she’s coming to love. “As long as you promise to split a cotton candy with me afterwards. Deal?”

She opens her mouth, knows the words that goes with the script, but they shrivel and die in her mouth as his smile warps and she takes a step back in the suddenly empty amusement park.

There’s a harsh noise, iron grinding against iron, as the roller coaster spirals onto the ground in a splitter of metal behind her and then a sudden silence rustles upon them like a sigh that leaves an eerie stillness behind.

Lights keep flickering, the large carousels slowing down into a rusty repetitive squeaking, and somewhere a distant laugh turns into a sob.

“Where are you going?” Jonah asks with a dip in his brow.

He takes a step towards her and she flinches back, stumbling over something soft and landing hard on the ground and there’s a clink of metal as she reaches blindly behind her, a sound so familiar in its echoing rattle that she forgets how to breathe.

Tremors shudders through her arms and she clenches her teeth, feels the way they scrape together as Jonah kneels down, ignoring her completely in favour of what she’d stumbled over.

“She was beautiful, you know? To me.” She sees the way he reaches out to touch.

“So easy to love.”

She’d always admired the nimbleness of his fingers.

Had enjoyed curling up together with him on the couch and listening to him thrum on his guitar or, on rare evenings, play a short piece of something that had caught his fancy during the day on the piano.

Anything from short commercial jingles to jaunty tunes he’d picked up from his students.

There’s a noisy squelch and she slowly turns her head, follows his outstretched arm down to the rotten body of Faye Henley and the ball-gag he’d scooped out of her unhinged jaw.

She scrambles to her feet and he watches her go, straightening slowly as her back disappears around the corner.

She stumbles blindly into one of the houses, twisting down a dark corridor and colliding hard with a red and white spinning wheel and through the plastic curtains into a room of cracked mirrors where she lands hard on her knees before a warping mirage whose only clear fixture are the eyes.

There’s a click of shoes behind her and then warmth as he seats himself on the floor beside her, watching her through the mirror.

“You know, I wish I could taste her one last time,” Jonah muses. “To lick the salt beading on her back when I fuck her. She was so beautiful when she came, you know? But the taste – that was the
best of it. I could have torn her apart over and over again just to lick her skin clean afterwards.”

In the mirror Faye Henley peers out at him with silver eyes, crouched over the body of a small six-year-old little boy before it twists into nothing, leaving only a single reflection behind.

She looks at herself, sixteen-years old, one eye black and one eye silver. Pale and trembling, the soft swell of her chest barely visible in the cast of light from a single yellowish lamp.

Beside her, Jonah’s mouth slowly stretches as he leans forward, so close that she can see the way his pupils dilate in the mirror even in the dark.

“You know, you’re pretty cute too, Sasuke.”

- Sakura gives Naruto a week of avoiding her before she leaves a note on Tsunade-shishou’s sake bottle and excuses herself early.

As shinobi they have to constantly contemplate right and wrong, the morality of knowing the ins-and-outs of their teammates when a slip of the tongue can mean certain death.

It’s particularly dangerous thing, especially in the ranks of shinobi where they’re valued differently and yet expected to keep a blind eye to it.

Loyalty to the village ranked above everything else.

Sakura reads the reports – sees the way clan shinobi are prioritized over those from civilian background and sought out for the higher-ranks.

A bad Hyuuga will always be more wanted than a good civilian born shinobi, no matter how clever.

Sakura knows because it’s a hinder she herself has faced and continue to face even as the second hand of Tsunade herself, the last living Senju, her position considered an indulgence and gamble to win fervour with the civilian populace.

Weak.

She’s an obstacle, an after-thought on a team with the likes of the last living Uchiha, Sharingan no Kakashi and the Kyuubi jinchuuriki. So easily written out of the story, replaced by any civilian born kunoichi because they’re a dime a dozen and will never amount to anything.

Tsunade sees something in her and it’s what saves her when Kakashi-sensei melts into the ranks of the ANBU.

But it doesn’t save Sasuke.

Sasuke who is so terribly broken and distrustful that he paints his toes to hides them from the world.

On a team of monsters Sakura isn’t expected to amount to anything and becoming the apprentice to the Godaime Hokage herself is a chance that’s beyond anything she ever could have dreamt of.

A chance to finally become something – to finally reach the level of her teammates.

The little civilian girl who wasn’t supposed to amount to anything in a generation of clan heirs.

It costs her something she wasn’t prepared to pay.
Sakura doesn’t have the answers, doesn’t have the words. She feels powerless, like she’s once again twelve-years-old, her hands slick with the blood of her teammate as he pleads wretchedly for her to stop when she struggles to keep him together only now she’s the one tearing him open.

Sakura reads the files Tsunade leaves on her desk for her – a message on hundreds upon hundreds of dead bodies left in the wake of Sasuke’s destruction of Otogakure.

Weeks spend digging graves for experiments that are barely human – bodyparts respectfully placed in boxes and then beneath earth with crosses of wood to mark their resting places and with a plaque to describe their exact content.

Looks through the blank files on Sasuke who doesn’t return to Konoha but seeks out the brother who’d slaughtered parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins in a single night after killing his best friend. A file even thinner than her own had been at twelve.

Reads the files on the same brother who tortures Sasuke and leaves him slumped on the ground for the ANBU to find him in the morning, mind brutalized and his parents blood coagulated on the wooden floor.

It’s almost as empty and Sakura looks at the grinning face of Uchiha Shisui and wonders what they’re missing.

She sits in on meetings, the shadow of her shishou, where the Konoha Council pushes to mark Sasuke as a missing-nin. To have him killed before he can become a threat to Konoha.

Just like his brother.

Sakura leaves those meetings with the inside of her cheek chewed to a bloody mess.

“Konoha didn’t do right by Sasuke,” Naruto whispers into her ear just days before they unseal the door and a part of Sakura wishes it would have remained closed forever.

The room is questions and answers and something far beyond anything Uchiha Sasuke was supposed to be and Tsunade ranks it an S-class secret.

What happened to you?

It’s a question that plagues her long after the events in Nami ni Kuni and it only grows.

She’s on the team of a boy who’d been distant but popular at the Academy, pursued in a way Sakura now understands was nothing more than cruelty disguised in lavished words.

A boy who wakes up gasping in the tent beside her and dodges any attempt at touch with empty eyes and trembling hands hidden in the pockets of his too-big jacket.

The same boy who leaves Naruto at the Valley of the End with a hole through his chest and barely breathing.

Right and wrong, the morality of carrying the fate of your teammates in your hand.

A door that would never have been open if it weren’t for them.

Responsibility.

Sakura has her first real row with Tsunade-shishou after being given orders to let Shikamaru and Ino into the room and the only thing that keeps her from being executed for treason are the arms that
envelope her afterwards and holds her close in a world that’s crumbling around her while Shizune stands grim-faced by the door.

“There’s a traitor in Konoha,” A secret entrusted to her as she slumps exhausted in her shishou's arms. “And it all leads back to the day of the Uchiha massacre.”

Erased files, a thirteen-year-old-boy who kills everyone but his little brother.

Trauma disproportionate to what little scraps of records that exists on her teammate.

A noted return on the Academy records nearly eleven months after the massacre.

An entire room sealed away with people there are no recorded existence of.

Sakura kicks the small bathroom window open and folds through it feet first, ignoring the shocked squeak from her teammate when she lands feet first in the bathtub and sinks down, clothes and all, from across his naked body.

Threws the orange at him to peel and juggles the sake bottle and cup onto the side of the tub as he stares at her.

“Are you ready to talk about it?” she asks as she pours them a thumb each and leans back.

“You’re wearing shoes in my bathtub,” Naruto says faintly as he reaches for his cup.

“Didn’t have time to switch them for my slippers unfortunately,” she responds pleasantly and he slants her a look as he sinks deeper into the warm water and pokes the orange into a spin in it.

“Do you think he’ll ever forgive us?” Naruto asks her quietly.

“I don’t think I can ever forgive myself,” Sakura admits as she leans her head back against the tiled walls.

Chapter End Notes

This is has been on my computer for almost a month now and it is what it is, apparently.

It's been a strange couple of weeks.

I'm glad Danzo made sense - had to think long and hard about how I wanted to deal with him considering what canon was and did. It's interesting to explore, anyway.

My brain is in a slump so it's a short note today. Sorry.

Cheers!
Sasuke’s dreams are a melting pot of faces and expressions that mixes and matches until she barely understands the creature that stares back at her from the mirror.

“*Mom?*” she whispers to the woman split in half with blond hair falling down one side and black spilling down the other – her mouth stretched in a perfect smile.

“*Dad?*” she asks the man who reaches for her with one hand black and the other white.

Their voices are a warble of noise that makes her cover her ears.

- She dreams she’s thirteen with blood on her hands and beneath her nails as she drops her little brother to the ground with empty eyes and saliva dripping from his chin.

She dreams she’s twelve and setting fire to the house they’d spent their childhood in, reaching for her big brother with a smile as his palm finds hers.

- She dreams of the tendons in her feet slit, a chain around her neck and a ball-gag in her mouth and hands that tears her skin open and kisses her with blood and obsession.

Dreams of unmarked skin that warps into scars and a single red eye spinning with mania who curls around her naked body and touches her with leather gloves and desperation.

- Sasuke buries her nails into her thighs – struggling against the panic that sends her heart beating too hard in her chest as she stares out through the window.

Sees the expanse of a red sky that never seems to go away – even with the glitter of stars splayed against it.

Sasuke reaches up to cover her left eyes as she folds over her legs, one arm beneath her thighs and holding on to the skin there with sharp nails.

The sheets are stained red beneath her and she knows she needs to change it but she can’t get herself to move.

*Jonah.*

She curls tighter on herself, quivering as she struggles against the panic clawing for her attention.

*Tobi.*

She hears a whisper from a distant time brush against her mind as she swallows a miserable laugh edging into something desperate and wretched.
“I want you to tell me five things that you’re wearing today. Can you do that for me?”

“Rajeem.” She presses her palm against her eye, nails digging into the skin around it as she chokes on a sob. “I think I’m going mad.”

- 

“- what do you do after you rape a deaf girl?”

She taps her nails against her whisky glass, chin in her palm and eyes fixated on the man in the middle of the group and the woman seated at his side with a smile on red painted lips and too tense shoulders.

“You cut off her fingers so she can’t tell on you!”

An echo of laughter and a noticeable shift of the woman beside him.

“It’s just a joke!” he laughs as he draws her close and plants a kiss at the corner of her mouth.

Sasuke thinks of hands that tore her apart and a tongue that tastes every inch of her body.

Thinks of unwilling pleasure under rough fingers and whispers of praise and adoration in her ear as she screams against the bruising violence of hands forcing her down and open.

Remembers yellow walls and blood soaked floor – a body that is turning rotten with her still attached and an arm black and hanging by threads of oozing pus until he saws it off and leaves it in her bowl with a boop to her nose and crinkle at the corner of his eyes.

Thinks of the taste of her own flesh in her mouth, desperately trying to force any and all past the gag with something that is far past any sense of reason.

*Just a joke.*

Her hand tightens around the glass but before she can lift it up she finds it stolen from her fingers and she goes still at the sight of Tobi’s orange mask and a baby blue drink being pressed into unresisting fingers.

“Sasu-chan!” His voice is a bubble of happiness but weighed with something darker. “I missed you,” he tells her earnestly.

“I thought you were on a mission with Deidara,” she says slowly, drawing the drink closer and her hand further from him as she settles back in her seat.

Most likely he’d been waiting for this exact moment.

Kisame; gone with the client.

Her; alone at the bar.

“But I wanted to see you,” he pouts. “Is Sasu-chan unhappy with Tobi?” he asks her urgently, leaning forward with his single black eye wide and earnest beneath the shadows cast by the mask.

Remembers a whisper of a name that isn’t hers.

“No,” she lies.
“Sasu-chan makes Tobi a very happy boy,” he tells her and she watches him with a single dark eye as he draws a knee up on the seat, unperturbed at the glare it garners him from the owner of the bar.

Sasuke catches their eye and makes show of tucking an extra note under the already emptied glass.

“Nah, Sasu-chan?”

She takes a slow sip of her drink.

“Why are you hiding your pretty eye from Tobi?”

She watches him over the rim of her glass for a long moment before slowly lowering it back onto the table with a low click and crosses her ankles, hands on either side of her glass.

“Maybe I’m shy.”

He stares at her for a moment, his gaze edged with something heavy as he scans her eye for the lie before his shoulders slowly relaxes.

“Sasu-chan never has to be shy for Tobi!” And there is something earnest and truthful in the way he presses it, his eye seeking hers. “Tobi likes Sasu-chan the best and he’s a good boy for her,” he promises.

Sasuke thinks of lips that slants over her own and alcohol in her blood.

Thinks of unwilling pleasure forced upon her and hands that won’t stop taking until there’s nothing more left to take.

A body that seizes to be hers as she arches her back with a sob of disgust and hot breath between her legs.

Just a joke.

When Tobi reaches for her hand Sasuke draws backs, turning her head away from the crack of wood beneath leather gloves.

"You'll never run from me again."

She collapses do her knees on the planks, clawing at her chest and feeling the way her breath constricts with every desperate gasp for breath and her left eye burning as she stares into the dark water below her.

Sees herself staring back pale and afraid and dead.

Something wet drips from the dip of her nose, splashing against her reflection, and anger coils white hot through her as she tumbles into the water with her hand outstretched and a scream that never reaches the surface as the abyss swallows her up.

“How are you today, Faye?”
“How are you holding up?”

“It’s alright not to be, you know?”

“We might be shinobi but we’re human too.”

“Sssh, it’s okay – it’s okay.”

“You know why I didn’t like you in the beginning?”

“Your little brother beat your father and mother to death and put the house on fire.”

“Mom said they found you clutching each other’s hands as the house went up in smoke.”

“You understand how disturbing that sounds, don’t you?”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

A blue jacket, clumsily stitched together.

“It got ruined because of me.”

“Your nails-“

Green eyes, a gentle smile.

“It looks good on you. I thought I was the only one who liked a splash of colour.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I think you did everything you could have done but sometimes everything isn’t enough.”

“It doesn’t make it hurt any less so I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for the both of you.”

“I am here.”

“You are safe.”

“Come here.”
“The Sharingan... and he’s very similar to you... Who is he?”

“My little brother.”

“You’ll always love me, right?”

“Sasuke.”

“What happened to you.”

“You are not even worth killing.”

“I’m not leaving without you, Sasuke.”

“We let you down once by leaving you in that bastard’s hands but he’s dead now. Whatever he did to you – we’ll help you through it!”

“And- and if you want to track down Itachi, we’ll do that too. Together.”

“So you don’t have to run from us.”

“We’re your team. Your family.”

“We just have to get stronger so that when Naruto comes home, we’ll be together again. Stronger than ever.”
“Tobi.”

“I thought I got rid of you in Suna.”

“You tried.”
Sasuke feels something breaking inside of her – eyes rolling into the back of her head and water filling up her lungs and she’s drowningdrowningdrowning, spiralling into an endless stretch of darkness as her chakra ripples with a violent hiss against the cold water.

Chapter End Notes

Sasuke finally hits her breaking point - this has kinda been spiralling since chapter 13 and now I can get us trucking into the third part of this story.

This chapter has been bugging me for some seven days now and I kinda want to throw it out the window but it needed to happen for us to step into the next part of this story and I'm genuinely not getting anywhere with it.

So, I'm just gonna throw it at you and stop obsessing or you're not going to get any updates before December.

I've been trying to draw a thing for a chapter up ahead and let's just say it's never seeing the light of day. My skills of drawing is a solid -5 to my consternation.

And I really try! Honest. I can draw a butch pikachu with abs but that's about it.

Gonna buy myself a strawberry cider to celebrate summer is here. Might buy two because my life is a mess and I kinda wanna nap for five years because nope.

I adore all of you - stay safe and sane.

Cheers!
Kiba wakes up with a headache that makes the world twist into a violent blur when he jerks awake and he barely manages to turn his head before he pukes up all over the grass beside him.

He watches through blurry eyes as a mess of greyish sludge drips off and unfortunate little yellow flower and struggles against the absurdity of it all as he drags a shaky hand through his hair, noting that it doesn’t hurt nearly as much as it had and breathing carefully through his nose before spitting.

Akamaru noses his way closer – huffing in his sleep – and Kiba digs his finger into the mattered fur of his too-thin companion and raises his head to look at what he knows awaits.

He had hoped it a bad dream but Uchiha Itachi stares back at him, head tilted and the fire catching in the dark eyes that are so like his little brother’s.

Beside him is a woman and despite her not looking at him he feels an icy feeling crawl down his spine.

Hanasaki is still bound, asleep or out cold just a bit to the side of him and Sai is talking in low tones with the two Akatsuki members, a scroll twisted in pale hands. Kiba can see the tenseness of his shoulders all the way from where he sits, blurry vision and all, and something rises inside of him as he wobbles to his feet and stumbles across the distance.

He plops down beside Sai despite the fact that it puts him closer to the woman than he reasonably wants to be, and straightens his back.

He’s clammy and sick and he hurts and there’s a clinging of fever that hasn’t faded but he pretends to notice none of this as he meets the eyes of the man who’d torn his classmate to bits.

Kiba recalls meetings and speculations – the horror reflected in black eyes as the boy reaches for his teammate with desperate hands and Ino’s sick face as she pieces together the evidence none of them knows what to do with.

Words that echo but are never voiced out loud because saying it would make it real, would bring the violence to life in a way none of them knows how to handle.

“Inuzuka-san.” Itachi’s voice is smooth, his eyes a void he struggles to read and Kiba fights against the hatred that flares at the sight of them.

This man had murdered his entire clan, had tortured his little brother, had –

Kiba thinks of his sister and he can’t imagine the horror of having Hana turn on him – can’t even begin to imagine what it must have been like for Sasuke six-years-old and terrified, surrounded by
death and meeting the eyes of the brother he’d loved, the man responsible for it all at only thirteen.

He feels the gap between himself and this man who’d Sasuke had turned to despite everything and he wants to understand, wants to make sense, wants to ask how could you do it?

Uchiha Itachi is a dangerous being and Kiba swallows the nausea and bares his lips in a smile that is more teeth than friendliness.

“Itachi-san.”

He thinks he sees the woman’s lips lift at the corner at his daring and the man tilts his head just so, a glimmer of something quickly smothered with a dip of acknowledgement.

“You still have a low fever,” Itachi says, reaching out to fill a bowl with cooling stew that he stiffly accepts. “I will prepare you some herbal tea later, it will help with the dizziness.”

“Karasu-san and Ketatemashii-san have offered us safety for information,” Sai says beside him, a fumbling attempt at reassurance coming from anyone else but Kiba hears the warning in his words and feels the stiffness of the shoulder he presses himself against.

“You have my thanks,” he bites out, hiding his reluctance in the exhaustion that burdens his shoulders.

He can’t even yell at Sasuke for seeking out the help of murderers when he’s doing the same, can he? Forced to flee his village and hide from the Sandaime’s oldest and closest friend.

Kiba wonders what it says about Konoha – about their evolution with the voice of someone like Danzo whispering into the ear of their Hokage.

Feels like a traitor for just thinking about it.

The food isn’t bad but it isn’t good either and he doesn’t feel bad for barely tasting it, his shoulders tense as he listens to the two Akatsuki members talking quietly with each other.

“What did I miss?” he asks in an undertone to Sai whose face is bruised but cuts efficiently bandaged. He must have taken a bath because he smells like Sai which is much better than whatever rot of old blood he’d been dragging around before and it’s strangely comforting.

He inhales – lets the smell of comrade settle inside of him, a whisper of a word he doesn’t dare to voice hounding at the heels of it.

“I stole information from Danzo and offered it up in exchange for keeping us safe. We’ll most likely be taken back to the Akatsuki base.”

If Kiba wasn’t close enough to feel the bunched muscles of the other boy he probably would have exploded on him for sounding so calm. Instead he has to curl his nails into his palm to prevent himself from reaching out and gripping his hand in reassurance.

They’ve traded one danger for another and they’re playing a very dangerous game in a deal of information that relies on Akatsuki actually having some sort of honour and it’s ridiculous.

Kiba knows that the best bet they have is on Sasuke being of stable enough mind to feel something for them after three years spent between Orochimaru and his brother.

Sasuke who had left Naruto with a hole in his chest in the Valley of the End.
Kiba will never forget the way Sasuke reaches for Sakura and Naruto with unmentionable horrors painted into the very depth of his soul. Something that left him broken and side-turned for years without anyone to reach out for him and help him and once they do he reaches back with desperation, clinging in a way that leaves Kiba with a bitter taste on his tongue.

“We were just kids.”

Turning a blind eye to the strange boy with dark dead eyes in his too big hoodies, hands carefully hidden in the long-sleeves – it gnaws on him when he watches the loss that still burdens Naruto and Sakura who both loves Sasuke despite the time and distance and one being left for dead, the other nearly losing her best friend.

There’s complexity in loyalty, Kiba knows, glancing at Sai whose jaw is tense - tension lining his shoulders.

He also knows that his face is about to be plastered in every bingo book the moment it gets out that he’s gallivanting around with Akatsuki and he doesn’t know how to go about explaining that he’s spent weeks locked up starving in the hands of Shimura Danzo who is, apparently, running an entire underground ANBU division called Ne without Godaime-sama being none the wiser.

It’s the kind of nightmarish scenario nothing in the Academy could have prepared him for and he misses his team with an aching desperation.

“And then?” he asks, already knowing the answers as he lifts his eyes to meet the inky depths of his companion.

“And then we survive.”

Hinata spends the night curled up in her girlfriend’s arms, head tucked under the other’s chin, legs tangled and ear pressed against her ribcage to hear the beat of her heart.

Despite being together for nearly a year she’s can’t help the curl of her lips and soft warmth in her chest from opening her eyes to soft eyelashes and hard muscles - buns released and straw coloured hair brushing against a sharp collarbone.

Hinata reaches out, tracing a long scar on the other’s chest, ghosting her finger over the flat surface of her areola, the little peak of a nipple in the dark skin that responds to her touch.

She squeaks when she finds herself abruptly spun and pinned, narrowly catching the hunger in teal eyes before a familiar mouth slants over hers and she tilts her head, deepening it with a little hum as she reaches out and hooks a leg around the other’s lower back to pull her down and closer.

Temari glances at the clock when she pulls away and practically collapsing her weight on the younger with a groan.

“It’s five a.m.”

“You asked me to wake you up,” Hinata reminds her, unable to resist dragging her nails down the freckled back as she spreads her legs to accommodate her body.

Temari mumbles something in denial against her neck and Hinata feels her face heat up when fingers dip down and her hips cant up with a soft moan.
It’s a soft thing, slow with gentle words in her ear and guided by the hips that presses down a calloused palm against her while fingers dip inside, dragging pleasure out of her with soft sharp gasps.

She makes sure to return the favour two-fold, enjoying the taste of her girlfriend on her tongue and the strong thighs around her head that could so easily kill her.

Temari is strong, Temari is beautiful, Temari is clever.

It’s admiration that grows into something more and Hinata straddles her hips and kisses her with something she never wants to forget filling every inch of her chest.

The squawk of a messenger bird makes her straighten up from her light doze against Temari’s chest – holding out her hand and relieving it off its burden with a crease of her brow as she flips it open.

She slides into Temari’s lap without protest as the other sits up with a concerned crease of her brow.

“What is it?”

Hinata wishes she’d never opened the letter.

- 

Hyuuga Hiashi had, during a single night, eradicated the entire branch house of the Hyuuga Clan with the exception of his nephew who is found near death, the seal of his forehead raw and bleeding, before apparently ending his own life.

Hinata hears the words but they won’t register as she sits beside her cousin’s bedside, his soft hand cradled in hers.

She feels helpless, numb, as if participating in a script she doesn’t know the next part of.

Lee is there, too, as is Gai and Tenten and Sakura who is talking in low tones with a nurse.

Temari was supposed to return home that morning but had excused herself with a squeeze of her shoulder to send a letter to Gaara and request additional leave and had promised to be back with something to drink and eat.

The words and there but it won’t work their way through the constriction in her chest, a web of words and emotions she doesn’t want to touch upon.

Hanabi lies in the room next door – the ANBU guard burdened with the promise to fetch Hinata the moment she wakes up after being forcefully sedated.

She’d been the one who’d found –

Hinata doesn’t want to think about it. Doesn’t want to face the reality of the situation.

_Her father_ –

She folds her fingers together with her cousins, a tremor in her soul and a scream in her throat that she swallows thickly around.

All of them, dead.

The cursed seal activated for far longer than it was ever meant to be used in the silence of the night.
His body found hanging at the room containing her mother’s shrine.

She twitches at the feel of a hand curling around her shoulder but the familiar buzz registers as Shino steps up beside her, his jacket missing and shirt smelling faintly of smoke.

“Come,” he says gently, tugging her up and tightening his grip when she stumbles.

He leads her out of the room, down the hall, gently pushing her into a familiar hospital room where Kurenai-sensei stares back at her, heavily pregnant and already opening her arms as Hinata trips towards her with a sob bubbling up past her lips as Shino closes the door behind them.

“You don’t have to be strong here,” Kurenai whispers as she enfolds her.

-“How could this happen?”

Tsunade stares at the fiery young woman with exhaustion that roots through her very soul and hiding it behind a thin barrier as she waves Shizune aside.

She knows why she’s angry and she knows it will do neither of them good to get into a fight about it but she feels her mouth curl at the challenge in those eyes.

The daughter of the old Kazekage, the brother of the current. Nineteen-years-old and one of the most valued and well-recognised ambassadors around. Her name is almost on par with her brother’s in Suna and it’s a well-deserved thing.

She knows the question isn’t how could this happen but rather how could you let this happen – the accusation like poison but grounded in something else entirely.

Young love, Tsunade thinks with just a touch of wryness as she staples her fingers together and watches the younger over them.

If she didn’t feel the same way she would have thrown her out the door in a single breath but Tsunade feels the responsibility in juggling too much things and being unable to help them all.

Hinata had brought up her hopes and plans for change in the clan and since Tsunade couldn’t do anything to interfere with clan business the best she could do, in the capacity of the Hokage of Konohagakure, was be there and support her as the young girl matured and grew into someone who didn’t fold and shy away in the face of adversity.

Someone who would one day proudly lead the Hyuuga Clan and change it for the better.

She’s been hounding through information on the Uchiha massacre for weeks and now she stands with another one on her hands and she doesn’t know the first way to handle it.

Their best bet for information in in the hospital, brain fried and with a narrow chance of making it. ANBU had been called in and Shikaku, Inoichi, Tsume and Shibi had all volunteered to look into the situation with their respective skills.

Tsunade’s brow furrows.

It bothers her – the way the pieces doesn’t fit together.

Nothing in Hiashi’s behaviour matches up with the suddenness or brutality of it and his secretary reports on him having dinner with his nephew just nights before.
“Temari-san,” Shizune ventures eventually when Tsunade remains silent. “I know both you and Hinata-chan is hurting but this is not the time or place.”

Temari’s face goes through something that is very close to desperation as she turns her face, visibly gathering herself together as Hokage and secretary politely gives her the time.

“I wish to extend my stay for another month, Hokage-sama,” Temari says finally and Tsunade mentally applauds the mask that settles over her face, the danger in her eyes hidden by lowered lashes and head as she bows.

“Granted.”

Shizune steps forward. “With your permission I will send a letter to Kazekage-sama and explain the situation.”

Temari nods her agreement as she holds out her own letter for the woman to take.

“Go,” Tsunade says, just a touch gentler than she means to allow and Temari gives a jerky nod before turning on her heel.

The door glows blue behind her as it seals shut.

“You have a soft spot for the youth,” Shizune observes, tone light but eyes troubled.

“Not as fond as you.”

Tsunade leans back, brow furrowing in thought as Shizune shoots her a suspicious look.

Jiraiya had explained as much as he could about the Uchiha massacre and how Itachi had acted on behalf of Hiruzen-sensei’s order. His Hokage’s orders to murder his entire clan.

He’d been thirteen.

Tsunade drinks heavily that night and Jiraiya looks older than she’s ever seen him when she leave him in the morning and she wonders what it must have done to him to shoulder that burden for so many years.

It’s another piece in the puzzle and she thinks that Sasuke must have known, or at least suspected, his brother’s role in the massacre for him to seek Itachi out after killing Orochimaru.

There’s still pieces missing – needs and orders, reasons, a year erased entirely from existence and dark eyes that stare up at her with trauma that doesn’t belong to a single night in the hands of a boy who had sacrificed everything to keep his little brother safe.

She drums her fingers against her knee in thought, brow dipped and half-formed ideas that makes Shizune glance at her in suspicion as she bares her teeth.

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Kisame pauses at the sight of a dripping wet Sasuke perched with one leg folded up against her thigh, the other swinging slowly, the tips of her bare painted toes barely brushing the floor from the tall chair by the counter of the bar.

There’s a dead man speared to the wall – a broad sword shoved clean through his chest and left to dangle with hands torn to ribbons where he’d tried to yank it out or perhaps prevent it.
The bar in itself is empty, not a single chair or table out of place and glasses still filled with alcohol left on tables.

There’s a growing pool of water beneath her and she raises her glass to her mouth and downs half of something amber with a quiet tap as she places it back down.

“I thought I told you to stay out of trouble,” he says, closing the door behind him to prevent cold air from sweeping inside.

“You did,” she agrees. “I took care of it.”

Kisame glances at the man and the pool of dark wet blood beneath him.

“I suppose you did,” he says noncommittally. “I got the information we needed. We’re doing him a favour in return and getting rid of a bandit gang that has been making a name for themselves a bit to the south of here before we return back to the base.”

Her hand stills around the bottle it’d curled around to refill.

Kisame seriously contemplates ditching the mission entirely and drag the girl back to Itachi when she turns her neck to look at him, a smile twisting pale lips into something entirely unrecognisable - eyes glittering from their sunken depths.

“Of course, Kisame-shishou.”

He doesn’t narrow his eyes but it’s a near thing.

“Mind telling me why you’re dripping wet while we’re at it?”

“I went for a swim.”

“With your clothes on?”

“It was cold.”

There’s something she isn’t telling him. He sees it in the dead look in her eyes, the twitchiness of her fingers and the man still dripping blood where he dangles bloated and wide-eyed.

Something has changed during the hours he’d left her on her own and he doesn’t have enough information to go on to put together the pieces of what.

“You’re taking a warm bath once we get back to the hotel room.”

She blinks and the sharp edges of her smile fades in the face of his bluntness.

“I was thinking sushi for dinner,” he continues, shrugging off his cloak and draping it over her shoulders with a soft squeeze of her biceps to remind her if the here and now and his presence as he nudges her off the chair, bare feet making no noise against the wooden floor.

Her nails are painted the same colour as her big brother’s he notes absently as she turns her neck to look at him as if she isn’t quite sure what to do with him.

Kisame feels rather the same when it comes to both her and her brother and isn’t the slightest bit sympathetic as he gets her moving with a soft push against her lower back.

The snow is thick on the streets when he opens the door and she’s two steps out when he snags her
by the neck of her clothes and pulls her back inside.

“Shoes.”

Something strange flickers across her face.

“I lost them,” she admits.

Kisame stares at her – at the wet pants pulled up to the knee and jacket zipped all the way up, covering most of her face as she ducks her chin into its protective wall against the rest of the world, a shiver barely hidden by the thick fabric.

“You lost your shoes,” he says slowly. "When you went for a swim?"

She gives a small jerk of a nod.

“Both of them?”

Another nod.

Kisame stares at her for a long moment and she stares back – headband at the forehead and both eyes bare for the world to see.

Samehada is at the hotel room, his back free, and it’s a surprisingly easy decision to make as he kneels down in a clear offer, hands drawn back.

“It’s a ten minute walk to the hotel,” he says when she remains still behind him. “You’ll get sick walking around barefoot.”

A hand slowly grabs his shoulder and then the other, chest pressing against his back as he grabs for her thighs and hoists her up while simultaneously rising to his full height.

She tenses, stiff and ginger in the way she awkwardly holds onto him, and he gives her a deliberate little bump up, lowering his shoulders and taking a step into the cold.

It takes a couple of minutes for her to slowly, cautiously, relax against him. Chin coming to rest on his shoulder, one arm curling half-way around his neck in a loose grip. He feels the way her she slowly, almost bonelessly, sinks against him – as if unable to deny herself his closeness in a moment of weakness.

Sasuke is an echo of trauma and her aversion to touch a side-effect of it but he doesn’t think for a moment that it’s a natural state for her.

It doesn’t mean she’ll ever get used to being touched or even be comfortable seeking it out again. But it doesn’t meant that the need isn’t there and Kisame is so very careful with how much he pushes her limits, knowing that he easily can do more bad than good.

He feels fond for this creature - more fond than he means to.

"What about the body?" Sasuke asks in a soft murmur.

"This is Yukigakure," Kisame says as she tilts her head just so to look at him. "It will be gone before morning."

Chapter End Notes
I haven't had internet or time, working some twelve hours a day, but I have three days off and managed to toggle all of this together for your enjoyment instead of sprawling out on the beach so yaaaay.

I'm genuinely happy because my brain has been stuffed - being unable to write anything tend to slowly drive me up the walls.

There's a lot of development in all sorts of directions here - with the Hyuuga clan (what are you planning, Danzo?) and Kiba and Sai who are in way over their heads.

We've established that Kiba, Sai and Sasuke are all moving towards the Akatsuki headquarters, at last, and there's stuff happening in Konoha for all sorts of reasons.

Danzo have plans - it's not a good thing.

Tsunade have plans - it's a messy thing.

Dead guy is absolutely the one who made rape jokes in the last chapter. We'll get back to this and the loss of shoes, I promise.

Recently got way into BNHA and I have so many ideas. I need to reel myself in but I so wanna write because. Like. Yo. It's amazing.

Feel free to let me know thoughts and ideas and questions! I read them all and while I might be way slow to respond I do it and I love it.

Cheers!

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Works inspired by this one

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