Yeah, Kunai are cool but have you had dessert?

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Yeah, Kunai are cool but have you had dessert?

by Authorship

Summary

Easy, I thought, like the idiot I still was. Open a bakery and try not to die (again). Seemed pretty simple...until you factor in that I, a civilian, have the last Big Cat Summon. And Ino, Shika and Chouji think I'm their nee-chan.

...I didn't think to factor in the overwhelming force of Shisui’s puppy eyes either.

Some - rather large - oversights then.

SI/OC Patissier and Baker...."What do you mean you don't know what fucking caramel is?!"

OR

Okay, I'll admit seeing my new dad's Hitai-ate was a massive kick in the (thankfully metaphorical) balls. Sorry, but I don't kill people! AKA an SI/OC fic where the girl is more concerned with the alarming lack of pastries...and appropriate female role models...and adopting misfits and cinnamon rolls...err, oops? At least, I get to troll people!

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
IMPORANT NOTE: Before you read this story, keep in mind that our girl is going to
be a child with the memories of an adult. The silly and childish tone of the first 12-or-so
chapters is deliberate. Whilst, she has a more mature personality and outlook etc., she is
also ruled by her body's emotions. So, when she's a child, she is very silly and excitable,
and a bit resentful. As she grows up, the tone of the story changes to match her,
becoming more mature and reflective. As the years pass from her old life, memories fade
and she lives more and more in her actual world as well. So, don't just assume, because
you think it starts of a bit silly, that it's always going to be that way!

Disclaimer- I don't own Naruto! Capeesh?

A/N- new fic! I've read more than my fair share of OC/SI fics so thought I'd toss in my two cents.
Hopefully, this one will be reasonably refreshing. Anyways, please drop me a review and enjoy!

P.S- my views on death etc., they are in no way meant to be harmful or insulting. If you disagree etc.
then I'm sorry but they're kind of important for the development of Kiharu's character. She's me but
also not, remember guys. She's not actually me. Anyway, please keep this in mind!

Chapter 1

When I daydreamed about being in a fantasy world, I didn't actually…mean it.

I was one in a million in my life. Tall girl, two sisters. History degree and a couple of ex-boyfriends.
My life, not to sound melodramatic, was completely normal. I was never particularly smart and I was
too lazy for sports. However, my two elder sisters… they were smart. They'd read books and then
spend hours talking about them. I felt kind of left out so I ended up reading them too.

And I loved it.

I wasn't the most…sophisticated of readers. My sisters read all the classics (I preferred to watch the
films) and I kind of fell into the fantasy genre when my history studies got so boring or violent
(mostly both) that reality depressed me.

Fanfiction was even better. For years I just read them, adoring the same characters but living different
lives and written different ways. That was what depressed me the most about books; getting invested
and then everything coming to an end. Maybe it was a bit unhealthy, not being able to finish a book
series because it was like the character had died.

That was when I started writing.

I wasn't the best writer, in all honesty, too little dedication and too sporadic in my updates, but
writing felt so good that sometimes I'd update and the update again and it was amazing.

I used to think for so long on how the story would go.

It was inevitable then that I imagined myself in these universes. We've all got favourite characters.
People we'd love to help or save or just simply hug. I'd dreamt of being a Nara (I was certainly lazy enough and I'd loved Ino-Shika-Cho) or raising Naruto like those amazing Femharry prompts I'd adored. I never thought anything would ever come of them.

It wasn't until the car ran a red light and sent me flying that I honestly thought about death.

I was a Catholic. It was tradition to a certain extent (a cultural thing in this region, the done thing) but also the hope that I'd see my granny and grandad when I died. In school, rebirth or reincarnation had always scared me; the idea that I've been born again but remember nothing; would that even count as rebirth, if you don't even realise it? If the soul remembers nothing? I just couldn't say.

But anyway, here I was, flying through the air.

In so much pain it wasn't even painful. All I could think was my mum's gonna cry so hard and how I'd never hugged anyone goodbye. How I'd never been in love or owned a dog or got to wear that dress to my cousin's wedding in June. Little things. Big things. But then I hit the ground and it was red, my god I'd never seen that much red. Someone was screaming and the car had stopped and people were running. Black sensible heels in my vision and a woman- a stranger, dark hair, sobbing-is stroking back my hair, screaming for an ambulance.

They don't make it in time, I don't think.

I smile up at her-sad, she's so sad, I don't even know you- and she smiles back.

I feel so bad, I hope this moment won't torment her. I'd hate to hurt someone even as I went.

-"Oh honey, hold on, it's gonna be okay-"

As the last words, I thought they were lovely. Honey. Noone had called me that in years…

Then it was dark.

….

It was dark for a long time.

And very warm.

I was terrified, thinking that this must be hell in some form, even if I wasn't in pain. I spent what must've been days thinking of all the reason I could be in hell (the childish lies I'd told my parents, that one time I'd stolen a goody-bag from the freshers stalls at Uni – it wasn't technically theft as they were free but it wasn't meant for me, so surely that must have been it?).

It wasn't until I heard voices that the scariest possibility came to mind.

(Hell… I could possibly deal with. At least I'd know what awaited me. And possibly ask what it was that I'd done.)

But rebirth? Being a baby? I wasn't sure I could do it again. Love another family, grown up to what would feel like a stranger's face in a stranger's home. I didn't think I was strong enough. Sure enough of myself. Smart enough it live like an ordinary human(?)

Oh please, at least let me be human.

But, back to the voices.
They were muffled and sometimes so quiet I understood nothing or thought I'd imagined them. I fidgeted to try and get some attention.

A pause and then a flurry of movement, excited babbling and a vague pressure of the area- stomach, my new mother's stomach- in front of me.

And the voices…I'm pretty sure that was Japanese.

Now, as I'd said earlier. I wasn't that smart. My cousin had visited Japan and my sisters had a thing for manga. I was more of an anime and fanfiction girl, mostly because it was easier and my parents disapproved. I most definitely did not know any Japanese. The most I knew was 'Nani?' and some Naruto terminology I'd picked up from various fics. I wasn't that smart, in all honesty. I'd struggled as a kid with the English language and then later with French enough to know that I wasn't going bilingual anytime soon. So, upon realising that I was quite possibly going to be slaving away for years trying to understand an incredibly complex language, that didn't even have the mercy of a similar alphabet, I kicked the skin in front of me as hard as I could.

Not the most mature option, I'll give you. But hey, I'm a baby.

Unfortunately for the sake of my temper, this only encouraged the excited babbling of Japanese.

This, I could tell, was going to be a long ride.

....

Now, I won't bore you too much with the next few month because, except for being the most vicious kicker, nothing happened.

Pretty sure I'd bruised my mum up plenty but, hey, I'd never claimed to be an angel.

Speaking of, if I didn't actually die after this life (a bit early to be thinking this way I grant you, but still) I swore I was going to be the biggest troll ever conceived. Or a megalomaniac. Either one, depending on how far my sanity would last me.

I'd be good in this life though, I promise.

I'd had months now, however, to get myself sorted. Although I'd yet to actually face the real reality of human interaction, I had cried most of my tears already (mostly figuratively, I was in the womb of course) and gotten over the worst of my grief. I knew that these would really be my parents and this body would be mine, no matter how different it may end up looking. I had to believe that this was my body, that I'd not been forced into someone else and killed them in some way. I'd reasoned that such a process would be illogical; nothing had been special or wrong about my death so who could say if this didn't happen to everyone. Apparently, the rebirth theories had it right.

I had also briefly wondered if I was in a coma, locked inside some sick fantasy in my own head. That thought was mercifully and quickly discarded. I had no reason to believe this wasn't real and enough issues without adding 'existential crisis' to the pile.

So, here I was, drifting along for months. Aside from kicking I'd not really moved much. The thought of moving my little half-formed body before it was ready was deeply terrifying; the last thing I wanted to was to give myself irreparable damage in the womb. My mum had been a nurse and my grandmother a midwife; I knew enough horror stories about twisted umbilical cords to never want to touch mine. Ever.

It was incredibly boring. Up until the contractions started.
Oh shit, nope.

I immediately wished for the boring to return now, please.

It was the most bizarre sensation. Ever. It was worse because I knew I would never forget this. How…embarrassing.

It was like a vacuum, everything moving and contracting downwards and I was so terrified I wanted to scream right alongside my mother. That kind of background noise really wasn't helping me chill.

It went on for ages and it was so bad I blacked out a few times. I really didn't blame newborns for being so screamy and red. I was definitely going to be voicing my displeasure. Loudly.

For hours – it felt like years – my mother screamed and pushed and screamed some more. In Japanese. I could only hope they were colourful swears at my dad. On behalf of both of us, I could confirm it was all his fault.

After an age, something harsh and cold hit me in the face and then a sharp smack had me screaming in pain. I gasped and gulped at the new, colder stuff in my chest.

Air. I was breathing. It had been so long I forgot what it felt like to inhale and exhale, lungs and ribs expanding. In my previous life, I'd had a lung condition and never forgot the luxury of breathing freely on those days without an inhaler. I realised I'd stopped screaming, too busy drinking in the gloriously cool air to care. Something huge and warm was rubbing me, the materially inching my sensitive -too sensitive, everything hurts- skin. I thought I was surely be bleeding.

I felt then that we were moving but the hands weren't enough, surely they were going to drop me! I was too small to survive such a thing and found myself screaming at the thought all over again. I couldn't help but cry louder when I was wrapped firmly in what must've been swaddling, limbs trapped so tight I knew that if I was dropped now, nothing would save me.

I'd thought I'd be mature and reasonable about this. But I didn't trust anyone here, not with my helpless body. I felt so unsafe, I could be hurt at any moment.

That was when I was curled up against something soft and warm. By the feel of it, it must have been my mother's chest. Her hair brushed my face as she cooed at me softly in that foreign language.

Earlier the sound had made me angry, evidence of my own helplessness. Now, …it just felt strangely familiar, from all those months curled up in her body.

This was my mother. And I wanted to see her.

Cracking open my eyes way a trial and a half, the world a watery blur of colour (like that time I'd gone under in the swimming pool and vowed to never again swim without goggles). Her face was so close to mine though that I could almost see it.

She was…pretty. And mercifully human. And normal looking. Her skin was pale under the hospital lights (yes! Electricity and healthcare!), her golden brown hair sticking to her forehead and brushing her shoulders. Her eyes, exhausted but still essentially happy, were dark blue. Her smile was trembling but still warm.

Her face moved from mine, chin tilted up and I automatically followed her gaze. To the man.

Oh, hey, dad.

Where mum had been normal, dad wasn't so much.
Oh, he looked fine, albeit a bit on the unfairly handsome side of life (dark hair, deep chestnut eyes, and tanned skin). But it was the green bodywarmer and metal headband which had me screaming out once more.

A flack jacket and hitai-ate. With a leaf. As in, Konoha. As in, Naruto.

Queue more screaming.

Could you get any more cliché?

So, as I was screaming out for the Shinigami (when in Narutoverse, pray to Naruto gods) to come reap my soul, my hopefully-just-a-dedicated-cosplayer father stepped closer and relieved my deeply unhappy person from my exhausted mother.

I was too furious at the universe to feel guilty.

A gentle humming and shushing from aforementioned father gradually interrupted my hatefest. His voice felt wonderful beside my ear, a bit like Sher Kan from the original Jungle Book. As lovely and soft as my mother had been, I was instantly a fan of my father's deep rolling baritone. Even if I didn't understand anything he was saying.

I supposed I could forgive him his job if he kept that up for a while longer.

Maybe.

I mean, ninjas, as cool as they were in anime, were actual mercenary killers.

I'd also taken too many politics modules not to be able to acknowledge that I was now living under a military dictatorship and that, no matter where I was in canon, I would see War in my lifetime.

I didn't really want to think about it too much.

Thankfully, Dad provided a timely interruption. He said something, a lot to my mum and a fair bit directed at me. I mean, even if I was a real baby, I still wouldn't understand? Rude. Baby talk was always cute; now it was just an aggravating tease. I was almost tempted to try speaking English (even though I knew I'd mangle it with no teeth and no practice) but I couldn't risk it. Even if it could be excused as baby talk, all languages had a rhythm to them that made them sound like actual languages and not just random noises. Ninja's were incredibly suspicious; I couldn't risk anything.

I'd already resigned myself to never speaking of my former life to anyone, ever.

I could have claimed that it was a part of who I was and I had to tell the people I would come to love. Nope, not in my book. I'd had a lot of thinking time, stuck in my mum's belly. This was my life now and I doubted my previous would have any influence. And I was just asking to get killed or shipped to a cell or labeled crazy. No proof I could provide would give me any protection. And yeah people did it in the OC fics all the time and it worked out ok!

But this wasn't a fic. This was my life.

I couldn't live it like all those stories I'd read. Life didn't work that way.

And I told myself I wasn't that stupid.

It was at that point that Dad said something else to me, lips brushing a kiss over my head. ".-ru-chan" I caught. I guess I'd been named...
At least I was born a girl again. I definitely didn't want to learn how to pee standing up.
I originally planned to be a good kid but...well..

Chapter Summary

So I'm a baby. I figured I'd try and be a good one, all cute and smiley but, well,...maybe it's more fun this way?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Life as a baby was boring.

I slept a lot, cried a lot (it was so aggravating and no one made sense and I was so uncomfortable).

I’d read in fics that chakra itched, that OCs were hypersensitive etc. But I call bullshit.

Either that was just the fandom (then again, this is technically fiction…only, you know what? I’m not gonna go there) or I didn’t have any.

Okay, if that’s it; I’ll take it. What a perfect excuse not to be a child soldier, conditioned from primary school to murder other human beings in a constant existence of fear and conflict and paranoia.

Well, dammit.

But, yeah. I wasn’t super sure if chakra awareness was actually a thing. I mean, Naruto had a great big chakra fox in his gut and he literally never realised? You don’t feel blood or oxygen as it goes around your body or nervous impulses across synapses. Although, you don’t consciously wield those things, like with chakra.

I wish I could ask questions.

I still didn’t get Japanese.

After scrambling through memories of various animes, I’d scrounged up a baby-appropriate vocabulary of ‘Jiji’, ‘tou-san’ and ‘kaa-san’. And that wasn’t even from this world! And by 'baby-appropriate' I just meant without including a handful of swears, village names or weapons.

If my first word was any of them, I honestly thought my mother would kill dad.

And there was that. Even without comprehending…anything…I could at least grasp tones of voice and body language (as much as my slowly improving eyesight would allow). Mum was definitely awesome though. She threw books and pots at dad. After the (I could only presume) swear-fest at my birth, she proved to be equally irritable outisght of the birthing room. At least I was always entertained. The funniest thing was that she was always adorable with me, cooing and singing (not Leona Lewis but still pretty good). She was a ‘stay-at-home-mother’ (I obviously didn’t know why). I could only hope she wasn’t some clan lady. Dad was a ninja, obviously Chuunin or higher (the vest was a clue). When he did come home, it was always with a cheerful call (don’t ask what he said, I still have no clue after 9 months) and a delighted grin. He was always smiling, even when mum scolded him. I wondered if that was his way of coping as a ninja.
And he was always so happy to see me.

As humiliating as it was to be a baby, at least the sheer delight brought on by my presence was a huge ego boost.

He’d sweep into the kitchen as he pulled off his flak jacket, sweeping in to kiss mum before catching sight of me. By this time, I was usually already prisoned in the most uncomfortable baby chair ever created. Mum probably bought it expressly for the purpose of revenge for how uncomfortable I undoubtedly made her pregnancy.

Despite my grouchy face (it tended to be, especially in that stupid chair), he’d yell something out, “-chan”-whatever which was my mystery name, and then tickle me.

He hadn’t clued in yet that in this body I just wasn’t ticklish.

I giggled anyway.

Okay, so sue me. My adorable parents are showering me with affection and I’m, what? Gonna sit there like Grumpy Cat? Hell no! I’m going to be the most interactive and adorable cherub to ever grace Konoha.

No vomiting or snotty faces on this baby. Well, at least I’d try.

But there was no way I was going to be a bad baby when I had the mental facilities to be everyone’s favourite on purpose. And the possibility that, when mum eventually took me out, I’d do something embarrassing in front of a main character was just not on the table. I’m not being a fangirl about this, it would just be ridiculous.

‘Hey, I’ve read hundreds of fics featuring you and-oops, yep I’ve just been sick on myself!’

I didn’t think so.

So I’d babble and giggle like a Disney princess and I would relish in my, fairly superficial, success.

After dinner, where my parents ate food that, unlike my slurry, actually looked edible, Dad does the dishes and mum cleans up the crime scene that is my face. I know I said I’d be clean but I’m only six months and it’s super hard. Mum and I don’t exactly communicate well just yet so when I say ‘bit lower!’ she just hears nonsense. It gets understandably messy. Especially when she doesn’t wait for me to stop ‘speaking’.

Anyway, after that debacle, the family settles down in my playroom. Which is super cute, despite the whole ‘everything is pink’ theme my parents are trying to get me to rock.

I’ve always been reasonably girly but not quite ‘Mean Girls’ (even if that was just Wednesdays).

And that when the lovely day always goes downhill.

Dad’s holding a card with a cat on it.

He says jibberish. I stare at him, deeply unimpressed. He tries again, to no avail and then takes my little fat hand and pokes the cat. The jibberish is starting to sound vaguely repetitive.

I’d give him an extra point for effort, especially when he starts meowing.

I’d yet to actually see a cat in this life, so I was justifiably amused that he thought this could work.
My father slumps over and I’m acutely reminded on Hashirama in the anime. I can almost see the mushrooms growing… now that’s just disturbing, those effects should never be seen in real life. No wonder Gai’s sunset effect causes temporary insanity.

Those things just ain't right.

I decide to throw the poor man a line before my room needs to be fumigated.

“Ne” I was pretty sure he’d said. Wasn’t the ANBU cat called ‘Neko’?

He perked up comically and I felt my sarcastic heart whither in the face of his sunshine.

I was feeling particularly snarky at this age, missing my independence had made me a troll in my own mind. I thought I was pretty funny, which was, of course, a major danger sign.

He babbled encouragement (or it could have been a particularly enthusiastic correction, I just couldn’t tell) and I decided to go for broke.

I mean, he’d been teaching me ‘cat’ for three days straight now.

“Ne-Ko” I mumbled, cheeks too fat and missing all my teeth.

He honestly started crying.

Well, jeez. No doubt anymore that this was technically an anime. Those tears couldn’t be humanly possible. Maybe a jutsu? Hopefully not a Kekkei Genkai.

I was more concerned as to why he’d go to such lengths just for ‘cat’. He’d barely begged this much for ‘tou-san’ (I’d made him wait a good three weeks before saying ‘Kaa-san’ out of spite).

How dare he force me to learn a super difficult language every evening. I was too lazy for this and I couldn’t even crawl away.

Surely I was way too young for this? My bratty cousins didn’t speak until they were almost two and then we all wished they’d been born mute.

Well, I’d said my second word at 9 months. I thought it was hilarious that all I could technically say was ‘kaa-san’ and ‘Neko’. No ‘tou-san’ for you, Papa. I was almost tempted to swear the next time he taught me something. It would surely be an incredible moment I’d cherish for the rest of my life.

I had absolutely zero plans to be a child prodigy or a ninja. As much as I’d loved Kakashi, it just wasn’t gonna happen. Especially looking at the Itachi-trainwreck.

Thankfully, I’d wasted so much time forcing my father to act in increasingly ridiculous cat-like ways, it was basically my bedtime so he was forced to stack away those infernal cards. They were getting burned as soon as I achieved some form of mobility.

I couldn’t stay mad at him though, not when he gently scooped me up and rested my head against his neck. His deep, rumbling voice mumbled some rambling tune and I could almost purr at the vibrations in his chest.

So I did.

You can imagine my surprise when he purred back.

‘What the-’ my face was surely comical but thankfully hidden in his hair. It wasn’t even a human’s
imitation of a purr, but a deep rolling thunder like when I’d pet a tiger on holiday. Something deep and seemingly unending, that I felt all the way to my fragile little bones.

I was more concerned with how, now I’d started, I couldn’t seem to stop either. My purr, whilst almost silent and more of a gentle vibration that shook my tiny frame, was almost as drawn out as his.

I couldn’t even tell you how I did it.

Maybe this was a greater concern of kekkei Genkai than those tears earlier.

No wonder he liked ‘Neko’ so much.

Well then, ‘Neko-tou’ he was.

It was the best lullaby ever though.

I started the day, as usual, on my own terms.

‘Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!’

I’d been up for what felt like years and it was cold and what if they forgot me?

I understood I was being ridiculous, it was barely even morning, but well; when you have a baby, there’s a new sheriff in town. So I screamed a bit until I heard the satisfying cursing of my dad (no footsteps in a ninja household, which was a bit creepy). But I felt a bit bad now I thought of it so-

“Neko-tou!” wasn’t I adorable? Papa, you’re welcome.

His hand, which had been tiredly scrubbing at his face, dropped down as his eyes popped in astonishment. He really was endearing.

“Nani? Kiharu-chan-“ Ha! I got that! Well, before he once more descended into rambles. Kiharu, huh? Well, a name for a name I guess.

“Neko-tou” I squealed with a gummy smile. There, a reward for finally teaching me my own damn name. I’ll admit it was a bit of a big word for a 9-month-old but I was kind of depending on the ninja world phenomenon of extreme early development. And dad had certainly been pushy enough to warrant my vocabulary. It was bonus points for the baby though when dad gave me extra cuddles, spun me around (now, dad I trusted with my little person. ninja= awesome reflexes) and banana for breakfast. And I’m definitely a daddy’s girl (sorry mum but you won’t purr).

So, the next few weeks went by and the only interesting things that happened were an awesome apple dinner recently and dad almost accepting my refusal to comprehend words beyond ‘kaa-san’ and ‘Neko-tou’. As a plus, dad and I now harmonized our purr almost every night. I’d never ever slept better and I felt infinitely closer to my dad on a deeper level. Probably some mystic cat bonding.

But it was just before I hit 11 months (I thought) when mum finally took me out and about. Took her long enough I supposed. I tried to crane my little head around to see the Hokage monument (big clue as to the time period) but well…I’m a baby. As in I can’t even crawl. And my eyesight is still pretty sketchy. I can probably just see the other side of our medium sized kitchen. I wasn’t gonna be looking at cliffs for a long time yet.
Dammit (and this time I wasn’t even being sarcastic).

Furthermore, I didn’t even see an orange jumpsuit anywhere or a masked silver-haired kid or even hear a “dattebane” on the wind. Dammit, plot cut me a break, I’m an adorable baby!

The walk was nice enough though and even if the market was a new level of bewildering (I’d never done drugs but could imagine it would be just as disorientating and kind of funny). People cooed at me so either my mum was popular or I was just so cute I brought strangers together. Well, a girl can dream.

But the walk was a general success and set the tone for every Sunday morning. The air here, I’d noticed, was a new level of fresh. This body had never known any different but I could tell, if I was in my old body, I would have probably felt faint. With almost no pollution and the village surrounded by miles upon miles of massive chakra trees, it was incredible.

Anyway, trees aside, time passed again. I was one year at this point and my birthday passed with a small congregation of adults laughing around a playpen of children which, unfortunately, featured me as the main act.

I didn’t really recognise anyone, although one girl definitely had Yamanaka's eyes. But it wasn’t Ino and she was a crybaby. No thanks. I loved people but babies were a trial. It was fine when you were the adult. But the mind of an adult with babies? I almost went insane. Children were great, they could play and laugh and move. These babies just fell over.

Unfortunately, despite my mental advantages, my body was also that of a baby’s. So I couldn’t even move either.

One kid was crawling already and it pissed me off so much I threw a biscuit at him. Waste of food, I know, but I felt a vicious stab of satisfaction when he stopped crawling to cry instead. Well, up until I remembered I was supposed to be a mature adult. Oh well, I consoled myself. When in Rome.

The Yamanaka brat got more interesting however when she giggled at my little show. Not the best indication of character, laughing at the suffering of others, but I’d take it.

From what I gathered from her gushing mother, her name was something along the lines of “Inoko-chan”. I know, I know. Yamanaka naming traditions of ‘Ino’ seemed a bit cliché but this was anime. I mean, my dad purrs with me every night.

I decided the get the ball rolling. “Noko” I poked her. I was a bit callous I’d admit, but she seemed delighted that I kind of knew her name. “Neko-ki,” I said, pointing to myself. I distantly saw my dad face vault over my new friend’s shoulder (I thought they only did that in anim- oh wait-) but I waved it off, it was unusual if Neko-tou wasn’t being foolish. “Nek-ki” she garbled back, arms hugging me as best she could around my neck. All the mothers were ‘awww-ing’ around us and I decided I’d fix her pronunciation later.

Great, now I was sounding like dad.

After that, I saw Noko most days. I was pretty chuffed with myself, making my first friend who (bonus!) wasn’t mentioned in Canon and told me nothing about the timeline. I was both frustrated and pleased that I’d avoided that headcanon so far. It was frankly a ridiculous thought that out of all the people I could meet in the biggest ninja village, I would meet the main characters. It was ludicrous enough that I’d been born in Konoha.
Noko was a cute girl though. She reminded me a bit of Ino, headstrong and loud but Noko was also essentially sweet natured. She didn’t yell or tell me off for being lazy. She was loud but with laughter and giggles and lovely things like that. If not for her slightly wicked sense of humour, she would’ve been a perfect angel. She was perfect~

Since day one, she’d faithfully called me ‘Nekki’. I didn’t care, it was the thought that counted but then for all I knew it meant something random or inappropriate.

I didn’t call mum ‘Neko-ka’ until I was almost 18 months when she finally relented and tried to purr me to sleep, which eventually worked. (she wasn’t as good as dad or I, actually sounding human when she tried but dad had been on a mission for two weeks and I just couldn’t sleep). She looked pretty pleased with herself the next day so I figured I shouldn’t have left her out.

It was on my second birthday (still no clue as to the timeframe, no sight of a main character, and one year of faithful (baby) friendship with Noko) when I realised why dad and I could purr so well.

There was a massive fuck-off cat on my cushion.

Now, in my previous life, I had loved cats but I’d never actually had one. My parents never liked the idea of leaving a ‘wild’ animal alone all day so we never had pets. But I’d never really been around them.

Furthermore, for the past few weeks, I’d been teething and I was about ready to go in search of Tsunade myself. I needed healing, dammit! I was currently screaming my head off, right into dad’s ear (if I suffered, he was suffering with me), when I noticed that the cushion dad usually set me down on was currently occupied.

Now, I had basically existed on that cushion for the majority of my life so far. I had cried, laughed and basically married myself to the comfiest cushion in the household. When I finally left this household as an adult, that cushion was a non-negotiable part of my inheritance, effective immediately. The massive beast on top of it was not gonna stay there. Not on my watch.

Dad, perhaps thinking my feline purring and naming tendencies would soften me to the intruder, placed me down in front of it.

I reached forwards, my little fat hands adorably grasping as luxurious black fur before I met the emerald eyes of the panther squashing my beloved pillow. Its eyes were as intelligent as an adult human and it looked at me like a tolerant lord looks down at a servant. Dad’s voice enthusiastically introduced us. I didn’t pay attention to its name. I didn’t want to know.

Instead, I gave the most adorable gummy smile I could whilst yanking out the biggest handful of whiskers I could physically grasp.

My enemy yelled and its expression was akin to a vicious kick in the balls.

I barely managed to restrain my triumphant smirk.

At this point, I figured it was going to be impossible to be the angel child I swore to myself I’d be.

It was more fun this way.

“Kiharu-chan!-“ blah blah “-nice-“ something “Hitoshi”. Well, at least these scoldings were slowly improving my vocabulary without those stupid flashcards.

The cat – Hitoshi – had moved closer again from where it had jumped back. Just to be sure,
however, I threw myself forwards to cover the pillow, my eyes (the same deep blue as mum’s) locked on the cats.

Cats were supposed to be super proud right? Hopefully, he wouldn’t kill me. That would be an even shorter life than my last and if I was reborn again I would come flying out the womb swearing in English and ruining everyone’s lives.

He laughed. A deep rumbling growling laugh that fairly shook the floorboards. He sniffled my face but he didn’t eat me and didn’t make a move for the pillow so I let him. Dad was pretty silent behind me, probably just as surprised as I was that I wasn’t kitty-chow right now. Hitoshi rumbled again and I made a point of purring back at him. This close to him I noticed the silver bandanas wrapped around his front legs and figured he was my dad’s summon.

Nice, a ninja kitty to protect my helpless body.

The panther looked surprised and exchanged a long glance with tou-san, who was now laughing in apparent relief (smooth, dad, smooth). Hitoshi carefully reclined next to me, not on the pillow but close enough I felt the furnace-like heat radiating from his massive body. He must’ve been almost my dad’s size, at least in length. He purred back at me and I melted into his side in response.

A moment later, my dad’s deep baritone purr joined in.

My mum looked thoroughly exasperated when she came home to the sight of my small body bracketed by dad and Hitoshi, our purrs still reverberating loudly.

……………….

After those milestones (first word, first purr, first friend, first summon friend- ninja household, sue me), I knew I’d eventually have to walk.

I just couldn’t be bothered.

When Neko-ka and Neko-tou weren’t carrying and cradling my little baby body, Hitoshi was being an absolute star and carrying me places instead. Granted this was by grasping the back of my clothes like a cub but seeing as I was a purring little critter I figured I’d go for the all-in immersive ninja-cat experience.

Minus the ninja of course.

But mum and dad were getting annoyed that, after over two years of life, I was still perfectly content to plonk my behind on the floor and stay there for hours if no one would move me.

After weeks of being all but abandoned on the floor as my parents set up ‘tempting’ displays of toys or Hitoshi started purring invitingly across the room from me, I figured I was better off cutting my losses.

What my parents weren’t aware of, of course, was that I had been standing in my crib for almost two months and walking around it for over three weeks.

It wasn’t that I wasn’t able to walk, it was just so much nicer to be carried.

But everyone had been very irritating recently so I figured if I was going to give in, I had to make them suffer first.

I started by becoming a complete deadweight.
Whereas before, I would sit and crawl and support myself, now I just lay down or flopped everywhere. From my perspective, it was hilarious. For my parents and Hitoshi? Not so much. The panther was fed up by lunchtime day 1 and dragged me through the kitchen by my foot until my mother caught him. Granted I was doing this on purpose but still. Apparently, they don’t teach cats child safety. I’m pretty sure my mum did afterward though.

It took three days before my mum looked like she was going to kill my dad for ‘putting unfair pressure on me’. At this point, I calmly slipped out my chair (I’d practiced endlessly whilst her back was turned) before walking back to where Hitoshi was curled on the sofa.

It was silent behind me. And then my parents erupted. My dad scooped me up in a twirling hug before my mum clutched me to her chest, babbling happily about babies and I thought she said ‘hime’ at some point which was sweet. I loved how I was congratulated for essentially pranking them.

I wish I could tell Noko, it was right up her street.

I knew it wasn’t always going to be like this. For so long, almost three years, I’d been living in a quiet bubble of mischief and happiness, ignoring what it meant when tou-san was gone for days or weeks and came back dusty and bloody. Hitoshi wasn’t in fact summoned for the singular purpose of babysitting me. Noko was a Yamanaka, from a ninja clan.

I knew when I turned four things were going to change.

But for these precious few years, I was gonna soak up as much happiness and family as possible.

I knew that my birthday had been just after the cherry blossoms bloomed but it wasn’t until my vocabulary had expanded a bit more that I learned it was March 21st.

It was also the first time I had ever seen my father angry.

My fourth birthday was a slightly more advanced repetition of the previous years’ parties. There were some children present, undoubtedly those of my parent’s friends, and Noko. We were still as thick as thieves two years into our friendship and I appreciated it. We were just children, so it was a simple thing; picking flowers and drawing pictures and playing tag. The party wasn’t that bad, generic presents (and a wonderful flower hair clip from Noko I’d put in immediately) and group games going fine.

When my dad was asked by one of the other dads (Itsuo, I thought) when I was going to join the Ninja Academy, I didn’t know what to expect.

I knew my father was a chuunin and reasonably content with his lot in life. My mum had had a wealthy grandmother leave her everything and so she’d never really felt inclined to work. She knew how to embroider and sometimes helped her seamstress friend when the workloads were particularly bad or she was particularly bored but she’d not shown any inclination to become a ninja. And neither of my parents had made any move to train me.

Another reason I was eternally thankful for them. I wouldn’t know what to do if they’d pushed me into it or if we’d been, heaven forbids, a clan family.

When my dad firmly replied that I wouldn’t be, I almost burst into tears.

Inferring intentions from mood, actions, and snatches of conversation was no comparison for verbal
reassurance.

The other man shared a look of disbelief with a few of the others and the good mood turned noticeably more frigid. Noko was the only other child to notice, sliding up to my side and pressing her small hand into mine. I grasped it tightly, undeniably scared that her own parents would speak up and that we couldn’t be friends anymore. As annoying as I’d initially thought her, the unquestioning love and friendship of a child was a soothing balm.

Before anything else could be said, however, my mother gently shepherded the rest of us children outside with the instructions to play nicely and not go outside of the garden. Noko and I stayed by the door, ears pressed desperately against the keyhole.

We couldn’t hear what was being said but raised voices continued on for a long while, ended only by my mother’s voice snapping something out.

I’d never heard my father’s voice so angry.

“They’re just children-“ I couldn’t have agreed more.

When the party was over, I never saw that man around ours again, or his kids, or some of the others.

Noko stayed later than the others, her own parents speaking softly to mine until it grew dark outside and they had to go home.

But I knew I’d always remember that afternoon when, stood outside and eavesdropping with my best friend, I’d cried in genuine fear for the first time in a long time. It was the first thing I’d ever heard my father say in true anger and it had scared me to the bone-

“I don’t care if we’re at war! I’d die before I sent her out to fight-“

Chapter End Notes

chapter 2! I updated pretty quickly because this story is flying off the page so why not post it? Kiharu learned her name! she still doesn't know parent's or her family though, hehe. I wanted to smash through her childhood as, as fun as this was to write, it's when she hits 4/5 that things start to pick up... Anyway, stay tuned and please review! x
After my fourth birthday, things started to change around the house.

My parents didn’t say anything to me, about what happened at the party or being a ninja. As much as I was itching to clear the air, I understood that in their eyes I was still some ignorant kid. They had undoubtedly noticed over the years that I was pretty self-aware and did things on purpose, but I think they found it funny more than anything.

I’d once read fics where the mother thought she’d birthed a demon as her baby was too knowledgeable.

Thankfully, my parents were so in love with me that they just thought I was awesome.

I think the fact I was pretty ridiculous and stupid language-wise meant that they didn’t even question it. Maybe if I’d already known Japanese or I’d tried to do adult things, they’d have been freaked out. Because I genuinely lived like a baby (I didn’t really remember my childhood much the first time around so I felt the need to live baby la Vida Loca) I was accepted.

But, anyway. Things changed.

Dad, who had always made an effort to be the sunshine of the house and never mentioning his ninja work, made a point now to started me exercising.

In the mornings, before breakfast (cruel, I know), he’d lead me outside into our fairly modest garden. It was just a big patch of grass surrounded by fencing, with a circular flower bed in one corner. Every spring, my mum would resolutely go out and plant new flowers which always looked a bit random. We couldn’t all be Alan Titchmarsh. When we got outside, he’d make me run and do so basic stretches. When he started showing me how to throw a proper punch, I had to clamp my mouth shut so I wouldn’t whimper.

But my dad, for all his melodrama, was a pretty smart guy and we’d been purring together since I’d been a baby. That sort of thing…attunes you to someone. I guess it’s like how animals communicate without words.

I was staring down at my fist, wishing for once I had a fringe to hide behind, when my dad’s warm hand started stroking my hair.

I had mums navy eyes but dad thick mahogany waves.

“Ki-chan. Daddy just want’s you to be safe,” he crooned softly. He was so gentle, I leant my head against his torso and he dropped to a crouch to hug me properly. “I’m not gonna make you fight,
never,” he vowed.

Self-defence.

My dad was an actual angel.

What the hell? What are the actual chances that I, a politically aware pacifist, would be born – into a ninja society – into one of the few families that wouldn't want me to fight? It was a new level of ridiculousness but I could only be thankful that this was happening and not something even more stupid; like if I was born as I don’t know, Tsunade’s daughter. I would have become the snarkiest piece of shit out of pure disgust at my own plotline relevance. But here, as another random face in the population, with only the surprise blessing of actually good parenting, I wasn’t gonna look this gift horse in the mouth.

Why ruin my own happiness?

So after my small freak-out, dad started teaching me basic punches and kicks. How to make someone much bigger than myself let go and how to run away.

Father, you are a good man.

We did that every morning and, whilst I’d never been very sporty in my last life, I was pretty good at it. My previous dad had had much the same idea, although not spurred on by war but rather perverts, so I already had some moves in mind. My dad just thought I was resourceful.

Whilst dad did his thing with me, mum also started changing things up.

Namely, writing class.

And you wonder why I’m a daddy’s girl.

Every lunchtime she’d sit me down at the table and make me write my new alphabet.

I don’t even know which one. (when I remembered there were multiple writing forms in Japanese, my fury had known no bounds. I did finally get round to burning those flashcards though.)

I was just thankful my previous mum had been into card making and calligraphy. Although this body had shaky hands, my mind knew what to do. I’d been pretty good at illustration back then and as a kid (here) I’d spent hours getting my baby drawings up to scratch. My neko-ka was delighted and even framed some of them. I was too flattered to be embarrassed.

So I was pretty good at writing. It's just a shame that I understood exactly zero of what was being written. If you looked at the figures as pictures, I was a dab hand. As words and letters though…total jibberish.

My mum had talked herself hoarse trying to explain to me that this wasn’t just a drawing activity. I naturally ignored her.

But then, after suffering (both of us, in all honesty) for an hour, the best part of the day came.

Cooking!

Now, in my previous life, I was not a chef in France or anything of the sort. I was a thrifty student who refused to eat the same takeaway or weird stuff as my housemates. I got pretty good at making tasty food. My mum was a great cook and my granny had baked a lot for want of something to do.
Both of them hadn’t used recipes but amounts that ‘felt right’ and they could recite off the tops of the heads.

Naturally, I started doing the same thing.

Now, this was mainly cakes and desserts because I was a massive chocoholic. I’d never really learnt from anyone, aside from mum and gran, but I’d watched a heck of a lot of YouTube.

In a world that only really had dango, dumplings, and dango, I was just about ready to crack.

My whole life had felt like a diet so far and I was willing to resort to my own desperate measures.

In the past few months, mum had started leaving me home alone with Hitoshi whilst she ran out for errands. Not the best thing to do with a four-and-a-half-year-old but, then again, I was super mature and Hitoshi was a ninja.

So, it was autumn and mum had run next door to check on Saki-baa-chan (she was cute like that). Hitoshi was lounging in front of the fire (I’d never actually seen him summoned or do ninja things) so I wandered into the kitchen, my sweet-tooth craving like a fire inside me. I knew how to use the oven just from watching mum and, after I’d started helping make lunch and dinner, she’d given me my own apron and a stool to reach the countertops.

Apron on, the fridge provided me with eggs, butter and cream. Placing them next to the hob, I grabbed the dry ingredients and then a saucepan and whisk. No scales necessary means fewer dishes. Awesome.

I poured the water and butter into the pan on a low heat. When the butter had melted and the water had almost boiled, I added the sugar and a pinch of salt, stirring, before also adding the flour.

Turning off the heat, I started to carefully crack in the eggs, one at a time and mixing in completely before adding another. At one point I had to fish out some shell (curse these baby fingers!) but all-in-all it was going pretty well. When all the eggs were added, I dunked in a slosh of vanilla extract I’d found on a whim and jumped back down the steps.

A quick check of the cupboards reaped a large baking tray, a cup and a frozen food bag. It took me a few minutes, but I eventually also found some oven paper (it wasn’t actually greaseproof put I figured it would do the job pretty well) and I lined the tray. Securing the food bag around the cup, I carefully spooned in my pastry mixture before trimming the corner with some scissors; voila! A piping bag!

Now for the hard part.

As much as it physically pained me to sacrifice mixture, I knew this couldn’t go smoothly. My mum would want to know how I’d done it straight off the bat. I wasn’t a weird enough baby that she’d think I was an alien or something; she’d think it was either slurry or I’d stolen it from someone.

Piping out a stupid mess was both satisfying and heartbreaking.

I underbaked them too. And whilst I was waiting, made a mess of my workstation. I then curdled the cream.

It was a very depressing hour.

Hitoshi had wandered in at that point (lazy cat, I could have poisoned myself) and watched me set myself up for failure. Not that he knew that. Cats know very little about cooking.
His commentary, however, was not appreciated.

“What a mess….Aki-hime is going to kill you.” Oh yeah, that was mum’s name. Cute and short.

I mean I loved the cat, he was like my third parent at this point (damn that sounds so weird). But it was true; he’d raised me alongside my parents and I tormented him just as much as those two.

Ah, family.

Unfortunately, he was right.

Neko-ka was on a new level of apocalyptic rage that I’m pretty sure she went supernova at one point and burned my eyes. She gave me cold rice and carrots for dinner and watched me like a hawk. Thankfully, she also tore Hitoshi a new tail for being an ‘irresponsible guardian’ which I thought was laughable; who makes a cat a babysitter?

Oh, right. Ninja.

Unfortunately for both mum and Hitoshi, I had zero plans to quit ‘experimenting’.

I was gonna ‘create’ those cream puffs and no one could stop me.

I needed the calories.

I could only hope I’d have just as quick a metabolism in this body as I had in my last. As civilian as I was going to be, I didn’t really want to check off ‘obese’ either. I was a pretty skinny kid as Noko insisted on running everywhere and like hell was I gonna be left behind.

Speaking of Noko, she’d joined the Academy.

I know I shouldn’t have expected anything else. I mean, just because I wasn’t going to be a ninja child-soldier didn’t mean she wasn’t going to.

But I was so scared.

Although my parents never mentioned it again, I was now hyperaware that we were at war. I had no idea which one but I knew that Inoko was going to be rushed through the academy and onto the battlefield as quickly as possible. As early as 6, if she was talented. The thought of it made me shake and I felt like howling in righteous fury- “Even the Nazi’s didn’t send them out that young!”

My precious Noko-chibi was going to fight a war and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

As much knowledge as I had amassed about this universe in my previous life, I was powerless. What good were thoughts on Obito’s not-death and the attack of the Nine-tails when

- I was just some kid
- No one would believe me
- And if they somehow did, I’d have my mind stripped by T&I faster than I could say “Amnesty”.

I’ll pass thanks.

Some people would say it was selfish, not using my knowledge and letting people suffer. Well, I hate to break it to you but…this is a Ninja world of war and suffering! No matter what I do, people are going to die and be wounded and get hurt. If I try and change the big things, who knows what could happen to the plot. At least I know that, no matter what happens, Kakashi and Naruto’s time as
Hokage brought peace for a long time.

I was better off trying to help in the little things. Making sure Inoko had someone to talk to when the stress would start to wear her down. Making sure my dad could still smile and my mum could still sing.

Maybe I’d be that one civilian who’d smile at Naruto or compliment Sakura’s hair or point out the best cloud-watching spots to Shikamaru and Chouji when they were meant to be in class.

But I knew I couldn’t change anything. People were going to die, yes but…at least this way, I could hope it would turn out as well as it did in Canon.

It was much to my surprise when I realised there wasn’t a civilian school.

Parents and guardians taught you to read and write before you either attended the academy, learnt the family business or took up an apprenticeship.

I wondered if this was why kid-Naruto was so frickin’ stupid in Canon. He literally couldn’t read?

I found myself staying home with mum.

I was a bit isolated, I grant you, really only having Noko as a friend but, when my mum had asked me what I wanted to do with my life (a bit steep for a 5-year-old) I’d just told her I wanted to cook.

The cream puffs were, of course, my first success. Now that my intentions to be a cook were out in the open (if no one else was gonna provide decent desserts, do the job yourself), I finally allowed myself to start cooking things successfully. My mums face the first time she had a cream puff was pure gold. I can't believe no one made a choux pastry before, geez. And I thought anything could happen in anime.

The next month was a golden time for cooking and my mum had learnt all my ‘recipes’ alongside me.

The only sour spot was that dad was still gone. It had almost been two months. 3 weeks into his absence, Hitoshi had disappeared too and I’d never been away from either this long. I'm not ashamed to admit it shook me.

When two months looked like it was going to become three and mum and I had created various types of profiteroles and had started with the basic idea of an egg custard tart, even Neko-ka was looking grey. She concealed it admirably from me but after two days of her ashen face and limp hair, I started climbing into her bed every night. I hadn’t really done that before (didn’t really have nightmares) and I swore to myself I was going to do it all the time when dad was back.

His side of the bed was very cold.

It was at this time that I realised just how much I loved my parents. I had always been fond of them and right from the beginning pegged them both as good people and great parents. But now that I was consciously spending all my time with my mum and dad was gone, I understood that they were just as beloved to me as my first parents had been. To lose either of them would devastate me.

The next morning, I convinced kaa-san to share a bubble bath with me and it was the first time in a while she looked completely relaxed. Of course, we both giggled like princesses and got out wrinkled like prunes and smelling strongly of roses, but it was cathartic bonding that we both
needed.

It was two weeks later, three months since he’d gone, that dad came back. He was caked with dust and had a deep scar that ran straight down from his left temple to his jaw but he was Daddy and he was home. Mum let out a sob at the sight of him, rushing over and kissing him fiercely, completely ignoring all the blood and mud that caked his person.

I was stood frozen for a moment longer. It wasn’t until dad had mum tucked under one arm that he beamed down at me. He held out his other hand (and I took a moment to understand that the oddly shaped bandaged meant my dad had lost a finger) before I was sobbing and running and tou-san was holding me. He smelt just the same (underneath the dust and dirt and blood) and he was still a pillar of warmth. Without conscious thought, I purred for the first time in months and dad immediately joined in.

Which of course made all three of us cry harder.

Dad had tear tracks running through his dirty cheeks even as he grinned and laughed in relief and both mum and I were pretty dirty now too.

I couldn’t have cared less.

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It turns out that that was the end of the Third Shinobi War.

And I finally had a time frame!

As a kid, my parents didn’t tell me this- ‘oh, hey honey, the war’s over? What’s a war? Well…’- but the announcement of Minato Namikaze to be inaugurated as Yondaime was pretty huge news. This meant that I was roughly 7 years older than the Rookie 9, which is always helpful to know. Just for my bearings of course. I’m not gonna fangirl over any of them anyway…

Moving on!

The ceremony was in a few weeks and I think kaa-san was a bit too excited. Now, I adore dressing up; why wear normal clothes when you can dress like a queen? But the first time we went shopping, she started squealing and hopping around, holding little kimonos up against my body. Even the sales assistant looked vaguely disturbed.

I prefer greens and blues anyway. With my pale skin from mum (or just spending too much time inside), my dark blue eyes and thick, wavy brunette hair I looked a bit like a doll. I hated how cliché that sounded but it’s true. Both my parents are pretty fine specimens and good genes and all that. Thankfully I’m pretty tall for my age. I don’t think I could bear it if I was a small doll. Nothing against short people, but there are only so many stereotypes I can cope with.

I’d come from a really tall family in my previous life and wasn’t sure my ego could take being the one being leaned on and not the other way around.

I mean, Kakashi was super tall and I’d never reach if I was tiny. Cough. Even though, at this point, he was twice my age and a total stranger. But 6 years wasn’t the biggest age difference and the amount of KakaSaku fics there had been floating around…

Anyway!

Whilst people would be wearing white for the actual occasion, mum insisted that I be super
fashionable underneath as well. I figured there would be a party afterwards where I was expected to show off my threads. Mum settled on a silver kimono with a purple sash (‘Obi’ or whatever) for the both of us. It was a cute idea, matching outfits, even if I looked more like a chibi-girl version of Dad than mum.

When dad’s outfit had silver accents and I remembered Hitoshi’s summon bandana’s being the same colour, I figured it was something more than colour coordination.

When my mum was addressed ‘Dazai-san’ I finally – finally, it’s about bloody time, this is embarrassing – knew our family name. I titled my head up in a silent and quick word of thanks that it wasn’t recognisable.

So, when it came to the inauguration day, mum curled her hair and put on some natural makeup (pretty, nice shade of lipstick too- 10/10, mum) she moved on to me. The front of my hair was pulled back in a simple half up/half down style which looked both effortless and pretty. My hair (I’d never bothered to cut it) curled around my elbows and I looked cute in my kimono. Even if I wanted to die under all those infernal layers.

I was still an adult in mind, though, so could actually understand what looked good and I was a pretty cute kid. I’m not trying to be a Mary Sue or whatever (I was still dumb as bricks on paper) but I could afford to boost my own ego.

Not like an adult trapped in a kids body in another universe isn’t issue enough.

Dad looked very handsome though and the kiss mum gave him in appreciation almost made me want to yell out “Oi, keep it PG for the kids!”. Not that they’d understand.

The walk to the tower was so annoying though with people crowding everywhere.

My little kid body kept on getting shoved. Grrrr, why are people in crowds always so rude? It’s a real pet peeve of mine. like when you make room for someone to walk past but they don’t do the same for you, making either have to stop or walk in the road.

I was killed by a car! It wasn’t funny!

And if this woman doesn’t get her elbow out of my face, I’m gonna trip her in the most painful way I can manage.

I must have been leaking some civilian killing-intent because dad intervened before I got actively homicidal, swinging me up to perch on his shoulders.

It was so fun! My bad mood instantly evaporated, I eagerly twisted around the gaze at the plebians still forced to walk. Mum smiled up at me tolerantly, saying nothing but fixing my kimono and tossing my dad a wink before hooking arms with him again. I spent the rest of the walk either looking around or playing with dad’s super soft hair. It was too short and thick for plaits so I just tried to make a cone instead.

By the time the Hokage tower came into view, dad looked a suitable level of ridiculous (a little girl with Inuzuka markings and a long brown ponytail had caught my eye when she giggled and we shared a delighted grin). The area was so busy, however, I got to stay where I was. The Sandaime was pretty far away so all I could really see was his hat and cloak. He talked for ages but it was boring and he echoed loads and, as much as ‘meeting’ my first main character was awesome, I couldn’t help zoning out. I may have the memories of an adult but my attention span still wasn’t great.
The call for “Yondaime! Yondaime! Yondaime!” was suitably rousing, however.

A sunny-blonde head appeared, slightly closer than the Sandaime, and I got my first glimpse of Minato Namikaze.

Well…geez. The fandom wasn’t wrong when they’d called him pretty. And earlier I thought I was a cute girl. Minato would make Ru Paul rip off his wig and cry.

When he started talking however…I could see why Kushina had sat up and paid attention when he hit puberty. Dad had the best baritone, hands down; dad could do perfume Ads.

Minato was the kind of helpless attractiveness of Tom Hiddleston or Eddie Redmayne. Maybe it was because he was younger, still a bit wirey and too pretty to be like Dad. It was probably disturbing to think this as a 6-year-old but I’d been 20 when I died and a hot-blooded woman like anyone else. My body may not have felt that way (I was living as a 6-year-old after all) but my brain still understood that 'cooties' didn't exist. Ahem.

He said something about times of peace and prosperity etc., the usual speech stuff. It was actually really hard to listen as his voice echoed and I’m just a kid. Obviously, some people got something from it as they nodded and cheered at all the right moments.

I was just glad it was over.

Then everyone just kind of went wild. Mum and dad lead us straight through to the market street, which was lined with food and craft stalls. Red banners (kind of like bunting but more like scarves) hung all around, almost creating a tent-like ceiling in some places. I, naturally, did my best to eat everything I could get my hands on.

I even ate nuts. Now, this was actually a huge milestone for me.

In my previous life, I’d been violently allergic to them and became so sensitive to them I could smell or taste them in anything. The first time my mum had fed me them here, I’d spat it out everywhere, whilst freaking out about this world’s lack of epi-pens. It had taken me a good half an hour to calm down and mum had been super worried. Unfortunately, they used nuts quite a lot here. I remembered the first (and last) time I had Beef-Satai back then; it was the closest I’d ever come to cardiac arrest.

Now I bit into it with savage satisfaction (‘Fuck you, previous body!’).

I was busy lamenting (for the millionth time) the lack of variety in desserts when the chibi-Inuzuka from before came skipping up to me.

With three puppies.

_Hana Inuzuka and the Three Haimaru Brothers, anyone?_ 

If I remember correctly, Hana could only be three or four at this point; who the hell lets a baby run around a festival? This is why I didn’t wanna be a clan kid!

“Hey,” she smiled hopefully. Well, she did have the most adorable lisp.

“Hi!” I grinned back. Oh, I’m going to be the best senpai ever! “do you want some dango?” I shoved it in her face like the callous child I was. “I’m Nekki!” may as well cultivate a friendship using nicknames…again.

Thankfully, the trick worked and she beamed at me even as she distributed the dango between her
dogs. Not quite what I meant, but fair enough.

“’m Hana an’ this s Hai-Ma-Roo” she carefully pronounced. I had to control my expression, squealing inside. I was a mature adult, not some washy fangirl!

Introductions mercifully aside, I proceeded to be a good senpai and educate her in the ways of a refined palette. To a kid, of course, this just meant we giggled over nothing and everything as we gorged ourselves on all my favourite foods so far. After eating so much we felt a bit sick (even the puppies looked a bit on the bloated side) we then took our time ‘ooh-ing’ and ‘ahh-ing’ over the arts and crafts on display. I supposed this was both a celebration of a new Hokage and also for the end of the War.

It was at a jewellery stall, the two of us gazing mesmerised at all the shinies, that Noko found us.

At this point, I think it would be appropriate to note that both Hana's guardians and my parents had been lost in the crowd. I figured it was a necessary right of passage in parenthood that everyone had to have lost their kid in a busy crowded area at least once. I’d been a very good girl and I’d hate to stunt my parent’s experience and learning.

Evidently, my compatriot had the same idea and, after more lisped introductions and the obligatory cooing over the puppies, we set off again as a trio.

It was the best afternoon.

And like all good things, it had to come to an end.

In canon, Kiba and Hana's father had never been mentioned. There was a lot of speculation in the fandom, theories from early character death to being chased out of the matriarchial pack. But nothing was known about him, even a name.

So I was suitably stunned when, late afternoon, a large red hound (more wolf than anything) came barrelling towards Hana and plucked her right off of the ground like Hitoshi used to do with me.

The massive beast of a man who strode after him completely blindsided me.

It could have been any Inuzuka, come to fetch the clan Heiress. Except for the fact he looked exactly like Kiba.

Now, I’d always thought Kiba and Hana looked a lot like their mum; then again this was anime and everyone kind of looked similar if they had the same colouring etc. In real life, in this life, I could confirm that people weren’t animated. They were actually real humans. This is probably why Minato and Hana surprised me so much; seeing the ‘real’ them as opposed to the animated version is like a caricature and a photograph. It does no justice.

Now, I knew Kiba hadn’t been born yet so I couldn’t say for definite what he would look like but, if it wasn’t for Hana-chibi, I would’ve thought he was Kiba all grown up.

The hair, the grin…

It was insane.

And whilst Kiba had been of average height in Boruto (as far as I could tell), this man was an absolute giant. No wonder Hana and Tsume used to tease him.

“’Ey, Tou-san!” Hana smiled, totally unrepentant. Well, there I’m proven right. And I was so right
about her, what a gem.

The still-unnamed-Inuzuka stared down at his daughter, unimpressed, for all of two seconds before his face split into a wild grin (showcasing his gleaming incisors- 10/10 from Crufts) and roaring out a laugh that was more scary than humorous. Hana and the triplets saw nothing up, however, tails wagging (just the dogs, obviously) and mouths stretched in grins of delight.

Hana was still hanging from the red wolf-dog-beast, by the way.

It seemed, however, Hana’s dad had been head of a sort of child-hunting party (what strange mental images) as my own parents and Inoichi Yamanaka came bustling towards us.

Ignoring for the moment how my ridiculous father was weeping over my unresponsive body, I stared with something akin to betrayal as Noko (my precious, non-canon relevant Noko) greeted the Head of T&I and winner of the Most-Badass-Man-Pony-in-Anime award with a happy-

“Oji!”

I almost felt my soul leave my body. And then I knew that not only was I truly my father’s daughter, but I had just surrendered myself completely to the Anime experience.

RIP normalcy.

I had been so, so proud of my ability to avoid such obvious plotlines. It was bad enough I was here.

Well, I wasn’t going to be cliché and try and run, thereby attracting an Interrogation specialist’s attention and eventually having to reveal all I knew about the mysteries of death (not a lot considering I didn’t really…experience..it).

But I was still myself (and therefore a brat) and Noko owed me for not telling me her uncle was the Yamanaka Clan Head, so…

I gasped loudly, glad that Inoichi was turned in such a way from me that I could easily reach out and grasp his ponytail.

“You’re so pretty!”

My dad looked like he wanted to die, I clearly heard the sound of my mother’s facepalm and everyone else was staring at me in total shock.

I was, of course, beaming up at my victim with veritable stars in my eyes. I didn’t even have to try that hard, he was just that cool in Canon.

Inoichi was bright red, which was a total success considering this was the man who could break a man’s mind without fluttering an eyelash.

“I-I’m a man..” he grasped at straws. I frowned at him in return, disappointed at his narrow mindset.

“So? Boys can be pretty too! Nothing is just for girls, you know!” Not my best equality speech but I was meant to be 6. Seeming to understand what he’d said wrong, especially when Noko turned to him with a frown of agreement, Inoichi smiled warmly with his hands out in a vaguely consoling manner. “I didn’t mean that! I mean, thank you?” Obviously out of his depth, my mum intervened with an apology which I thought totally killed the effect.

“Now, say goodbye to Hana-chan and Inoko-chan, Kiharu-chan! You’ll have to meet up again soon,
wouldn't that be nice?" I dutifully did as she said, making a point to speak to each puppy (which earned me a wink from Hana’s dad). I beamed an Inoichi and got a bashful smile in response, so no hard feelings.

My dad had recovered at this point and I eavesdropped when he thanked both men for their help in locating ‘the rascals’.

It was a brilliant day when you got ahead of the rest of the fandom. No one else knew Hana’s dad’s name.

Chapter End Notes

Hey! So here's chapter 3. I won't update this quickly forever but I'm really loving writing this right now. I tried to make this as different a possible without being stupid(?) but at some point or another, she had to meet people (and by people I obviously mean main characters). Now, I know loads of SI/OC fics are angsty and the person really struggles with their identity, but for the time being Kiharu won't be like that. She's not gonna hold onto her old life so much she spoils her new one. She had literally months in the womb to make plans and grieve and get her head on straight. She's a pretty straightforward person and she's not gonna sabotage herself anytime soon, especially for the sake of 'the plot'.

Cute little anecdote btw, which I thought was pretty adorable; Kiharu can't write. Like at all. And she doesn't speak much either. She's still having a massive issue with the whole 'new language' thing and she really sucks at it. If she was at the academy, she'd be the dead last, hands down! She also still reads the wrong way so she really confuses herself and then ends up throwing the book across the room...Anyway, I thought it was funny hehe

Hope you enjoyed the chapter and please leave kudos/a review!
Sweetness and an absence of it.

Chapter Summary

As much as we could wish otherwise, most things aren't as simple as we think.

...Like, custard. I always get lumps in it...!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I don’t think I was prepared for this, in all honesty.

I knew that as soon as I met Hana and Inoichi, I was in the dangerous territory of becoming ‘Plotline-relevant’.

I didn’t think it would happen so…quickly though.

I wasn’t ready! I was just a brat who was the slowest reader ever!

Anyway, every year since we’d been friends, Noko and I attended each other’s Birthday parties. That was kind of a given fact.

I’d never had a particularly long conversation with Noko’s dad, Inoichi’s younger brother Inokumo, but he was still ‘Oji-san’ seeing as I’d know him most of my life. The same for Natsuko-oba-san, who always helped Noko and I pick the prettiest flowers. But they were still family and I’d probably get even closer to them the older I grew (as then we’d actually talk more). But I’d never twigged that Inokumo (cloud-pig, I was guessing, ha!) was the younger brother of Inoichi. Even if they looked kind of similar now I thought about it.

But I thought it was just a Yamanaka clan thing! Noko looked similar enough to Ino to be her elder sister. Well, if you ignored her strawberry blonde hair, the front of which just brushed her collar bones whilst the back was cut short in a long, asymmetric bob.

I was the one who gave her the idea when she was sick of her plaits.

She looked awesome!

Anyway, Noko’s sixth birthday, three weeks after Minato was made Yondaime, was June 28th. The weather was absolutely sweltering and I found myself tugging uncomfortably at the back of my buttercup-yellow tank top, glad my blue shorts weren’t so tight that they would stick to me. My hair was up in a high ponytail to keep it off my neck, and I couldn’t help but sigh in relief everytime a cool breeze blew past.

The sky was completely clear of merciful cloud-cover, so blue it was almost white in places.

Noko had come to greet me immediately, dressed in a cute white co-ord set that made her hair burn like copper. We’d scarcely exchanged delighted hugs (I was always happy to see her) when a very
pretty woman coughed politely behind us. Noko turned around with a beaming grin and I felt the keenest sense of foreboding.

“Nekki! This is Sora-oba-san! You’ve not met her yet, cause she used to work alllllll the time! As a ninja!” Noko babbled on for a bit, Sora smiling fondly. Her hair was chocolate brown and pulled into a high bun with a red ribbon. I’m pretty sure this was Ino’s mother, though. Noko didn’t have that many close relatives, despite being in a clan.

Warning, Warning! Getting a bit too close to a Main Character…

She couldn’t be pregnant yet, Ino wouldn’t be born til next September, but meeting the mother whose name we never knew, like Hana’s dad, felt very…involved.

I wasn’t gonna run for the hills at the idea of ninja, that would be ridiculous, but I was feeling unexpectedly hesitant to have a say in the plotline.

I felt bad enough trying to leave everything as it was without fucking it up accidentally.

Then I mentally slapped myself.

Idiot! I’m here already and no matter what I do, unless I actually act on it, what will happen, will happen! I had dark hair this time around, I wasn’t gonna make myself go grey prematurely. The first sight of just the possibility of a main character (the mother did all the work, as someone who remembers being in the womb, I can confirm this) has me jittery as a field mouse. I already met Hana! Get a grip girl.

Whilst I had been giving myself that little mental pep-talk, Sora had gracefully guided us into the kitchen, where a bunch of brats from the academy and some of Noko’s cousins were already congregated. I didn’t recognise any of them as future canon characters and breathed a mental sigh of relief, despite myself.

The party was cute enough, although next year I vowed to bake her a cake myself. It just wasn’t the same. Obviously, cake and stuff already existed here, but not like back in Europe! There wasn’t any fresh whipped cream and I’m pretty sure I would be credited with the invention of caramel, the ice-cream was stuff like red-bean paste and matcha. I couldn’t wait to introduce everyone to the heaven that was matcha green tea cheesecake…

I was so going to open the most delicious (and only) patisserie in the Shinobi Nations. And then get all my ninja friends to guard my secrets so I’d hold the monopoly on the stuff.

It was my duty as a glutton.

…………………………

Life was moving pretty quickly by now.

Or maybe I was just aware of how soon everything was going to change.

It was late Winter already, almost February, and I was hyperaware that Hinata had just been born.

Dad had stopped taking missions outside the village after the war. He was still the happy man I’d always known but now he seemed more tired. He could only be 30 or so and yet sometimes he seemed as aged as men twice his age. He’d sit by the fire before dinner, eyes unfocused and fingers rubbing over the scarred stumps which used to be his last two fingers on his right hand.
I always made a point of kissing them before curling up in his lap and purring.

(The first time I did that after the war, I pretended I didn’t feel his shoulders shake or my head grow damp.)

Mum had started helping out even more at Yuri-oba-san’s dress shop, sometimes spending entire mornings there whilst I exercised and practised my punches under the watchful eye of Hitoshi.

I ignored the few silver hairs that had appeared around the big panther’s eyes over the years. Or how, when I’d gotten older, I’d noticed the scars the laced his skin, concealed beneath ebony fur.

By this point, I was still pretty tall for a 6-year-old, waist height on my mum. My hair had never seen scissors beyond the usual trim to keep it healthy and was down to my waist. Maybe it was silly, to want hair as long as possible, but I would never be a ninja and so wouldn’t need to be functional. Even if Kushina proved otherwise.

In my previous life, my mum always sabotaged my haircuts as a kid; I’d ask for a trim and then the next thing I know, I’ve got a bob and my mum’s grinning like the cat that got the canary. Very uncool.

But anyway, hair aside, now that I’d gained a bit more independence, it was full steam ahead on the ‘inventions’. The most annoying part, aside from taking way too long to write everything down (the temptation to use English had never been so great), was purposefully mucking things up.

It was a crime to waste that many ingredients. All the potential goodies…lost!

But, by now I had a pretty decent spread of things, not including the ‘desserts’ kaa-san had taught me when she realised that’s where my interest lay. I mean they were fine but…they just didn’t hit the spot on my sweet tooth cravings. Speaking of…

“Ta-dah!” I announced to my dad, happily sliding the stack of pancakes towards him.

“Err,” he blinked. The poor man doesn’t even know the gift I have just bestowed on him. “What..is it?” he asked delicately, fully aware of how sensitive I could be towards my creations.

“I call them ‘Pancakes’” I sang, arms poised like a performer on stage. “cause they’re made in the pan!” not like he couldn’t tell. He’d been watching me suspiciously the entire time and I wasn’t sure if that was just being a ninja or if I should have been insulted. With a sigh, like I’d asked him a great favour, he picked up his fork and used it to tear off a corner. At my pointed glance, he obediently dipped it in the strawberry cream before putting it in his mouth.

You would’ve thought I’d asked him to taste test laxatives, for all the attitude he was giving me.

The look of surprised delight on his face as he took another, more generous bite, had me grinning in satisfaction.

Another success!

Hitoshi rolled his eyes from where he lay slumped in an armchair. “If she was going to poison you, “ he paused to lick his paw, “she would have done so by now, Seiichi-sama.”

I looked around for a new seconds before face vaulting at my own stupidity.

Seiichi was my dad, huh?
Tou-san ignored me, too busy polishing off my present but Hitoshi missed nothing. The stupid cat burst out laughing (more of a choked growl) and I resisted the urge to pounce him. It wouldn't have ended well for me, big surprise. Still, I wasn’t the most mature of people so I threw a cushion at him, snarling- “Shut up, cat! Go un-summon yourself!”

When all noise cut off, I realised I might have missed something.

I was a pretty callous person most of the time but that didn't mean I was insensitive. And I'd definitely noticed how, over the years, Hitoshi never really went anywhere.

Apparently there was a reason for that.

Hitoshi sat up, back to me, and ignored me like he hadn't in years.

Turning around in confusion to my dad, my eyes widened upon seeing the happiness flee from his face. A look of quiet grief and sad acceptance where there ought to have always been joy and humour. Guilt rolled in my stomach and I undoubtedly looked at lost as I felt.

“I’m sorry, Kiharu-chan. It’s not your fault.” Stretching out an arm, tou-san beckoned me into his side. I went without hesitation, hating how quiet everything had gone. A flex of his arm and dad had heaved me up to perch on his knee. At any other time, I would’ve been impressed by his smoothness. For a long moment, there wasn’t any sound except for the quiet ticking of the kitchen clock. I found myself holding my breath. It felt like I was tip-toeing on sugar-glass.

“Summoning contracts are a focal point between two realms. This one and the summoning realm. If a contract is lost, sometimes we may travel through to plead for a new one to be forged. If all of the summons perish, the contract is voided. During the second Shinobi war, your Jiji found a summoning contract. It was from a foreign village, possibly Iwa, but he found it on the battlefield and… we’ll never know for sure. The Uchiha have long held the cat contract but this one was for the larger felines, a smaller contract but still powerful. There weren’t many summons to begin with and we lost many in that war. I signed the contract when I turned 18, just before your Jiji died.” I’d never heard dad speak of his family before and something hard clenched in my chest.

“When you sign the contract, you are given a partner to hone your fighting skills and be your main point of contact. Sometimes they were already proficient fighters. Sometimes they learnt alongside you. Hitoshi was but a cub when he came to me.” Said cat flinched as if struck and Dad’s arms tightened. “The war was very scary, Hime, and people died. Hitoshi’s parents died alongside your Jiji and I was left to raise him. The last feline summon, Keida, died to save both my life and Hitoshi’s just before you were born.”

I felt pale, heart thudding so hard I shook.

The idea that I might never have known dad, never have grown up with him… a tear dripped into his T-shirt and before I knew it I was sniffling helplessly.

Dad squeezed me tightly but soldiered on to finish the story nonetheless. “Because he is the last, if Hitoshi goes back to the summon realm, he’d be all alone. Whilst the realms between animals are connected, he would still be the only one of his kind. And that’s why he stays with us always because we’re family.”

At this point, I was fairly sobbing into Neko-tou’s chest, crying and apologising to Hitoshi for anything I had ever said. A warm brush of velvet against my leg and I moved to clutch the panther closer to me.
After calming down slightly, I had one serious concern.

“Doesn’t maintaining a summoning take loads of chakra, though?” I remembered how much effort it always was in the fanfics and anime, what if-

“No, hime. The initial summoning can take a lot but after that, so long as the summon doesn’t use up their chakra, they can stay for quite a while. I only really have to re-summon Hitoshi once a month or so. It’s like with nin-ken summons; once they’ve been contracted individually, it barely takes anything.”

Well, thank god. With a mostly mental sigh of relief, I allowed myself to slump comfortably against Tou-san, Hitoshi leaning his head heavily into my lap.

At once point, Dad started purring again…which naturally set the rest of us off.

……………………………

Seriously this time…I honestly wasn’t prepared for this.

I was 7 now (wayhay!) with nothing to show for it but a silver panther necklace (from Noko) which I never took off (as annoying as Hitoshi’s smug face was) and a panther honour guard. I’d always been around Hitoshi, from our explosive first meeting to our babysitting days, but ever since I found out about the contract, he’d stuck to me like glue.

Kami knows why, as I’m not actually that nice to him.

It was a Sunday morning at the market and mum had rushed over early to the seamstresses (she’d run out the house yelling about bridal emergencies to the equal bewilderment of Dad and me) so I was left to run out for dinner (with Hitoshi, of course, so I was adequately protected).

Hitoshi was stalking along behind me like the drama queen he was and I had my nose stuck in the stupidly long list Kaa-san had left behind. I mean, who needs three different types of onions? (if this was dessert, I’d probably understand.)

So I was justifiably distracted when I bumped into someone.

We didn’t collide hard, so no one was dropping anything or falling over or anything as silly. The guy looked pretty unimpressed with me, however, even if he was the one standing in the middle of the street like people weren’t trying to walk? (I’d already said this was a peeve of mine)

Even the sight of his bandana and senbon wasn’t enough to stop me in my tracks. Genma was awesome but his careless glance made me want to stomp his instep.

Shhhhh, I was still a small cherub, I could definitely come out as the victim…

“So sorry, kid. Watch where you’re walking next time, eh?” he sounded pretty cool for a teenage brat, even if he was already one of the Yondaime’s Guards. But making it sound like it was my fault and he was doing me a favour? Dick move.

Ah well, I’m nothing if not adaptable.

“So sorry nee-san,” I blinked innocently, twisting the hem of my dress in small hands. With another smile (I’d practised without shame and knew it looked impressively angelic), I skipped off, thankful that Hitoshi had managed to contain his laughter this long.
A casual glance behind me showed Genma gawking after me, one hand rubbing self-consciously through his shoulder-length hair. The two ninja behind him – yeah, I’m pretty sure one was Raidou – were almost choking with laughter.

And who said civilians were harmless in the face of ninja?

I worried for half a second I was forming a habit of embarrassing ninja via their perceived masculinity but then realised I didn’t care.

Later, I was almost done with the shopping (which was trailing along in the toy cart behind me; I felt very Disney) when the scent of salty goodness set my tummy a-rumbling.

It was the infamous ramen stand, Ichiraku Ramen! Well, I had to go in right? It was like going to the Harry Potter Studios and not trying the butterbeer; Obligatory.

The shop looked just like in the anime only, well, real. It was so steamy and warm and golden. Mmmmmh! Thankfully, there wasn’t any sign of Kushina as I didn’t think I could survive an encounter without asking to see her hair split into tails- and wouldn’t that bring up some awkward questions. But I’d always wanted to know if that was Kyuubi or a special technique or if she was just that awesome?

Teuchi (what a good man) was cooking and I was beaming as I dumped my trolley beside Hitoshi (ha! He doesn’t have thumbs- that’s what you got for complaining without doing any work) and slid myself into a stool.

“Hello there, little Hime,” he greeted me happily. Aww, I bet he’s an amazing dad to Ayame… “What would you like? This your first time here?”

I was on my best behaviour at this point so nodded eagerly, “Mmhmm! Kaa-san sent us shopping but it smelled so good, I wanted to try it,” flattery gets you anywhere. “I’ll have miso, please!” I continued. May as well see what Naruto was always barking on about.

Teuchi was an absolute sweetheart, just as I’d figured. As he whipped up my batch, he effortlessly chatted with me, asking what my favourite thing was about the market and harmless things like that.

When he asked if I liked cooking myself (I must’ve looked a tad too interested in what he was doing), I went off on one about all the desserts I’d been making. He seemed excited for me, which melted my already liquified heart, so much so I promised to bring him something soon – if I had his cooking, he had to have mine!

The bowl was slid in front of me and it looked and smelled divine. Food in manga and anime always looked otherworldly good but I can confirm that that’s actually how good it was.

I had a pretty cultivated sweet tooth but still appreciated salty flavours.

This was delicious. Even Mr I-only-want-expensive-meat-because-I’m-a-queen Hitoshi was resting his head on my lap, licking his chops at the smell.

Either that or my blissed-out expression had sparked his jealousy/curiosity. I knew he wouldn’t like it and told him as much (in between showering praise on the embarrassed ramen chef in front of me). He didn’t look happy but that’s not my fault.

(five minutes later, I let him lick some off my finger.)

(He agreed with my reasoning.)
By the time I’d finished, it was just after noon and I knew I had to be getting back soon. With a cheerful wave at Teuchi and a final promise to bring him a dessert within the next few days, I dragged both the cart (physically) and the cat (not quite so literally) back out to the marketplace.

A bag of spinach, some ginger and a carton of eggs later and we were homeward bound.

The walk was insignificant, except for when I caught Genma’s eye (stood responsibly now, out of the flow of people – good boy) and tossed him a cheeky wink. The rueful smirk he graced me with in return left me satisfied. Ahhh, there’s nothing like trolling people and then making friends with them anyway.

On the one year anniversary of his inauguration, I somehow ended up sharing an egg custard with the Yondaime.

The pure ridiculous ‘headcanon-ness’ of the entire situation made me want to roll my eyes so hard they’d fall back into my skull.

Well, it went like this.

Three days after my first visit to Ichiraku, I returned once more, this time mercifully without the baggage of an apex predator and a shopping wagon. I literally walked all the way from my house to the stand with nothing but the egg custards in my hands. It was around 10 in the morning on a Wednesday, so I wasn’t exactly worried about being murdered. I’d stopped for nothing, except to glare at the punk who almost hit me with his football, before marching up to the empty counter and plonking the plate down. (It was covered, don’t worry. I’m fully aware of how dusty Konoha was.)

Teuchi, whilst initially dubious, had been delighted with the creation, particularly the creamy filling. So ever since then, I’d made it my mission to deliver six fist-sized little tartlets to the man every week, in return for two bowls of ramen. (I didn’t take him up on it every time, so now I had a nice little tally saved up behind the till.)

Of course, because there hadn’t been a word for it here before and I didn’t know Japanese in my previous life, there wasn’t an official title for the thing.

Teuchi just called it ‘sun tart’, which was pretty cool so I went with it.

Now, I knew I was asking for trouble by cultivating a contact in the most notorious food stand in the Narutoverse but…Teuchi was so cute, I couldn’t help myself. I thrive on the adorableness of others apparently. And mum had been so happy, babbling on about her little dessert chef and how this was my first big step in making a name for myself.

I got where she was coming from but I was hesitant to point out I was only just 7.

Dad, of course, just cried with happiness. I cannot stress both the abnormality of that man and his likeness to anime Hashirama (it wasn’t even biological!).

Apparently, at some point, Minato (a regular alongside Kushina) had managed to wrangle a slice from the ramen chef (who could be surprisingly tricksy, probably how he’d managed to keep hold of his recipes). And, when asked what he wanted in celebration for his first anniversary as Leader, he’d requested an entire tart (the size of a dinner plate) to himself.

I sensed the presence of a fellow glutton after my own heart.
So here I was, seated at 6 am (Hokage obviously worked early and it was either now or late at night) with a sleeping Hitoshi at my feet, making myself sick with dessert too early in the morning.

With Panty-dropper Minato Namikaze.

Not that I was like that! I was 7, for crying out loud! (hypocrite, I know.)

Minato was gushing about the tart, face sparkling like he was in Ouran Host Club and wiggling in happiness in a way that was scarily similar to my dad on Kustudon night.

How did my life get this way? I moaned internally.

I didn’t even have the heart to troll him like I would my dad right about now.

As morbid as it was, he was gonna die in a few months, along with Kushina, and leave his newborn baby the village reject. Urgh, Canon was an asshole and a major mood killer.

“-it’s just so yellow and happy-“ and here I’d thought Minato was supposed to be all cool and collected.

Apparently, he’s a massive nerd.

“Is that why you like it? ‘cause it’s the same colour as your head?” ahh, screw it. Who said I couldn’t be a little shit. Live in the present and all that Tumblr stuff.

The legendary Yondaime melted in his seat like a deflating balloon before Teuchi’s roaring laugh stopped him before he made it to the floor. When Hitoshi chuckled as well (ay, since when were you awake?), Minato sheepishly rubbed the back of his head with an eye-smile.

Holy shit, I didn’t think that was physically possible.

Then again, my dad grows mushrooms all the time and he did just turn into liquid for a moment or two.

“No, Kiharu-chan,” and suddenly he was all cool and mysterious again. “It just makes me happy!” He gently reached over and patted my head.

“Good food can do that for people.” I felt strangely touched. When he wasn’t being a bit of a weirdo, there was something strangely charismatic about him.

He was on a roll now and continued earnestly.

“-and I’m sure you’re gonna go really far with this, Kiharu-chan! You don’t have to be some ninja warrior to make a change in peoples lives.” He turned away from me now, still smiling softly and picked up his fork again. My face was surely just a bit awestruck. “Sometimes, just a special little thing, like this tart, can do something. I mean, you’ve really made my day with this!”

I can’t believe he just said that, to the little girl whose pie he liked. This didn’t feel like a plot cliché for once. I felt like an actual Konoha citizen, amazed to be noticed by our actual dictator (even if he was a nice one).

“Teuchi,” I glanced at the man who looked just as surprised and proud as I did. A smile tugged at my lips and I knew what change I could do today.

“as cute a name as ‘Sun Tart’ is, maybe we should call the little ones that. This one..” I pointed at the scene of Minato digging into what was left of his large egg custard, “…looks more like a
Yondaime’s Sun.”

Teuchi and Minato, grinning, both shook my hand.

“I’d be honoured.”

Noko had joined the academy in a time of war, which was just before she turned five.

However, she’d not gotten very far before the war had officially ended and so, once the peacetime curriculum was back in place, she was therefore still dying of boredom just two years later. She was particularly irritable now as the new students were her own age.

Hana wouldn’t be joining for another two years, being only five. (her lisp was still the highlight of my week.)

Nowadays (especially in the sticky July heat – which was, of course, unbearable in the classroom), the only things that could cheer the poor thing up were my food or Sora-oba-san, who was now really quite pregnant. Or both.

Both was always best.

Sora-oba-san, who’d insisted I call her that after introducing her to my fresh strawberry cheesecake during one of her worse pregnancy cravings, was usually a very composed and genteel woman. A lady.

When pregnant, she was just as entertaining as my mum. And just as violent towards Inoichi-Oji.

I know, I know. I was in fangirl heaven and my own plot-hell. ‘Oji’? I was definitely screwed.

In the front room of the Yamanaka Clan Head’s house, Sora-oba was having a bad day. She had dressed in loose pants and a simple shirt with her usually impeccable hair thrown into a high ponytail when Noko and I (and Hitoshi) found her.

This wouldn’t work.

Immediately sending Hitoshi to function as a heated teddy bear, Noko ran outside to gather fresh flowers whilst I opened the curtains and got the tea going. On second thoughts, I also set out the chilled peach juice. It was so hot out.

Now, Noko and I weren’t being presumptuous brats. We’d had to help Sora-oba out a few times with her pregnancy already when we visited. Ino was really making her uncomfortable; I briefly wondered if she was also a deeply spiteful victim of botched reincarnation before cutting myself off.

That was a horrible thought, urgh.

Noko came rushing back in as I was unpacking the cakes I’d bought, suddenly never more grateful I’d turned as fussy as a Grandmother when it came to pressing food into my ‘relative’s hands.

Bringing in all our supplies, we found our auntie curled up on her side on the sofa, Hitoshi squeezed on in front of her, purring loudly.

I had to force myself not to respond with my own. That would’ve been embarrassing.

I laid out the treats as Sora-oba raised her head. She looked awfully grey but her eyes immediately brightened at the picture the two of us made, cakes and drinks spread out with a vibrant bouquet of...
her favourite flowers.

By the time we’d left, we’d woven them into her hair, eaten a good bit of cake and felt Ino kick at least six times.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 4! I should probably chill but oops, nevermind. Thank you for your amazing reviews. I’m sorry I didn't call Minato pretty but how about trolling Genma to make up for it? I'm glad so many people are enjoying this, especially as we're only 2 days, 4 chapters in! Thank you for being so supportive, some of your comments really made me laugh.

Kiharu would like to express annoyance at the Headcanons she's fallen into (I don't mean for that to sound like I have a split personality disorder) but I really wanted her to meet people. At least she's not meeting them by 1) looking for them, 2) being an OP ninja or 3) being an idiot and making sure everyone's aware of her future/altUniverse knowledge. So far it's just been pure ridiculous luck, poor girl. Anyway, thanks for reading and don't forget to kudos/review! x
The inevitable

Chapter Summary

Some things are inevitable. You hold them off for as long as possible, deny their existence...but their time always comes.

Like Expiration dates on fresh cream...Tragic.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was September 1\textsuperscript{st} and not only had most of the Rookie 9 been born (Hana was delighted in baby Kiba) but Minato had only just over a month to live.

And...I may have gotten...attached.

\textit{Fuck. My. Life.}

Both of them!

One morning I’d woken up to a very official note from the Hokage Tower. Requesting my presence. As soon as convenient. I was stressed for all of five seconds – \textit{I do not want to be involved in the government, especially not a militarist one} – before I noticed the hand-written P.S on the flip side.

\textit{Bring tarts please~}

\textit{:D}

Oh, for-! Surely this was an abuse of power?

Regardless, I was just a civilian kid and so couldn’t exactly refuse the Head Honcho himself.

And...he’d wilt if I said no...eyes that blue shouldn’t be that watery, it wasn’t fair....!

So, since my first delivery months ago, walking past a surprised Genma (I winked, \textit{of course}) and into the bombsight which was the Hokage’s office bearing a plate of creamy goodness, I had visited (or rather my tarts visited and I escorted them) Minato twice a week.

Yondaime’s Sun’s were really living up to their title, Minato probably should have gotten fat by now. He was still on the slim side despite everything and I knew, if he was a girl, I’d be forced to resent him on principle. If he wasn’t gonna die pretty soon, I’d be worried about Diabetes or heart disease in the long term.

And that’s where my issue lay. (Not the diabetes/heart disease bit, I meant the death bit.)

\textit{I didn’t want him to die.}

I didn’t really want anyone to die, in all fairness. But Minato... he was \textit{good}. Even with my reservations towards a system that didn’t exactly promote freedom of speech and- anyway, he was a
good person despite all of this and every time I saw him, all I could think was how little time he had left.

Would I ever be able to look into Naruto's eyes after this? or Kakashi's (err, or rather- eye)?

I didn’t know. But the guilt sat like a hot rock in my stomach for weeks. Even my newfound camaraderie with Genma failed to lift my spirits.

Of course, being a ninja, my bandana-wearing buddy missed none of this.

“Hey, Squirt,” his voice stopped me on my way out. When he walked up to stand beside me, his eye’s widened in panic at the sight of my troubled face. Urgh, he was probably freaking out internally over emotions and crying girls- what a teenage douchbag. “What’s with the long face, eh?”

I almost waved him off but he was trying to help, despite how uncomfortable he looked. I always did love that headcanon of Mother-Hen-Genma. I wondered if I could get myself labelled as his first chick…

“I feel like…I’m not helping anyone.” I felt strangely hesitant and found myself staring intently as the straps on his sandals. I absently noted how dusty they were, tut tut.

“Does… that make me a bad person, Genma-nee?” yep, that’s what I called him. But I was actually curious now. Was I being a coward or smart, like I’d always figured? I knew that, no matter what, there was nothing I could do. But it didn’t make it easy and some days I wasn’t sure I could cope.

It was silent for a minute before Genma slung an arm around my shoulder and sighed loudly.

“Nah kid, you’re good.”

I turned my head to meet his steady gaze, happy to lean on him for a bit. He was warm and a nice height. He also used a really nice pine conditioner. And it was Genma ergo awesome, even if he was a bit of a dick sometimes. But he was a teenager, all moody and trying to act cool. I’d forgive him and then never let him live it down when we were older.

When my eyes met his, he grinned around his senbon before trapping me in a head-lock and ruffling my ponytail so much it was almost falling out when he let me go. I was squawking in offence, shoving ineffectually at his stupid chest and then growling up at him when I was able to stagger back a few steps. Coming from a girl who could snarl and purr as good as any panther, it was pretty impressive.

Didn’t wipe the smug grin off the idiot’s face though.

He continued, unrepentant, as I tried to salvage my ponytail. “You wouldn’t be my cute little Kouhai if you weren’t. Now, off you trot. And grab an actual lunch- not just some cake.”

The mumbling of conversation alerted me to ninja moving towards us. Ah, I could still win this round.

“Of course, Nee-san! But I already have a mother, you know.” I pointed out sagely, pretending I didn’t see Genma’s offended expression or hear the laughter of the ninja behind me (Raidou? Even better). I could almost feel Raidou’s embarrassment. He really was a sweetheart, so calm and yet so easily flustered.

“So, you should just call me imouto!” Finishing with a cheerful wave, I spun around and left Genma frozen in horror, mouthing ‘Mother’ to himself silently. Flashing a cheeky wink at Raidou’s
impressively red face, I skipped outside.

My thoughts were now thankfully distracted from Minato’s fate, too busy remembering one of my favourite fics which featured background RaidouxGenma. I wondered if I could set them up….

No! Bad Kiharu, no shipping!

Urgh, I sounded like a chuunin exam arch Ino or Sakura. I wallowed for a moment in self-disgust.

It was fine to support OTPs but it just got weird when they were right in front of you. I was a bit retarded when it came to recognising or identifying romantic stuff so would probably screw everything up even if I tried.

But, then again, you’d never know if you never tried…

(Back in the Hokage Tower, both Genma and Raidou felt a shiver of foreboding. They couldn’t help but quickly check their weapons…)

……………………………..

Noko was braiding glass beads into my hair when Sora-oba hunched over double like someone (other than Ino) had kicked her. She’d been shifting for a while and I knew what day it was.

I’d just kinda been hoping she could…I don’t know…hold it in? At least until I’d innocently trotted off home.

My 1st mum and gran had taken vicious satisfaction in mentally scarring me with the scariest maternity ward stories they could conjure. And then they wondered where I got my twisted sense of humour?

I wasn’t particularly keen to play midwife, thanks.

And yet, regardless of my feelings, here I was, scampering alongside Noko was we rushed to keep up with Noko’s cousin, Tetsu-nii (the only relative who’d been around to come running when Sora-oba had started yelling), as he ran towards the hospital.

He looked just as scared as the rest of us, holding Sora-oba firmly but also fearfully like she was a particularly large bomb.

I could appreciate the comparison.

As soon as a medic-nin relieved him of his burden, he staggered back against the wall, face ashen and openly terrified. You would’ve thought he was the one going into labour. (what weird mental images- I had to clamp down on a hysterical laugh.)

Wasting zero time on the lily-livered pack-mule, Noko and I rushed after our aunt, guided by her dulcet yells. She was obviously becoming accustomed to the pain, changing from mindless shouts to very eloquently and imaginatively phrased curses. Thankfully, these were all aimed at her currently absent husband who-

“Ah! Inoichi-Oji! We need to get him-“ I yelped, grasping Noko’s arm before running back the way we came.

“You hold down the fort here!” I yelled over my shoulder, already flying around the corner and taking the stairs two-at-a-time with my short little legs. It took a few minutes but I was finally running
through reception and bursting back out onto the street. I gained some odd looks but paid them no
mind. I was pretty desperate to get to Inoichi first- hopefully, I could get him to faint!

Taking a moment to gather my bearings, I sprinted off in the direction of T&I. I’d never been
allowed inside it (thank god for some sense of childhood awareness) but Inoichi had made sure both
Noko and I knew where to find him in an emergency. He’d made us swear to never abuse our right
to enter. I was totally okay with never stepping into the torture zone, thanks.

Now, as I zipped towards the deceptively harmless-looking tower (they weren’t exactly gonna paint
it with blood and barbed wire, were they?), I was glad that the hospital was set in the centre of the
ninja admin buildings (for easy access to medical attention in an emergency etc.). I was bright red
and gasping, having flat out run for almost 10 minutes now, but I was desperately hoping that I’d still
be the first to break the news.

Running through the turning doors, I all but collapsed against the receptionist’s desk.

“P-please! I need to see Inoichi-Oji! It’s an e-emergency.” Drama always got things sorted quickly.
The kunoichi pursed her lips, pretty unimpressed, but my desperate glare (I needed to be the one!)
had her rolling her eyes and pressing a button under the edge of her desk.

Very James Bond.

A very awkward few minutes passed, where the lady ignored me and I desperately fanned at my
steaming face. Thankfully, it didn’t last too long.

The doors banged open and Inoichi swept in, eyes immediately latching onto me with laser-like
intensity and scanning my person, even as he strode closer. I wasted no time, however, running
forwards and grasping his hands.

“Oji! Sora-oba-san is-“

An ANBU had lept through the window and stolen my thunder.

“Yamanaka-sama. Your wife has gone into labour and is requesting your presence.”

Inoichi made an incredibly satisfying croak, staggering back a few steps before shaking his head to
centre himself.

I didn’t even waste time lamenting the lack of hysterics.

My head turned slowly, eyes aflame like coals. I noted the silver hair and canine mask with the
vicious satisfaction that at least I knew the identity of my mortal enemy. With a snarl (like when dad
had accidentally trod on Hitoshi’s tail) I threw myself towards the asshole that had ruined my
moment.

I swore that, if I’d been the one to tell him, I could’ve made the big-bad Head of T&I faint.

Unfortunately, Inoichi just caught me around my middle and nodded for Inu-teme to leave. Which he
did without even glancing at me.

Yeah, you’d better run, punk!

Inoichi, without even bothering to put me down, walked straight out of the building. Taking to the
rooftops, – he only spared a second to sling me onto his back with the instructions to hold tightly –
he immediately took off towards the hospital. I had always been a bit of an adrenaline junkie and rebirth hadn’t changed that.

I was too angry to even pay attention to our crazy speeds.

I had always loved Kakashi as a character; he was lazy, attractive, read porn shamelessly and was a troll after my own heart. What wasn’t there to like?

A part of me, the bit that hadn’t devolved to the maturity of a seven-year-old, understood that he hadn't actually wronged me on purpose. But I couldn’t help but resent him. I supposed I understood what Obito meant when he’d called him a careless bastard. I’d loved his character too much to not give him a second chance though…just maybe in a few years when the hormones kicked in. Maybe it was just ANBU behaviour?

If that was it, I hoped I’d never meet Genma when he was behind the mask.

He was already a dick without the added baggage, but he was my dick.

Wait. That sounded inappropriate.

Thankfully, we then arrived at the hospital and Inoichi immediately swung through the nearest window without even breaking stride. I was impressed. When we arrived at the right wing, Inoichi slipped me off his back, like I was a interestingly shaped backpack, and gave me a quick squeeze before heading inside.

Noko, who’d been watching all this with a smile and a nod at her uncle, beckoned me to the seat next to her. So far it was just us in the room (Tetsu was pacing in the corner like a dork) and we clutched each other's hands tightly in both nerves and excitement. Naturally, I immediately began regaling her with my adventures;

“-and then he just cut across me! And told Oji-san instead and he was really rude-“ Okay, I’ll admit to still being a bit sore over the whole thing.

As per usual, Noko was both loyal and the voice of reason.

“that was quite rude, I mean, you were speaking and he cut you right off! But, he was ANBU, so maybe he was just terribly busy?”

Oh, you innocent, sweet child.

It was at this point that our parents burst in, along with a trail of various concerned relatives. Tetsu jumped like a rabbit in surprise, which made Noko giggle before our parents were on us. Dad scooped me up under the pretence of a hug but really, he just stole my seat (only one of two) and perched me on his lap instead. The sneak. I didn’t have much time to do more than give him the stink-eye, however, as it was at that point that two figures swept into the room.

Chouza Akimichi and Shikaku Nara.

The stars in my eyes must’ve been glowing and I was pretty sure I had a background of magical rainbows developing behind me.

I’d mentioned earlier that I’d fancied myself a Nara. I don’t think I’d quite explained that when I said I’d loved them, what I meant was that I was a disciple of Shikaku and Shikamaru, who were in my Top 5 Characters in Naruto. And I had a lot a love for this fandom!
I was briefly distracted by his deer-skin, wondering if it was as soft as it looked. It was much fluffier in real life than in the anime. Almost as cute as Tobirama’s kitty-ruff.

The man himself looked pretty surprised at my reaction before he smiled down at me.

“You’re Shikaku Nara-sama, right? The Jounin Commander?” I clasped my hands together and tried to stop bouncing. One eyebrow rose before he replied. “Ah, I am.” Which wasn’t terribly encouraging for my enthusiasm but I didn’t let that phase me.

“I’m Kiharu Dazai and I think you’re amazing!” I beamed, trying to look as genuine as possible. As genuine as I felt. Which was 100%.

The shadow master looked surprised before a dark blush burned his ears and cheekbones. I didn’t think he’d heard that much before.

Chouza laughed loudly, hand slapping his teammate between his shoulders before he offered me his hand. I shook it with a grin as he responded on Shikaku-sama’s behalf. “Well, little hime, it’s about time someone surprised him! Chouza Akimichi, I’m delighted to meet a little spitfire like you, Kiharu-chan.” His arm was massive, dwarfing mine but his hold wasn’t too gentle either like he thought I would break.

I liked him very much.

The twinkle in his eyes (they did open) told me I’d made yet another friend.

Shikaku-sama recovered quickly enough and bestowed upon me a wirey grin, which made his two scars crinkle endearingly. Oh, who was I kidding? This man could have a kunai to my throat and I’d probably find it endearing and thank him for it.

Okay, that didn’t sound as disturbing in my head.

“Ah,” he chuckled and damn, his voice was husky in the best way. “Thanks, Kiharu-chan, but Chouza and I had better go check on Inoichi, ah?” Feeling warm, I nodded happily in agreement and waved them both off with a parting jab, “Oji-san looked pretty sick, so that’s probably best.” It was worth it when they both chuckled.

Turning back around, I noticed Tou-san staring at me, looking completely devastated. Oh hell, what now? Stepping towards him carefully – you never knew what could set him off – my caution proved to be in vain as he immediately started crying anyway. I shot a panicked glance at mum but she was expertly ignoring the situation and I knew I was on my own.

“Er, dad?” I patted his shoulder softly and felt a sweatdrop develop. Damn, I’d never get used to these effects. “Are you…okay?”

“My little hime prefers Shikaku over me!”

The sweatdrop was so heavy I felt like it almost gave me a concussion. Needless to say, I spent the rest of the wait convincing Dad I wasn’t trying to replace him.

Thankfully, Ino was born after just 7 hours. It was an age but I’d known babies who took over 20 so I was pretty relieved. Except for Noko’s parents, none of us were let in – but it was still a bit of an event.

Inoichi-Oji, pale but ecstatic, told us all to drop round the Compound in a week or so, so that they could get settled.
When I did finally get to visit, it was almost 2 weeks later. Accompanied by Natsuko-oba, Noko and I ended up killing two birds with one stone when Yoshino was also there.

Baby Shikamaru was divine.

Ino…not so much.

She *cried. All the time.*

Shikamaru was, just like as a kid and adult, a super sleepy baby so we could admire him all we wanted. I was super impressed with his ability to ignore all other disturbances *cough* Ino *cough*. But I knew that I’d love Ino regardless of her shrieks (Noko and I had already made a pact, with Sora-oba’s permission, to be the best Nee-sans ever) but she was so loud my eyes almost crossed. Noko had given up all pretenses and had her hands firmly clamped over her ears.

When Sora-oba looked like she was going to cry alongside her daughter and Shikamaru had woken up to voice his own displeasure, I figured I had nothing to lose.

My purr, when I was a baby, had first been more of a gentle thrumming vibration than anything else. As I’d gotten older, it had become more audible and, whilst not as deep as dad’s or as roaring as Hitoshi’s, it was still super soothing.

Ino hiccupped a few times before finally deciding that the new weird noise was more interesting than reaching new decibels. Shikamaru looked adorably surprised but then proved that he was a genius even at this age when he immediately took the chance and settled back down for his nap. I was a little bit in love.

I could feel Noko gaping at me (I’d not done this since we were children and she’d had a nightmare) and both women looked gobsmacked.

Which then fell away to gleaming calculation and triumph.

I had the strangest feeling I was going to the most sought-after babysitter.

If it was for Ino-Shika-Cho, I can’t say I’d mind.

…………………………………

On the evening of October 10th, I’d kissed both of my parents goodnight before curling up in bed with Hitoshi.

I’d last seen Minato three days ago. If I’d stayed a bit longer and finally cracked the courage to hug the surprised man goodbye, that was no one’s business but my own.

I’d visited the Yamanaka’s yesterday. If I’d held Noko’s hand for most of the visit, kissed Ino and Shika and hugged everyone goodbye, I wasn’t going to say anything.

Mum had been home for the day, with the seamstresses closed for the day. Dad had gotten back at lunch to a massive spread of cakes. I’d spent the rest of the day relishing in family, the four of us together and whole and warm.

If Hitoshi felt the silent tears that soaked into his fur, he said nothing.

And so, when the massive explosion of chakra outside ripped the air from my lungs, I closed my eyes in acceptance.
Even as I was pulled from my bed, still in my pyjamas, led from the house by my mother and a snarling panther, my father already gone with nothing but a hurried “I love you,” and a kiss that still burned on my forehead, I knew that it was out of my hands.

I’d always been powerless but I just wished for more time.

I didn’t know what was going to happen. Who would survive and who I would lose.

I was never going to see Minato again. I didn’t know if Dad was going to make it. Or Noko. Or Natsuko-oba or Inokumo-oji. People I’d never know before. The man from the fish market, the boy from across the street or Yuri-oba who ran the dress shop.

I knew, I knew, that there was nothing I could’ve done. And that wasn’t me trying to convince myself. It was stone cold fact. Even if I’d been a ninja, I was still 7 and it would change nothing.

The horizon was glowing as we ran towards the invasion shelters on the other side of the village.

People were screaming; in terror, in pain or for loved ones. I twisted one hand deeper into Hitoshi’s fur and blinked furiously at the smoke that had started to spread through the streets. We were too close to the site of the attack, I could almost see Kurama’s head from where I was on the ground and I knew that it was the force of his attacks, even from this distance, that had sparked fires. Trapped wires, gas leaks from the shockwaves and fires left abandoned. It was terrifying that he could have such an effect so effortlessly.

We’d reached the end of our road when mum noticed two small boys running in the wrong direction. She wheeled around, crying out for them to ‘come this way’ instead, ordering Hitoshi to protect me before she was gone.

I screamed for her so hard my throat ached.

When I tried to go after her, no sign of her anywhere, Hitoshi had snarled at me to stay put like she told us.

A massive explosion shook the ground, the trees beside us catching fire.

We’d lingered too long.

Hitoshi scanned the area for my mother just as desperately as I. when I looked at him, he looked just as scared as I did. Trying not to cry, I climbed onto his back. I knew we had to leave but I was terrified we’d miss my mother if we did.

Another explosion echoed and, with one last regretful glance back from where we’d come, Hitoshi set off through the smoke.

Kaa-san never made it to the shelter.

After spending the rest of the night in the caves, which were dark and cold and filled with the sounds of crying children, the light of day signified the end of the onslaught. I’d passed the entire time either crying into Hitoshi’s sooty fur or staring at my guilty expression reflected in his solemn green eyes.

In those long hours, I hated myself. It would have been so much easier if I’d be born like a normal person, no memories to torment me with knowledge I couldn’t use. I knew it wasn’t my fault, any of it, but they always did say that survivor’s guilt was the silent killer.

The village looked wrong when we came outside. Parts of it were completely demolished, others
untouched. Some were just on fire, sparked by ruined electrics from the shockwaves. The trees had been completely cremated in some places, nothing left but the scorched brown earth.

Minato and Kushina were dead and Naruto was all alone.

People rushed around, getting medical assistance or reuniting with family members. It was scary and loud but also strangely hushed in the face of such tragedy. I almost stopped a chuunin to ask about my parents but he was gone so quickly I didn’t even have time to open my mouth. Sharing a look with my panther companion, he looked just as lost as I felt.

So, we went to go see if we still had a home left.

The anime had shown the devastation of the Kyuubi’s ‘attack’.

The reality was so much worse. Not only was this real life but this was my home, I’d lived here for almost a decade and, seeing everything so devastated, my throat had swollen into a hard lump I couldn’t swallow around.

Our street was pretty intact, aside from some fallen trees and the fires that had been put out in the first two houses.

Slowly turning the corner, I quietly sucked in a breath of relief. Our little cul-de-sac looked okay, if smoky, and our house was relatively unscathed, aside from the shattered windows.

The door creaked when Hitoshi went through first (he insisted). We sat on our sofa for hours, not daring to go anywhere.

It was just getting dark out when the door banged open and the sounds of ragged breathing shattered our silent vigil.

I leapt to my feet, terrified that someone had taken advantage of the chaos to hit a few unprotected houses, with Hitoshi crouched protectively in front of me. We must’ve alerted the intruder as the door was thrown open, to reveal my dad (filthy and exhausted but whole) armed with a Kunai.

At the sight of him, all my composure from the last few hours shattered like an overfilled Dam. Barely even waiting for him to lower his weapon, I flung myself across the room, relieved beyond belief that he was alive and in front on me.

The warrior’s gleam in his eye had vanished and he clutched me desperately to his chest, rocking me gently as he lowered us both to the ground. He was shuddering and gasping and I knew I’d be a bit bruised tomorrow. When I’d finally calmed down enough to understand his almost feverish muttering, pressed as his lips were to my head.

“Oh, thank Kami-You’re here, you’re okay…you’re alive” he sobbed and I realised he must’ve been looking for us all day. A hot stab of guilt lanced my heart for unknowingly making him think I’d died. I pressed myself so hard against his chest that I almost thought I’d be able to slip beneath his skin and never leave him.

I wondered if this was how my first parents had reacted to my death.

I wondered how long he’d been looking, scouring the entire village for his family.

I wondered why kaa-san wasn’t with him.
A/N- I actually got so emotional writing the end of this chapter and then when I had to read through the whole doc from the top I was NOT in the mood for Minato's funnies. I'm sorry we couldn't have more time with Minato or have a scene with Kushina but I just couldn't put Kyuubi off any longer. We still have so far to go... like almost 20 years of action left! And we're only through 7 years of childhood! Anyway, I hope you liked it and stay tuned for news of the aftermath and repercussions of Kurama! x
And then, there was the Aftermath

Chapter Summary

Aftermaths...were always messy things. And, whether they were tragedies or a just a sink filled with dirty cooking equipment, I would always hate them.

... I was never very good at cleaning up, anyway.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

We stayed there for a long time, curled in each other's arms with Hitoshi wrapped around the both of us.

The sun set and the shadows grew longer and longer until I could barely see dad’s face beside mine. Only then did dad rouse himself, rising carefully on legs long since gone stiff and still cradling me to his chest. Without a word, he slowly climbed the stairs and lay the both of us down in the spare bedroom. My small single bed would never have fit all three of us and Mum and Dad’s room…

I didn’t dare ask where mum was or why dad had been crying all alone before.

I think I already knew.

The silence between us was unbroken for the rest of the night. Even when I soaked dad’s shirt with salt water. But then again, his pillow was wet.

The fragile peace was fractured early the next morning when banging downstairs jolted the three of us from a fitful sleep. Dad looked appalling, eyes swollen and face sallow beneath his natural tan. Hitoshi was still filthy, smearing the white sheets like charcoal and I could only imagine the state I was in. When Inoichi-Oji burst up the stairs, dad had already lowered his kunai and I was swept up against my Oji-san’s chest before I could blink. When he pulled back, I noticed how pale he was. Composed, and much cleaner than any of us, but I could see he had been crying as well.

Numbly, I wondered who else we’d lost.

“Thank Kami,” he breathed. “I couldn’t find you anywhere, Seiichi, and no one had seen Kiharu-chan since yesterday morning…” My dad sighed and scrubbed a hand through his hair. “Sorry, Inoichi. I got straight back from escorting some civilians to the hospital and then I immediately checked around for Kiharu…it wasn’t until I got home last night that I found them both here already.”

Inoichi nodded, still holding me tightly to his side, before hesitating. “…And, Aki?” My dad’s expression darkened like a thundercloud rolling in. I closed my eyes as they stung again.

After a long moment, Tou-san cleared his throat roughly and looked back at Inoichi. “And Sora and Ino-chan and everyone? They’re okay?”

Inoichi squeezed me tighter before he slowly started to speak.
Sora-oba-san was crying again.

Ino was mercifully quiet for once, down for the count in her bassinette, and I could hear my aunt’s quiet sniffles even from the nursery. Carefully, carefully, I reached down and stroked one smooth cheek but Ino didn’t stir as I gazed down at her.

I’d been helpless last night but… I swore I was going do everything I could to help this little warrior grow up strong and beautiful and **good**. I’d made a promise and I was gonna be the best nee-chan ever.

Even if Noko wasn’t here anymore to help me.

*I’m, I’m sorry Kiharu-chan…*

**Natsuko and Inokumo went out to gather everyone to the main house in the Compound. They went back for three children just before midnight.**

*In the confusion…Noko just…Disappeared.*

Kaa-san had been found after two days, under the ruins of a house that had collapsed in a fire. She’d tried to cover those two boys with her own body.

Natsuko-oba-san was in ruins. She barely left the bed and a part of me worried she’d just fade away. I visited every few days with fresh flowers for her bedroom but she couldn’t even look at me. It was okay. I knew every time she did, all she was reminded of was Noko.

It hurt to think of this as how my parents before had mourned me.

I hadn’t seen Inokumo-Oji except for at a distance, keeping a silent vigil over his wife’s room without ever entering.

But Noko…

Noko had just vanished. Loads of people were missing but, with most of the rubble cleared, they had been pronounced dead earlier in the week.

I wish they’d found her. Maybe then it would feel more real and not some horrible dream. Maybe then I’d be able to sleep because I’d stop dreaming of Kaa-san, Noko and Minato asking me why I’d wanted them to die.

Dad and I moved into his room after a week and we curled up in a king size bed which still felt cold despite the three bodies squished into it.

Hitoshi was my pillar at this time, as I was dad’s. I didn’t want to think what he would’ve been like if he’d been left alone like he’d originally thought. He had nightmares sometimes, horrible bloody things that had him jerking upright with a yell and a flash of kunai drawn. His chest would heave before turning to me and frantically feeling for my pulse point, only relaxing when it thumped clearly against his searching fingers.

It had only been two weeks so I let this continue but I knew it couldn’t last for long.

After three weeks, I told dad I’d booked him in to see a therapist. Expectedly, he was adamantly against it. Well, up until I burst into tears at the thought of him withering away in front of me.

He went, clearly unhappy but I didn’t care so long as he started getting better. When I said as much
to him, the guilt on his face – a child, in his eyes I was just his little girl – had my mouth shaking again until I turned away so he wouldn’t have to see.

After that, he went three times a week.

I remembered when before, an old man across the street had always told me he thought he would die before his wife. He was older and had more health issues but I also figured he couldn’t bear the thought, as perhaps as selfish as it was, that he might outlive her. She died in the summer after a violent and short fight with cancer. I remember how heartbreaking his anguish had been. He’d died of a broken heart a few short months later.

I couldn’t bear how similar my Tou-san and Noko’s parents looked to that sweet old man after Kaa-san and Inoko…died.

Whilst dad was devastated, I was terrifyingly numb.

I had adored my mother and Noko. But I’d already lost everything before. This felt like both an old and new wound simultaneously. Like I’d lost everything all over again and yet not. Before, I’d been the one who’d left everyone behind. To be one of the survivors was jarring.

I didn’t know what to feel and so I felt like there was nothing. Like a black hole almost.

The mass-funeral was to be held in three days. It had already been weeks but the…bodies…had been placed in stasis until all the rubble could be cleared and the number of dead finalised.

I’d known that the attack had been devastating in the anime but…it felt like there wasn’t anyone who hadn’t lost someone.

I couldn’t imagine being a civilian orphan. Not only had they lost their parents but most had lost their future’s too. With no family to provide education (orphanages were so busy, the lessons couldn’t even be considered competent) or provide support for an apprenticeship, most of those children would be forced into the life of a shinobi. I’d known Naruto’s class had been filled with Clan children, but there were three groups per year and the other two were filled with civilians hoping to make something of themselves.

And whilst the whole village was in mourning, I’d never felt so trapped before, in the house where I’d spent all my days with my mother. Because kaa-san had taken hold of the reigns of my education and helped me ‘set myself up’ for a life baking, I had no external routine and nowhere to run to.

At times when I felt isolated, I’d always gone to Noko’s.

Which is why I found myself marching up to the gates of the Inuzuka Clan Compound.

Hana and I had stayed pretty good friends over the years, even if we only saw each other occasionally at weekends. Hana was always training with her clan as, having three Ninken, she technically had triple the work. All the serious ninja stuff had toughened her up; not that Inuzuka’s could ever be called soft to begin with. But she was much more mature now.

And maybe that was what I needed.

Despite the dark atmosphere that lingered over the entire village, the compound was still noisy and, for the first time in a while, I felt like I could breathe. It was busy with dogs barking and people yelling but it felt so alive. Not joyful and in no way disrespectful, but I felt like just being here helped me focus more of those who’d lived and not the losses we’d suffered.
Tsume was lounging on her patio, Kuromaru at her feet and Kiba-chibi reclined on her chest. She looked weary and I remembered that Hana had said she’d been fighting a lot with her husband.

This was probably around the time in canon where he jumped off the radar. I’d not really seen him since that first time, even when I’d come over to see Hana. No wonder she’d looked so delighted with his attention if he normally didn’t spend any time with her.

Tsume was already looking in my direction when I appeared, no doubt having either heard or smelled me (probably both) coming. She tried for a smile, one sharp canine peaking, but the dark bruises under her eyes were fooling no one. “Hana’s in her room, gaki, go on in.” her voice was stern but I knew it wasn’t meant meanly. Wisely saying nothing, I nodded respectfully at both matriarch and ninken before quietly slipping inside.

Hana’s back was to the door, curled up on her bed with a large scroll and the triplets scattered around, sleeping peacefully. She must’ve been really absorbed because she didn’t even react until I was knocking and stepping through the door.

“Ki’aru-nee,” she sighed with a smile. “What ar’ you doing ’ere?”

Something in my chest loosened slightly at the familiar catch of her babyish lisp. Shhh, that’s right, Hana’s here, alive and strong, I soothed myself. It sounded demented, talking in my own mind, but it helped console the jagged hole where my mother’s love had used to rest.

That love wasn’t gone but now it throbbed with such aching loss sometimes I wondered if I was physically wounded.

“Well, that’s not a nice way to great your beloved senpai, whom you love very much,” I quirked a brow. There were zero pretences with that five-year-old.

She simply raised an eyebrow in return, cheeky brat. How dare she emulate me so much my own attacks fall short. This was karma, I supposed.

Flopping down next to her, I sighed loudly. “I felt a bit…trapped, in the house I mean. I’ve not done any baking in ages.” It felt like a dirty secret, that being in there felt like mum was watching me over my shoulder and Minato waiting, ever hopeful, for his next delivery of dessert. I just…didn’t feel ready.

“Well, shoot, that was the only reason I’m friends with you! It wasn’t for your stellar personality, that’s for sure!” Hana burst out with a smile.

I turned to gape at her, feeling a little ‘tch’ develop over my eye. Mortally offended at the almost-plagiarism, that had sounded scarily like something I’d say.

But, in the end, a small smile wriggled into view. Hana really was a cute kouhai.

Didn’t mean I didn’t try to beat her into the ground though.

.................................................................

When I left the Inuzuka Compound almost 4 hours later, I felt much more in control. Of both the situation and my feelings.

And so, whilst still a bit high off of endorphins and adrenaline (Hana hadn’t taken my punch kindly at all- maybe it was a cat/dog thing), I headed straight towards the Hokage tower before I could chicken out and run in the opposite direction.
The Sandaime had been reinstated immediately with little fanfare. It hadn’t been in anyway a celebration or a happy event. Thankfully, I’d barely had to step into the tower before I saw the most welcome sight.


Now, I’d known in the anime Genma hadn’t been massively wounded in the attack but, well…he was my nee-san and I’d still worried! I adored the massive idiot, you couldn’t blame me. And so I was perfectly within my rights when I broke into a sprint and, ignoring the ninja he was currently speaking with, threw myself at him.

He sensed an on-coming collision and I was pretty sure that it was only the smiling faces of his colleagues that meant I wasn’t immediately transformed into a senbon-porcupine. Regardless, he whirled around to face me just in time to get a mouthful of my loose hair when my arms wrapped like vices around his shoulders.

For once there was no snarky commentary or sharp retort, nothing but a fondly huffed “Squirt,” whilst he valiantly ignored the chicken imitations of his fellow ninja.

Obviously, my mother-hen comments had caught on brilliantly. I wondered if I could now be credited for that headcanon.

Fully supported by the strong arms squeezing my torso (aw, I knew he loved me), I leaned back to grin broadly at my big brother-figure. The fact that he hadn't complained or dropped me and was actually grinning back at me around his senbon had stars sparkling in my eyes.

Well, until I started growing mushrooms under a purple cloud of depression. The technique was still pretty effective even when I was still being held almost three foot off the ground.

My mood change made all three choke on their tongues.

“Genma-nee!” I started sobbing. I couldn’t lie…they were only half fake. “It’s been three weeks and you never came to check on me!” I almost pulled the ‘I thought you were dead’ card but…ouch, that struck way too close for comfort. For everybody.

All three men, all dorky teenagers even if I was pretty sure two of them were in their twenties, immediately started freaking out at my tears.

Genma started shushing and violently rocking me, for Kami’s sake, like I was a goddamn baby. And if I had been? Those sways would've made me vomit all over his face from pure seasickness.

Urgh, and they were the elite? Evidently, Genma’s legendary coolness had yet to emerge. Either that or he’d yet to gain his sagely wisdom with children. Probably because I was his ‘first kid’. I was so proud!

“I know!” Genma shouted desperately, the other two nodded furiously in agreement over his shoulder. “You should have dinner at mine tonight! There are some people I'd like you to meet?”

Whoa, whoa, whoa. Hold up there, tiger.

Had he taken in Izumo and Kotetsu already?

EEEeeeeeeeeeiiii.

I was right, I was right, I was right!
I WAS his first chick! In all honesty, I’d never felt more accomplished in all my very short (current) life. Which sounded sad but this was actually just that awesome.

Immediately the fungus and dark clouds vanished as I chirped an “Okay!”, making the three exchange weary but relieved glances. “But, Genma-nii-san, won’t you take me to lunch now so we can catch up?” He looked uncertain for a moment before the memory of my tears had him sold. He was too relieved at the gender-appropriate title to complain about paying for two of my three meals of the day.

At least I got to check in on Teuchi aswell.

The sight of Minato’s usual stool at Ichiraku, occupied by some random merchant, had me sighing regretfully.

Genma, following my gaze, reached across and rested one hand gently on my head. Pain, concealed masterfully but peaking out just for my sake, glinted in his coffee eyes and I felt bad for being so pathetic.

Genma had been infinitely closer to, had even responsible for, Minato than I could ever have been. I just gave him pies.

“He’d have hated it if you stopped just because of him.”

How did he do that? Know immediately what my issue was? And normally when people spoke like that, the wishes of those lost, it pissed me off with how justified and self-righteous it sounded. Genma…he had every right to say those things.

“You know, Minato never asked for those pies to be delivered.”

What? I whipped my head around to gape at the assassin.

He smirked knowingly, chopsticks halted in front of his mouth.

“You should have known he’d never have troubled you like that. But all of that first fortnight, he talked about your inauguration gift to him. Even as he was, neck deep in paperwork. He’d not had time, you see, to pop down to Ichiraku’s for one. So, I passed you that note. I figured you’d do it, you seemed like the type and he was so delighted, well…”

I couldn’t believe it. All that time I thought Minato had secretly been a bit of a cheeky brat under all that charisma and genuine dorkiness. I wasn’t disappointed, just shocked, and I wondered how I must’ve seemed to him, barrelling in out of the blue with his favourite dessert twice a week.

“…Are you annoyed?” he asked, chopstick’s still suspended mid-air.

“Not at all,” I replied honestly and found myself smiling.

Six o’clock rolled around quickly. When the ramen was all gone, Genma had left me with his address and the instructions to come just after six.

Just to prove I could, I’d gone straight to the kitchen after arriving back.

The Yondaime’s Sun cooked to perfection, identical to the one I’d gifted Minato all those months ago. It felt almost cathartic, making it once more. Even if I had shed a tear (just the one that dropped
when I’d blinked).

So, dressed in the same cute blue yukata from earlier (at least my bum-length hair was nicely brushed with one side held back with Noko’s hair grip from my last birthday), I carefully carried the massive egg custard to Genma’s apartment.

As expected, it was in the shinobi sector. The buildings were spaced far apart (for privacy, I presumed) and felt a bit like a hotel complex. It was very clean if uniform.

(My street was pretty eclectic, with houses of different shapes and sizes all bundled together. It felt familiar and homely. This felt…like a prosthetic. Perfectly formed but hard, cold and never truly yours.)

I had to juggle a bit with the plate to reach the doorbell (I wasn’t quite tall enough) but the door was opened almost immediately.

“Squirt,” Genma greeted me, even as he stood aside to let me through. “Your old man let you go okay, I see.” He commented wryly. I nodded pleasantly, looking around his undecorated hallway even as I toed off my boots and tried not to think of my father’s wails and mushroom growth as the prospect of my ‘abandoning him’. At least it had all been done with the same melodramatic humour as it used to.

“I brought dessert…if that’s alright with you,” I mumbled, suddenly shy and a bit worried I’d been presumptuous.

Genma eyed the round tin with a knowing look before nodding at me, seeming almost proud.

“Thanks, kid.”

Stepping in front of me, he led the way through to the kitchen. From here, I could guess at the basic layout. The corridor was a straight shot into a kitchen-dining room which was separated by a half wall from the living room. Another door, that I could see around the edge of the sofa, must have led to the main bedroom. Two other doors in the corridor, near the end, must’ve been for the bathroom and the spare bedroom.

I didn’t really focus on that, aside from the usual childish curiosity, as my attention was almost immediately snared by the two boys wrestling on the sofa. Genma, rolling his eyes so hard I’m sure that would do them damage, stepped forward and yanked the two apart, holding them aloft by their collars.

I took a moment to safely set dessert on the countertop, before stepping forwards to examine the two twelve-year-old boys still trying to fight despite their separation.

Oh, and they were shouting too. It wasn’t too clear but, judging by the playing cards scattered everywhere and the bright red backs of their hands, it looked to be over a particularly vicious game of snap. I bit my lip so I wouldn’t die of laughter.

“Oi, brats, I leave you alone for one minute and you almost break my couch.” I clapped my hand over my mouth – geez, Kiharu they’re fricking kids – “and I told you, if you break it, you pay for it,” he shook them a bit to illustrate his point and I was reminded so much of Yoshino I couldn’t hold it in anymore.

Both boys- yep, that was definitely Izumo and Kotetsu- snapped their heads round to look at me.
And then immediately went bright steaming red, eyes popped wide.

Okay, weird.

But it was so adorable anyway I couldn’t help beaming at them, delighted.

Kotetsu started wiggling, “G-G-Genma! Let us down!” he growled, face still beet-red and eyes glancing furiously between Izumo and I. The quieter boy gulped audibly before smiling sweetly and I winked at him in response.

I wanted them now- Forget Genma, I’d be their Mother!

Genma looked heavily amused at this point, even as I bowed and introduced myself; “Hi, I’m Kiharu Dazai!” The assassin dropped the boys, who both just about managed to get their feet under them in time to save the remains of their dignity. As one they rushed forward, Kotetsu almost bounding up to me as he said, at the same time as his best friend,

“-Izumo Kamizuki-“

“-Kotetsu Hagane-“

“And I’m Genma now come on, I’m hungry, brats.”

Both boys immediately sent devil glares at their new guardian but I was definitely in the mood for food. Reaching forwards and grabbing their hands in mine, I pulled them behind me as I raced back into the kitchenette. I’d not even noticed, too distracted before by the brawl, the wok full of Katsu curry steaming on the hob. Dropping the boy's unresponsive hands, I flew to my seat.

Out of all the countless things Dad and I had in common, our love for Katsu burned brightly. I, of course, considered my own devotion twice his as I’d adored it in my previous life just as much. So there.

Genma snorted at something behind me but he was a weird guy so I ignored it in favour of watching him serve up the ambrosia* with a side of rice and green beans. Slowly the boys took their places across from me (I don’t know why they were so slow and what was with that redness still?). When we’d all been served, we raised our chopsticks in union.

“Itadakimasu!”

The first bite was glorious and I’m fairly sure my eye-smile was glowing (I’d been practising and it felt super weird) I was so happy. For some reason, Izumo choked and Kotetsu had to pat him on the back a few times. I sent them both a weird look – how could you choke on this glory?- before turning adoring eyes on Genma. Each word rang with sincerity and my expression burned with the strength of my emotion-

“I love you, Nee-chan.”

Now all three of them were choking. I take it all back, they're all dorks.

Once the guys had all gotten their breath back, I was regaled with stories of the academy (the boys were due to graduate in March). At one point, I forced myself to ask if they were living with Genma now, knowing there was no way I could have known without doing this. Still, I felt like an asshole, even if they took it well and I’d not exactly directly asked how Kyuubi had orphaned them. The fandom never knew why though…
“It’s Okay, Kiharu-chan,” Izumo smiled gently as picked up his rice bowl. “My Obaa-san isn’t around anymore so it was just Kotetsu and me.” He glanced at his friend, both sad, and I didn’t fail to notice how he hadn’t mentioned what had happened to the Haganes. We were all thoughtful and, up to now, I’d managed to avoid thinking about …everything… all evening. I thought the boys were probably the same.

“Yeah and then they literally ran into me, “ Genma interrupted, voice slightly louder as if to diffuse the solemn atmosphere that had started to settle. “And then the next thing I know, there’s two more mouths to feed and my place is a tip.” He finished with a groan but the fond tilt of his lips ruined the effect.

It did the trick though as the boys scowled at him.

“We’re not hobo’s, ya know!” Kotetsu rolled his eyes.

I giggled again and leaned forward conspiratorially. My smile may have been a tad evil.

“You know, Genma rudely almost knocked me down the first time we met!” The boys looked surprised and then incensed on my behalf whilst Genma looked a trifle betrayed at my little twist to the tale. “And then he tried to make it all my fault!”

“Liar,” the man in question drawled, even as he gathered up the plates and dumped them in the sink. Grabbing four smaller plates from the cupboard and four forks, he moved my dessert over to the table. Adequately distracted, the boys leaned closer. “What’s this?” Izumo asked, surprised. In response, I smiled and told him I’d made us all dessert, to which the boys looked delighted.

Bottomless pits, I swear. And that was coming from me.

When Genma gestured to me to do the honours, I felt a bit ridiculous but took off the cover anyway. The boys, even Genma, leaned in curiously. “What is it, Kiharu-chan? It smells-“ Kotetsu breathed in deeply “-Reaaallly good!” smiling proudly, glad they seemed a bit impressed, I started cutting up slices. “It’s called Yondaime’s Sun Tart.” And I laughed a little at the surprise on their faces.

“That’s how I met Genma again- Minato-sama always craved it in the office, so Genma kept sending me messages to deliver them to the Hokage Tower!” I laughed at the sheer ridiculousness of the story, appreciating Genma's throaty chuckle as he joined in. If he was laughing at me or the funny expressions on the boy’s red (again??) faces, I couldn’t tell, but I revelled in the rare sound nonetheless.

“Cooool~” they spoke in tandem and I grinned in thanks, feeling my age (7) now more than ever.

Thankfully, after all the hype, they both seemed to genuinely enjoy it. They’d wolfed down two large slithers each before groaning in defeat. I knew what they meant, I could only just get halfway on my seconds and Minato had eaten a whole one unphased!

Genma had sat back, slowly nursing his own slice with a slightly forlorn expression. He looked much more mature than his 19 years. It was strange to think I was, memory-wise, older than him. This body, this brain, had all the developments of a seven-year-old and so, even if my memories were of a girl technically 27 (combined), I was for all intents and purposes a kid. I had all these 'years' stuffed in my head but I didn't actually feel them, I didn't feel old. I was a kid. Just with the personality and the memories of someone older. I was glad- there was no way I was ever gonna date Genma and if I had maintained my 'age', going for anyone my actual age would've felt like pedophilia. Or, at the very least, like being a cougar. Yuck.
But anyway, I left the senbon-wielder be for now, as his thoughts didn’t seem at risk of nose-diving anytime soon. Thoughtfulness did not equal depression.

But it was getting pretty dark out and I really didn’t want to worry my dad. He was still far, far too skittish. It was understandable but I was quite concerned about how his protective behaviour was going to evolve when I got older. I’d need my freedom and independence, after all.

By the time I’d extracted myself from the boys (the trio of them whom, I was fairly sure, were going to end up labelled ‘My Boys’), I’d promised to come round on Saturday about four times before Izumo and Kotetsu were satisfied. They were still acting a bit weird when Kotetsu blushed scarlet when I’d hugged him and Izumo looked a bit faint.

Honestly, I was like they’d never met a civilian girl before. I wasn’t that different from academy girls, right?

On the other hand, I’d never seen Genma laugh so much. Even if it was at the weirdest time and when nothing funny had even been said. Nevermind, the boys seemed to make him happier and that was what mattered.

Dad was, of course, waiting for me around the corner.

That man, I swear…

He’d held my hand tightly in his as we walked back home. When he’d casually (meaning, so obviously it hurt that he was a shinobi and yet so transparent) started quizzing me about the two boys I’d been hugging, I zoned him out with ease. He was being weird too. The streets were pretty empty and it was dark by now so I was glad I’d not have to walk by myself. I thought about how, for the first time since that night, I’d been able to think of other things. To laugh and smile without feeling crushed with guilt.

It had been…nice.

……………………………

Three days later, the mass memorial for all who had died, shinobi, civilian and child, was held.

The Sandaime gave a speech, genuine and solemn and final, and then offerings were given and at one point I had started crying. Dad was the strong one between us and Hitoshi had bowed his head but, if Panthers could cry, I think he would have been. Yuri-oba-san from the dress shop had caught my eye and smiled sadly at me even as I tried not to look at Natsuko-oba, who was being half carried by Inokumo-Oji. I was glad, on some level, that they seemed to have come together again. Mostly I feared that things between us would never be the same again. Not that it ever really could have been, without Noko.

We’d stayed there for a long time, even as the ceremony finished and people started leaving. I exchanged tiny waves with Izumo, Kotetsu and Hana. Tsume had nodded and Genma had caught my eye for a long moment at one point.

Eventually, though, it was just the three of us once more. Dad was silent, fingers brushing the cool stone of the memorial that had been completed just in time. Hitoshi said nothing (He’d barely spoken the past few weeks but I knew he was undoubtedly remembering the passing of his own kind), only leaning his huge head against my side.

When we left, hours later, I felt like dad had finally started to heal. Not a lot, it would take years for this loss to scar but…I thought, maybe…his heart bled just a little less.
*-food of the gods.

Chapter End Notes

A/N- not much to say about the chapter except it sucks when you get caught in your own web of feels...but I just wanted to thank everyone who's kudos/bookmarked and/or commented on this fic so far, I really appreciate all your encouragement and I'm so happy you're enjoying reading this just as much as I am writing this. To those who've left comments, I love you all! Some of you made me laugh so much and I'm just super grateful you took the time to tell me how you felt xxx

P.S- 'dyingUta' you can probs find a recipe online for them if you type in 'natas'. In the fic, I call them 'egg custards' sometimes, but they're actually what I mean :)

And for the questions you guys have asked about the plot, well, .....you'll have to wait and see!
Proving...(like dough, I guess)

Chapter Summary

Somethings need time to settle. A bit of downtime, if you will.
...Think how crap cinnamon rolls would be if they didn't have time to rise! (flat and disappointing)

(So, I guess I just needed time to...prove?)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Winter came, cold and white, to Hi no Kuni.

I’d always been a bit surprised that such a warm climate could turn so bitterly cold. For the majority of the year, Konoha reminded me strongly of the southern coasts of Europe, Sorrento, and Cannes. But then, come late November, the weather would suddenly turn and winter would be a spectacle of crystal white snow and pearl white skies.

I thought the anime had just been being aesthetic. But apparently not quite.

Shinobi were baffling though, with their stubborn open-toed shoes.

I stared at the pale toes peeping out of the regulation sandals on the ninja in front of me before glancing down at my own feet, encased in fur-lined knee-high leather boots. And I was wearing two pairs of socks. And yet, I was still freezing my arse off.

It was probably some chakra thingy, I reasoned to myself. Didn’t make me any less miserable though; if I was suffering, then so should they be!

The supermarket, despite the foot of snow on the ground, was rammed and I must’ve looked ridiculous, with my toy cart piled with Kg bags of flour and dozens of eggs. It was really hard to maneuverer as well and I got glared at loads by grumpy grown-ups when I accidentally turned too fast or lost a little bit of steering control.

“You’re going to be labeled public enemy number one by the time you get to the counter,” Hitoshi drawled, ever helpful. The presence of the big fuck-off carnivore was probably the main reason I hadn’t been scolded yet, so I bit back my scathing retort and focused instead on making the corner – without hitting the display. Again. Hitoshi wasn’t even really allowed in here, animals and food and all that but well...why don’t you try and tell the arrogant feline where he could and couldn’t go due to sanitation issues?

Panthers were really fast hunters, after all. And the shopkeeper looked like he knew when to cut his losses.

Smart man.
The food would cost a small fortune but I was determined to make a couple of ‘new’ things over the next week. I needed to keep myself sharp.

It had nothing whatsoever to do with this being the first time I’d ever been home alone. Or that this was Dad’s first external mission in years since I was around 5. He’d been called in as the tracker for a mission (obviously, I didn’t know anymore) as, even though dogs were the more traditional animal for such duties, cats were nothing to turn your nose up at either.

Cats just wouldn’t listen, though.

Hitoshi was due to join him in a day or two and then Inoichi-Oji would bring me over to stay at the Compound for the rest of the time.

Sora-oba had looked pretty eager to see me ‘at work’ and I smiled to myself, glad she had started to perk up a bit more recently. I had seen Natsuko-oba briefly at the start of the month but she had managed to smile at me and actually look me in the face. It was such a little thing and yet my heart swelled with hope for the future.

Today, however, was the 24th. And I was feeling sentimental.

When we finally got out of the shops (after holding everyone up with my huge amount and creating an awkwardly long line), we dragged the shopping back home.

Well, I smugly noted and Hitoshi yowled unhappily, Hitoshi dragged it home. The trolley had been difficult to move on the polished floors of the supermarket; outside in the deep snow? I barely got it out of the way of the door!

Thinking quickly, I had undone the belt (thankfully just an accessory) from around my waist and slung it over my guardian’s front. He had glared but was loyal enough to indulge me.

Something he surely regretted when I fastened and knotted it multiple times around the front axil of the cart.

“And what,” he growled, pride undoubtedly stinging at being lassoed like a mule, “do you think I am? A delivery service?”

“Nope!” I quipped, unphased, as I added to his burden by climbing onto his back; he was a ninja, though, so this shouldn’t bother him. “You look like a cat who wouldn’t dare leave your charge struggling in the cold. Why, I’d probably get pneumonia before I got home!” Emerald eyes had narrowed at me, a dark rumble reverberating in his huge chest.

I didn’t fail to notice that he’d not replied.

By the time we got back, Hitoshi looked willing to leave early for the mission, seven-year-old mistress or not. The indulgent smiles of the adults who’d chuckled at a young girl atop of sleigh-pulling panther had probably not helped.

As thanks, I heaved a large elk steak from the cold-room (not the fridge, the joints needed to feed a panther wouldn’t even have fit) onto a metal tray and left it for him in front of the newly lit fire. It wasn’t often that he was allowed to eat inside (big cats, in particular, were messy eaters) but in winter an exception was made. He settled down with it and proceeded to ignore my existence like the mopey old man he was.

I had things to do anyway.
Now, because it was just me, I had settled for a good duck breast but I was hungry so planned to sauté it instead of putting it in the oven. A few carrots, thin little baby ones which only needed a quick scrub in the sink, were boiled/steamed with a few heads of cabbage and then tossed in butter. The parsnips saw the same fate except, instead of butter, a light drizzle of honey was added before I set them in the oven.

Running over to the bread bin, I found a stale loaf end that I’d saved. I blended it quickly with a fistful of ground pork and dumped in some herbs. The oregano, dried, exploded a little bit but I didn’t particularly care. I liked strong seasoning anyway. I roughly chopped a white onion (really, roughly was the only way I could chop; I was much more of a baker than a chef) before mixing everything together in my hands, squeezing it into a rough ball before pressing it into a small loaf tin. Rinsing my sticky fingers in the sink, I popped the tin onto the top shelf of the oven where it would hopefully cook quicker.

A glance through the doorway showed Hitoshi paying me no mind, licking his joint with long pink strokes.

It was quite cute, honestly.

Waiting until everything was well underway, I gently lowered the duck into a lightly sizzling pan. I’d not really liked duck in my past life but this body had the taste for it (the duck pancakes here were really good) and turkey was a bit trickier to come by.

I added a knob of butter before shaking in the same herbs I’d used for the stuffing- harmonizing flavours, or whatever Gordon Ramsey would say. (Although, he would have sworn every other word, of course.)

Adding a drop of stock (left over from a few nights ago) so the meat wouldn’t burn, stick to the pan or dry out, I put on a lid for a few minutes whilst I checked the stuff in the oven and set myself a place at the table. I hadn’t put on the main lights, only the ones over the oven and countertops. In the low, yellow light, I could easily see out into the snow-covered garden. Everything outside had been painted in a soft flush of blues and purples, the daylight having faded. The snow fairly glowed.

Checking to make sure nothing was burning, I ran upstairs to pull on a pair of woolly red socks.

Pausing in front of mum’s wardrobe, still filled with her clothes, I took a fortifying breath. The doors didn’t even creak and her scent lingered over everything.

I remembered helping her dress in the mornings, pulling out fancy kimonos even as she’d laugh and tell me we were just staying home for the day. I’d laughed too and tell her that was all the more reason to, as no one would know. In the end, we’d both spent the day dressed like imperial princesses (or as close as one could get with limited materials). I brushed away the few tears that had stained my face, relieved that dad wasn’t home. It almost felt like one of those moments when it had just been me and mum and I could almost feel her beside me. My searching hands finally found what I’d come looking for; a lumpy emerald green sweater my Kaa-san had stolen from dad, even before I was born.

I pulled it over my head, luxuriating in the honey-and-jasmine- scent of my mother, rolling the sleeves up three times so my hands were free. The hem fell to my knees and it was the closest both of my parents could be with me right now.

If I closed my eyes, I could almost feel her arms wrapping around me. The longing grew to an ache in my stomach but the warmth in my chest had me smiling faintly.
As silly as I looked, I was feeling quietly festive.

Hitoshi gave me a long look as I walked back past him but he was a cat of few words and knew when to leave me alone. He turned back to his meat.

The duck needed turning but looked beautifully brown on the one side. The veggies were almost done, even if the parsnips had started to char a little around the edges. The stuffing could do with a few more minutes so I closed the door. I made myself a milky coffee (like a latte but with the milk heated in the microwave) to go with my dinner. Unconventional, I know, but there wasn’t any English breakfast tea to be found to remind me of before. This was a suitable alternative.

When everything was done and I’d spooned out a trifle too much, I sat down at the table by myself. The food was good, if a bit dry without the invention of gravy granules here, but I stuffed myself anyway. It was hot and stodgy, sitting heavy in my stomach in a way that Japanese food didn’t.

Strange as it may sound, it felt like a tiny little celebration. Even if it was a party of one.

“and don’t forget to actually wash, Hitoshi. With water. I don’t care what you say, your tongue doesn’t count as ‘bath time’.”

Inoichi-oji was an elite ninja and kept his poker face up there with the politicians and statues alike. The heavy exhale through his nose was the only sign given that he wanted to die with laughter just as much as I.

Well, I couldn’t let Hitoshi leave without firmly embarrassing him, now could I?

When the cat tolerantly allowed me to hug him tightly once more, smoothing down the hair around his eyes (even though I was still growing, he was still a bit taller than me), I knew he didn’t really mind. He’d miss me too.

A minute later and he was gone in a puff of smoke which drifted off like mist in the white landscape. “Well, Kiharu-chan, do you have everything?” Inoichi-Oji smiled and gestured to my bag he’d slung over his shoulder. “Almost; there’s just my groceries and supplies.” I jerked my thumb at the line of bags gathered behind me.

Oh, to be young and merciless.

It was…weird.

Being in the compound without Noko. Knowing that she wasn’t going to skip around the corner, arms filled with flowers (depending on the season) and already chattering away before she’d even gotten into hearing distance.

Sora-oba had settled me into one of the guest rooms and I was grateful I wasn’t where Noko used to stay when her parents were away or she was put down for a nap. I wasn’t scared to go in but the thought of staying there felt almost…sacredious. It had just been a room and it hadn’t even really been Inoko’s but, I had memories in there. I just…didn’t think I was ready for that, just yet.

But the house was quiet (Sora-oba had taken advantage of Ino’s current nap and had settled down for a bit as well) but mercifully peaceful.
The cold out meant I wasn’t inclined to go outside and I didn’t want to cook in someone else’s kitchen.

Days like this, in my previous life, usually signified a movie day. Or, at least, a good book and some music.

I didn’t really have any of those things.

I couldn’t watch a film for obvious reasons. There weren’t any TV’s here, as I had known them. Movie theatres existed but the films were one, not ones I recognized and two, in the village center.

I had a pretty good memory but that was mostly donated to my previous life, recipes and the Narutoverse information I had religiously recited in my head until the plotline was all but seared into my skull (that stuff I couldn’t afford to lose). I didn’t have the time, patience or memory to try to rewrite my favourite novels. Although, if I ever wanted to dabble in authordom, I could probably scramble together something to give Jiraiya a run for his money. Simply because of the amount of… certain… fanfics I’d read.

Cough.

Whipping out a sheet of paper and scrounging for a pencil, I started translating some of my favourite songs.

They were mainly Disney (less use of terminology that either wouldn’t translate or cause confusion and also because they had been stuck in my head from early childhood) but I ended up having to rework some lines due to grammar so that they’d still fit with the tune.

It was annoying and long, especially because I hated Japanese above most things.

By the time I had ‘A Whole New World’ and ‘Colour’s of the Wind’ hammered out, I could hear both Ino and Sora waking up. The mess I’d made of my workstation looked like I’d written them from scratch, which was a useful fix, I supposed grumpily.

I’d never been a great singer. In either life.

The first time around, I’d always sounded vaguely nasally, even though I could hit the notes and carry a solid tune. A speech impediment when I was younger and just my voice, in general, meant that I’d always sounded a bit like I had a cold. In this life, my voice was high and therefore, when I sang, a bit reedy. I could only hope this would improve when I matured. Also, in this world, ‘good singers’ were technically proficient. I was used to singing soulfully, like Tori Kelly or Jennifer Hudson (in style, obviously, not talent). I wasn’t sure how popular that would be considering no one here sang that way.

Now, this isn’t the part where I go out into the street, like in some Musical, and sing a glorious solo which no one would even blink twice at except to join in. I wasn’t going to be singing anytime soon but…it was nice to hum a little tune again, mumbling under my breath as I hopped down the stairs.

“Ne, Sora-oba? That’s the salt…”

I wasn’t sure why my auntie-in-all-but-blood had insisted on making something ‘new’ but she wasn’t the best baker, that I could say with certainty. Which was weird as, if nothing else, Sora was a graceful and accomplished woman in everything she did. And I’d had countless dinners at her table so I was righteously confused as to why she was acting so scatter-brained?
And that was coming from an almost eight-year-old. Yikes.

I plucked up the courage to ask, as nicely as possible. Of course, not only was Sora a ninja but also a woman; She saw straight through me, like a single pane window. Thankfully, she took it all in good humour, batting playfully at my high ponytail with a roll of her eyes.

“I could only cook enough to get by on missions when I was younger. When your uncle and I were married, he was in much higher demand than I was because of the Ino-Shika-Cho formation. So, I was the one doing the cooking. Kaiya, Chouza’s wife, taught me how to prepare actual meals…not just skin a rabbit for the spit.”

I tilted my head, “Is she a kunoichi, too?”

Sora-oba paused in measuring out the sugar (correct this time, thankfully) before shooting me a knowing smile. “Not at all. She’s a civilian just like you. She’s the force behind the Akimichi restaurants, actually. She and Chouza’s cousin Soushi bought a place back when they were 19. That’s actually how she and Chouza met, you know.”

I grinned, pleased at the apparent strength of character of a woman the fandom had known so little about. All I vaguely remembered was that she fought barehanded against the invasion during the Fourth War. And had had violently orange eyeshadow (minus the sage mode). And I could definitely appreciate that level of kick-assery, especially in a civilian.

Moving over, I took the sugar from the scales, adding it to the saucepan of apples on the hob. Into a bowl, I poured the blended crumb-like mixture of sugar, flour, and butter alongside some cinnamon and a touch of ginger. For my aunt’s benefit, I actually used measuring spoons. Then, once the apple had cooked down enough to form a nice thick jam (without becoming a sauce or losing sharpness), I poured it into the oven dish before evenly coating the top in the ‘crumble’.

“There!” I finished with a flourish before grinning up at my aunt’s interested expression. “Put it in the oven for about half an hour and you’ve got an easy dessert. What I like to call ‘Apple Crumble’.”

“What a clever name,” she teased me with a wink.

“Ino thinks it’s cute!” I claimed, whirling round to the resident baby (who was staring, mesmerized, at the rotating flower-mobile above her and paying the both of us exactly zero attention).

“Mnhmm,” my aunt agreed when a sweatdrop formed on my brow (I was really getting into those things).

“Inoookkii-chan,” I gave up, defeated. “Shika would’ve helped me.”

“Hardly…all that baby does is sleep- “

“Maa, maa, don’t be so jealous, oba-san! Just because Ino thinks screaming is the greatest joy in life“-

“-but even then, you can’t deny I’ve won this round, Nekki-chan.”

We both froze at the slip and I glanced away, suddenly shy.

“…I’m sorry, Kiharu-chan, I know that I-Inoko used to call- “

“It’s fine, Oba-san. I…would be honoured if we kept that alive, between the two of us.”
The gentle hug I was swept up into made me blush bright red.

“Just between us then, Nekki.” She pulled back, suddenly all business once more.

“Now, you’ve done something for me; we should do something for you...after the dishes.” We both surveyed the bombsite.

Thankfully, two pairs of hands really were better than one and the kitchen was shining and freshly mopped (from various spillages) just in time for the crumble to be taken out. We left it to cool so that we could reheat it later (somethings I always found tasted even better the second time around) and then, once Ino was fed and changed, we started to pile on the layers.

Ino was swathed in multiple blankets inside her bassinette (which had its strong hood pulled low) with an adorable hat and mitten combo on as well. I was wearing thick woolen tights beneath my grey winter trousers, tucked into my fur-lined boots. A long sapphire blue coat brightened the look whilst being snuggly warm and I had matching silver fur mittens and earmuffs. My Aunt was dressed similarly, except her top was a tunic that came down like a dress over her leggings and her cloak was a rather royal purple. Once Sora-oba had attached Ino’s bassinette to her pram, we set off out of the compound.

“Where are we going, Oba-san?” I wondered aloud as we moved towards the shopping district. Thankfully, whilst chilly, the snow was only a few centimeters thick. I had worried about Ino, being only 3 months, being out in the cold before my Aunt had pointed out the Fuinjutsu or ‘Sealing Barrier’ markings for warmth etched along the inside of the cradle. Apparently, minor ‘barriers’ such as these could be used to regulate temperature; Kushina had done these herself, according to Sora-oba, as a gift when she found out Sora was expecting. They used to be extremely popular in Uzushio before it fell, what with all those storms.

“Tch, ninja cheating,” I grumbled.

My aunt ignored me, merely gesturing for me to get the door of the shop so she could lift the pram over the ledge. A burst of hot air had my sighing in relief, the warmth making my numb nose tickle. As Sora-oba fuss ed around with Ino’s hood, I looked around the shop. It was a little boutique salon with pastel blue walls and gold embellishments. It was surprisingly high-scale and I’d never been in a place like it before.

“I need a haircut and thought it would be nice if we could get something done together, Nekki-chan.”

I’d never really cut my hair, kaa-san only trimming it when it started looking a bit straggly. I’d never been in a salon in this life.

“Hai!” I bounced, excited. I didn’t want a lot done, wanting to maintain my long hair. But this was sure to be fun anyway.

“Welcome,” came a smooth voice from behind me and I turned to see a gently smiling woman come around the corner. She had smooth black hair so dark it shone like spilled ink and her caramel eyes were expectant.

“How many I help you, this afternoon?” Sora-oba stepped forwards as the woman walked over to the receptionist’s desk. “I’d like two hair appointments, both wash, cuts, and finishes, please.” The woman nodded politely, making a note in her book before gesturing for us to hand her our coats and follow her. After storing our out-door things in the cloak-room, we were lead through to the salon floor. There were only two other customers; one young woman with her hair in curlers and another
lady, whose silver hair was being trimmed into a short bob.

Ino was asleep in her pram and I gently rocked her as oba-san went first. Her hair was massaged with a scented lavender soap before being towelled and combed out. I couldn’t believe how long it was when free from her usual bun, almost reaching her elbows. Sora sipped contentedly on some complimentary green tea, whilst her locks were slowly but surely shorted until they rested just below her shoulders. Her fringe was trimmed neatly before her hair was dried. The stylist was considerate enough to twist it into a new bun, this one a bit fancier than oba-san’s usual.

When we exchanged seats, it was my turn.

Accepting my own tea, the woman gently guided my head back to rest against the rim of the bowl. Warm water soaked my hair and then gentle hands were sweeping at my temples. Against my will, my eyes fluttered shut and I reflexively started to quietly purr. The hands jerked in surprise before both the woman, Misaki-san, and my aunt giggled quietly. I would have been embarrassed if I had been any less blissed out. Rubbing rose shampoo into my scalp had me drifting again. No one had done this to me in a long time.

A soft giggle and a shake on my arm had me rousing, disorientated, from my impromptu nap. Blushing pink, I stuttered out an apology but the woman just brushed it off.

“It’s fine, Kiharu-chan. And you looked so cute! But, maybe you’d prefer to be awake during the actual cutting, ne?”

(It wasn’t until my aunt printed a copy for my dad and pinned her own to the fridge, that I realised she’d taken a photo -using a special jutsu for crime scenes- to capture my sleeping face, smushed cutely against the sink and surrounded by pink bubbles.)

Nodding quickly, I sat up straight and blinked hard, trying to banish the lingering sleepiness.

It took almost half an hour but, by the end, my hair was resting at my waist with two layers at the very front. The first was half-way down my biceps, the second at my jaw, framing my face. My hair, thick and with a barely-there wave, was a blanket of dark chocolate down my back and I met Misaki-san’s eyes in the mirror, grinning happily.

“Arigato, Misaki-san,” I bounded to my feet and sketching a quick bow in gratitude, hair swishing around me. My aunt smiled tolerantly as she got to her feet, Ino now huddled in the crook of her neck. Passing me my ‘imouto’, she moved back to the main room with Misaki to pay. Ino gurgled up at me, pudgy fingers brushing my cheeks and grasping my new bangs as I slowly followed. Not being able to resist, I kissed her forehead soundly, making a loud “mwah!” which had Ino giggling happily before she leaned forward to gum on my chin. Ooh, lovely. I really wanted someone to cannibalise my face.

A quite coo, had my eyes snapping up to meet black.

The woman before me was dressed in simple but rich clothes, her onyx hair and eyes marking her as an Uchiha. The baby, wrapped like a burrito in a white blanket, rested in the crook of her arm (pram next to ours in the corner) as her other hand was firmly clasped by the small boy beside her. The faintest smile warmed her face.

I blinked once, twice, as Ino happily mouthed my chin like a puppy.

Uchiha Mikoto.
Which meant that...the burrito was Sasuke and the kid...Itachi.

His lashes were already prettier than mine. Hot damn, that was unfair.

Sora-oba bustled back to me and, relieving me of Ino (I fished a tissue out to subtly wipe off the slobber), handed me my things. Itachi eyed me curiously the entire time and I had to remind myself that he was Hana’s age, a gaki, and not a Nuke-nin.

I still didn’t feel comfortable under his solemn gaze.

“Uchiha-sama,” my Aunt nodded as we bustled past the small family out the door.

Mikoto smiled again, a little bit more obvious. “Yamanaka-sama.” And then we were gone. Phew.

Ino was awake for the walk home but mercifully happy, even when we made a pit-stop for milk.

At dinner that night, Inoichi looked surprised at our new looks, making Sora-oba exchange winks with me. I giggled at the subtly satisfied look on her face.

Inoichi wasn’t the only one allowed to have pretty hair, you know.

Chapter End Notes

A/N- The past few days, it wasn't just Kiharu who needed 'proving' time. I know I usually update like every 15-or-so hrs because I'm super invested but I had a shit two days which reflected in this chapter. Ergo, Kiharu had a nice time chilling with both the family and on her lonesome. This chapter isn't really contributing a lot to the main plotline but I think it's really important for Kiharu's character and getting you guys attached that we don't skip too much of her healing. It would be a horrible way to treat an OC to just skip to the 'canon-relevant' 'interesting parts'. And it's more...realistic?...this way. I also love Sora-Kiharu bonding as it's super important for Kiharu to have that maternal bond, despite everything, and integrate her into the Yamanaka family. Also, she'll be even closer to Ino-chibi this way~
P.S- Noko. I'm not gonna say anything because why would I even want to end your suffering? (-:0 If you're a cynical doubter, be prepared for the long haul hehe. Also, can't believe it looks like I was the only one dying over Izumo/Kotetsu's crushes?????? When she hits puberty, ya'll better be more invested in the pairing poll I'll be setting up...
Anyway, enjoy! x
Some opposites were amazing together, like salted caramel or beetroot chocolate cake.

...Unfortunately, sometimes I’m reminded that civilian/shinobi relationships can be on the other side of the coin.

I was running.

(And it wasn’t recreationally.)

Now, I wasn’t training and there wasn’t a wild pack of dogs on my heels except, well...there kinda was.

And this was all because I was still an unmoving advocate of the society of ‘Being-A-Ninja-Is-A-Terrible-Lifestyle-But-I-Can’t-Change-That-So-I’m-Going-To-Try-Boycotting-The-System-Without-Insulting-My-Loved-Ones-Or-Being-Accused-Of-Treason’. Not the catchiest of titles but, seeing as it only existed in my mind, I didn’t really give a shit.

Because the boys weren’t convinced.

“How?” Kotetsu cried, sounding for all the world as if I had just told him that I’d booked him in for a castration. Izumo was a lot quieter but equally as disbelieving. “Who wouldn’t want to be an awesome ninja?!?” The plaster-wearing boy asked the sky in disbelief.

“Oh, me?” I’d responded, pointing at myself with my patented ‘are you stupid’ expression plastered on my face. They’d known I was a civilian for months but, when I told them I was turning eight soon, they’d realised I’d still yet to join the academy.

And they were super confused.

It had almost been cute for all of 6 seconds. They were only 12, and boys at that, so didn’t understand how I didn’t want the same things they did- the world didn’t make sense the way they thought I saw it.

Apparently, my reply had sounded uncertain and my expression confused. And then they’d had the bright idea that they’d just have to convince me. Without asking. In the middle of the marketplace.

So, that’s why I was currently fleeing like a bat out of hell.

Ducking under a man’s arm, I shot off down the street, dodging civilians and stalls alike. I’d played tag with Hana and the Triplets more times than I could count but that had been just a game, confined to Inuzuka land and filled with laughter.

This was considerably much more frightening.
Now, I knew the boys would never hurt me; we’d become close friends (although the boys were closest, like brothers at this point, but I wasn’t jealous) over the past months but the boys were due to graduate as genin in a fortnight and had been going a little…crazy…recently, at the realisation that soon they would be actual genin. Knowing them, this would only end when we took it a step too far.

Hopefully that ‘step’ wouldn’t be a particularly painful one.

And, in all honesty, the adrenaline was getting to me.

I was well aware of my own helplessness. Being able to stomp a man’s groin and get a drunk to let go were very different things than going up against two boys with taijutsu (and various other) ninja training. So, right now? I felt like a palpitating rabbit on the run from two very mischievous, and hungry, fox kits.

Bakas. I was going to groin-stomp them when this was all over.

“Ha!” A dark shape leapt over my head and I reflexively lunged back, foot slipping only to skid on one thigh. The skin smarted (I had been caught unawares and so was only wearing a lavender qipao dress) with what I was sure would be a nasty graze.

Hissing through my teeth, I jerked away from Izumo as he came at me running, grinning like the oblivious maniac he was, and ducked down a side street. When a hand caught my arm, I automatically twisted my elbow into the person’s gut, just as Tou-san had taught me all these years.

An “Oof!” was my reward and I scampered onwards, face growing sweaty and expression undoubtedly desperate. Served the idiot right for playing fucking ninja tag with a civilian.

This game wasn’t fun anymore if it even had been, to begin with.

I came out near the training grounds and knew I was in trouble; in the streets, there were distractions and nooks n’ crannies to hide in. Out here? This was ninja territory. I only knew this place by sight—from passing by, bringing dad the occasional lunch and from the anime.

I had nowhere to hide.

Ducking across the grass, I made for the trees. I felt like a particularly delectable and fluffy bunny in the open range of a hawk. I’d just made it into the foliage when a heavy weight landed on my back and I went down on my front with a shriek.

My nose smacked hard into the packed earth and my head rang for a moment. Distantly, I could hear the boys cheering at their success and absently noted that they must have tackled me together. But, when the weight left my back, I was suddenly aware of how much pain my nose was in.

The boys leaned down to pull me up so I was sitting, still grinning brilliantly. And I promptly burst into tears.

I know, I know, crybaby moment. But honestly? That fricking hurt like a bitch. Taking two older boys to the spine wasn’t funny!

I’d never really been hurt before, childish scrapes cast aside like nothing to my adult mind. But, in both lives now, I’d never broken a bone or anything like it. Even my death didn’t really count because it had hurt so much, so quickly, my mind couldn’t even register it.

I’d never cried in front of the boys though, not since the funeral.
Their faces instantly transformed, horrified, as I wailed and blood flowed from my nostrils. I was still a kid, with a kid’s pain tolerance, and tears streamed down my cheeks.

“Oh shi-!” Izumo wrapped his arm around my shoulders, pulling me back to sit on my bum, even as Kotetsu scrambled for some bandages in his pocket.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay,” Izu-kun crooned, face panicked and sharing desperate glances with his best friend, “It’s not broken, Kiharu-chan, so don’t cry, ay.”

“I-I,” I stuttered out between slowly calming sobs. The tears still flowed but at least I could breathe a bit easier and my nose had now numbed, tingling pain stretching across my cheeks and under my eyes.

“I can’t believe you two did that.” The words were quiet, muttered, but the two boys stopped moving and heard me all the same. I was pissed now; I wasn’t made of tissue paper but I wasn’t a fighter either. Those two idiots had definitely forgotten that I wasn’t some kunoichi from their class. They’d done it before, asking me about a technique when doing their homework etc. and I’d have to remind them that I knew nothing. Even Inoko had done that sometimes.

It pissed me off. Just a lil’ bit.

“Kiharu-chan, it was just a tackle,” Izumo explained in a reasonable voice, concerned faced looking between myself and Tetsu-kun. “We didn’t think you would land like that. If hit from behind, you’re supposed to- “

“I didn’t know that, though, did I?!” I interrupted, the words angry and hurt.

I didn’t want to be a brat or to fight but…they, they just didn’t seem to understand what they’d done wrong! Like they forgot that I would never been fighter like them. I wasn’t weak, would never be weak, but…I’d never really activate my chakra system or learn how to handle weapons or fight in a certain style. I wasn’t like them but that was okay. It just…it hurt when they didn’t see that.

It was worse when they just…forgot.

“T’m a civilian, boys. I don’t know fighting or how to run properly or any of those things. You think that I want to be a ninja, even when I say I don’t and then you chase me through town, frightening me half to death before almost breaking my nose!”

At this point, Izumo had moved away to stand beside Kotetsu. Their faces were shocked, Izumo’s starting to move closer to dismayed and Kotetsu’s showing the first signs of anger.

I rocked onto my feet, bandages clutched to my nose (which was still steadily bleeding) and dress ruined.

“I’m a civilian and I will never be a ninja, okay? I’d die first!”

I repeated what my dad had said at my fourth birthday, all those years ago, watching the anger and hurt fill the boy’s expressions. Maybe it was melodramatic but I was sick and tired of feeling like I was letting people down by doing this.

Like I had disappointed them.

I couldn’t believe my two sweet boys had been so mean.

“Oh, yeah?” Kotetsu stepped forward angrily, fists clenched at his side. I could clearly see the hurt
and insult on his face and knew he was lashing out. That’s didn’t make it better though. “Well, then, go on! Run off home like the coward you are! Do nothing and stay a pathetic, whiny civilian!”

Izumo looked horrified at how things had gone and yet stayed silent, mouth pressed into a grim line. I didn’t even bother, knowing there was no way he’d move from Kotetsu’s side.

“Fine.” My voice was quiet but steely and I turned my back, extremely conscious of my hobbling leg, where my thigh had gone a bit numb from earlier.

It was humiliating walking back home. Kids and adults alike looked at me and assumed I was a shit kunoichi that had just had her ass handed to her.

Not some civilian girl who’d fought with her supposed friends.

There was no concern in their eyes, maybe some pity at such an obvious loser, and no one thought for a minute that I was just a child. The bandages in my hands certainly solidified the idea I was ninja. I quietly stewed in anger the entire time, pushing open and closing the gate behind me with deliberate serenity.

“Welcome home!” Dad called joyfully when I opened the door and I remembered now that I’d originally headed out for some milk and eggs. Well, never mind that anymore.

He was pulling the orange juice out of the fridge when he turned and saw my face, miserable and smudged with mud and blood, cheeks lined with tear tracks.

The carton hadn’t even hit the floor before dad was crouched in front of me, one large gentle hand moving the bandages so he could get a good look, even as his eyes scanned my form for other injuries.

“What happened, Ki-hime? Who hurt you.” The last wasn’t even a question. His deep timber voice was hard and his arms coiled protectively around me. I looked down, miserable, into his familiar brown eyes.

“I…got in a fight with Kotetsu and Izumo.” I mumbled. Dad frowned darkly, even as he gently turned my head from side to side, checking the bone wasn’t cracked.

“They hit you?” He was clearly disbelieving. He had to ask anyway.

I quickly shook my head; I was still angry at them, even as that emotion slowly transformed into hurt and guilt, but I didn’t want to get them in trouble.

Dad was silent as I quietly explained everything, sitting me down on the sofa and kneeling before me. He gently and diligently dabbed at my nose and face, cleaning and binding the large graze on my thigh and the minor ones on my palms. I’d not even really noticed them.

It was quiet for a while longer before he spoke and I was half afraid he would be furious at the boys. My dad may act silly but that was just his playful side. He could be truly frightening when provoked. Especially where I was concerned.

He shuffled in to sit beside me on the sofa, looping one arm over my shoulder and pulling me into his side as he let out a loud sigh.

“You know, the first time I met…your mother…she slapped me so hard my neck cricked.”

My eyes widened at the image and Tou-san smiled self-depreciatingly at my expression. “Ah, I’d
said something stupid- *Let the ninja take care of things, sweetheart* - and she…took offence, to say the least. There was a brawl in the bar she was waitressing in and she had been shepherding the men outside. She didn’t actually need the help but, well, I’d always been told that it was the ninja who fought. ‘Civies’ didn’t fight, couldn’t, but your kaa-san’s right hook told me otherwise.

“That’s one of the reasons I taught you self-defence, Ki-chan. Just because you aren’t a soldier, that you won’t make a career out of fighting, doesn’t mean you shouldn’t be able to. Everyone has something to fight for.

“…And those two boys, they-they were in the wrong, yes. Were they out of line? Definitely. Will I put the fear of the Dazai into them for hurting my little hime? You couldn’t stop me!”

“Dad!” I rolled my eyes and batted at his chest as he poked my cheek.

“But, Kiharu, they didn’t mean it. They need to learn, as most ninja *don’t*, that being a civilian isn’t a bad thing. Just like being a ninja isn’t always a…good…thing.” He shifted, uncomfortable, and I acknowledged that he’d perhaps brushed a bit too close to his private views. Secret opinions, unspoken ones, that meant treason if mentioned aloud. But I knew anyway.

“Civilians often view shinobi as a necessary evil, a dirty secret. Monsters as neighbours, who keep the peace but are also responsible for a lot of problems. Ninja often see civilians as cowards, those who wouldn’t dedicate their lives to the village. They don’t see that if everyone were shinobi, we’d be even worse than during the Warring States Periods. Who would farm and who would feed us? Who would build our homes and make our clothes? Everyone has a role to play and not everything is about fighting or being a ‘hero’.

“Namikazi-sama seemed to think your tarts were heroic enough, eh?”

Unwillingly, a small smile tugged at my lips in remembrance and I nodded shyly. At that moment, my dad seemed a bit like Minato had, like he could inspire confidence in the littlest thing because he honestly *believed*.

“Now, let’s get some ice on that nose. You’ll have some deep bruising for a while but nothing broken, thank Kami. Wait a few days before going to see those two, okay?”

With a nod, I threw my hands around dad’s waist when we both stood.

His hand rested on my head, a familiar and reassuring hot weight, and his chest smelled like cinnamon and ferns.

“Thanks, Neko-tou.”

His breathing stuttered slightly before he pressed me just a bit closer.

“Always, hime.”

The next morning, I was examining the tea selection when Mikoto stepped up beside me.

“Two medium bags of Darjeeling, please.” She ordered politely, Sasuke-chibi strapped to her back and peeping over her shoulder with dark eyes. If she caught me looking, she said nothing.

“Matcha green tea, please!” I pointed at the largest bag available and the Uchiha matriarch looked faintly surprised.
“That’s the biggest possible bag, gaki. Are you sure you want that much?” The shopkeeper, an old man with wispy white hair and closed crescent eyes, asked dubiously, gesturing at the 600g bag of powder. I’d bought tea from him loads of times, I was actually one of his ‘regulars’, but he was always shocked by the amount a small girl like me wanted.

“Yep, I need it for my desserts, again,” I reasoned easily, watching out of the corner of my eye as interest flickered in Mikoto’s eyes. “I’m making green tea mousse cake and will need quite a bit,”

“Excuse me,” Bingo. “but I couldn’t help but overhear…what do you mean by ‘mousse cake’?” She spoke gently with a surprisingly warm expression, obviously aware that she was interacting with a child, technically interrupting, and not wanting to spook me or seem rude.

“Oh, well,” I decided to play along, beaming up at her (the effect was spoiled by the developing bruises on my face) and ignoring the amusement that slipped past her mask. “It’s made with a cake base and a thick layer of chilled cream cheese and gelatine mousse. You can make it in loads of different flavours but matcha, especially with a gradient, is one of my favourites! It tastes so creamy and delicate…”

“Oh? Where have you had it? Is there a new bakery I’ve yet to hear of?” She looked intrigued and I wondered what would happen if I told her the truth. Ah well, I wasn’t going to give someone else the credit. Or praise.

“Nope! I made it myself! One day, you see, I’m going to open up a bakery and make desserts all day, every day.” Both Mikoto and the shopkeeper looked surprised for a moment before letting out a few quiet chuckles; they weren’t mean or disbelieving so I just waited until they were done.

“Well, gaki, when you do get that place,” The old man chuckled as he handed over my change and my bag. “we’ll have to make a deal; you certainly buy enough of my tea!”

On a whim I was definitely, 300%, going to regret, I turned back to Mikoto and blurted out, “If you want to try some, Uchiha-san, maybe I could bring you a slice, sometime…” I trailed off, abruptly realising that this was the Uchiha Clan Lady and she cut quite the political figure. Blush burning brightly and clashing horribly with my bruises, I floundered for something else to say. Mikoto spoke up before I could.

“That sound’s lovely, dear.” And my blush warmed further at the endearment. Even if she was probably just using it because she didn’t know my name. I’d never given Mikoto that much thought in the anime but something about her made me light up like a tomato. Maybe it was her eyes, they were super warm without her even having to move her face. Tyra Bank’s would’ve kudos-ed her smize.

“Kiharu!” I blurted, “Dazai Kiharu, please.” Her smile warmed her eyes again and I tried not to melt.

“Uchiha Mikoto. I’m delighted, Kiharu-chan. If you would like, you could come by the Compound around noon tomorrow? Would that give you plenty of time to complete your mystery dessert?” My eyes popped a bit at her light teasing before I remembered that this woman was once best friends with Kushina. There was undoubtedly some sass masterfully tucked away.

“Y-yes, that’s plenty of time, Uchiha-sama.” I smiled at her and received a gracious nod in return.

“Until tomorrow then, Kiharu-chan.”

Even sweeping away, down through the crowded market, she looked effortless.

And there was another can of worms so graciously opened for me by Fate.
What the frick-a-frack was a going to do about the Uchiha?

I wandered home, mind distracted and tea slung over my shoulder like one of the Seven Dwarves.

Itachi was only a kid right now; in relation to the Rookie 9, he was Hana’s age so I had under a
decade to get the Massacre and the uprising off the table.

This was different from the attack of Tobi and the Kyuubi. The situation with the Uchiha was one of
public unrest and general malcontent. That was something I had the chance of altering, unlike a
cinnamon-roll-turned-psycho releasing a Bijuu. But…I would have to be extremely careful not to
incite the interest and/or wrath of Danzo. Or Madara/Tobi.

I wouldn’t last anywhere near as long as Shisui. I mean, he was one of the few marked as “flee-on-
sight” in the Bingo Books. I was a troll but that hardly warranted a warning besides “don’t make her
embarrass you, it’ll smart.”

Anyway, there was absolutely no way I was letting Shisui and Itachi get shafted in that clusterfuck.
Itachi had always kind of pissed me off with his ‘master plan’ for Sasuke (that was just asking for
him to go off the rails!), even if I did like his character. And Shisui…

Shisui was an angel of happiness that these people did not deserve. I would frickin’ build that boy a
temple before I let him jump into the Naka.

On second thoughts, Shisui was just a little over a year older than me. And tomorrow, I’d be going
over to the Uchiha Compound for tea with the Clan’s Lady… Sadly, I doubted she’d suddenly want
to betroth me to the boy, even if she liked my cake.

Dad had border patrol today but Hitoshi was lounging on the front lawn, basking in the early March
sunlight. He looked asleep but when his tail flicked I knew he was just ignoring me in preference for
the sunlight.

He was a cat, no need to say anymore.

Dumping the tea on the sideboard and washing my hands, I immediately got cracking.

Hair pulled into a knot at the base of my skull (the two shortest lengths still out and framing my face),
I threw on my apron and gathered the ingredients. Firsts things first, I preheated the oven.

Now, I knew that this recipe was originally Japanese but, with mousse being a French creation, the
wonders of this cake had yet to be unleashed on these people. Well, wasn’t I just the public hero.

With two bowls laid out, I started separating the eggs. I always did it like Jamie Oliver, cracking the
egg into one hand before letting the white slip through my fingers. It was a bit grim when it started to
dry on your hands but I hated being unnecessarily fiddly. Jamie had always been gloriously slap-
dash in his methods and I’d completely rated that.

Once the three eggs were split, I added a small spoonful of the sugar to the buttercup-yellow yolks
before whisking. The oil was then added, poured with one hand whilst I kept stirring with the other.
In another bowl, I poured in some matcha and a drop of milk. Using a fork (I only had the one
whisk), I made a deep green paste, before slowly adding more milk until it was all incorporated. This
was then poured into the yolk mixture, with the floured gradually sieved on top in between stirs.

I hopped back down my stool (I hopefully wouldn’t need it much longer, already standing on the
first step instead of the second), I pulled out my trusty hand-held whisk. I was way too lazy to beat
egg whites by hand. Even dad complained when I’d asked him once.
Alternating between a low setting and a higher one, I beat the whites with some sugar until they formed a smooth cloud of meringue—it wasn’t as stable though, the peaks drooping but still there. Spooning a third of the whites into the matcha mousse, I used a spatula to slowly fold them together. The green was slightly paler but still awesome.

Once incorporated, I poured the green bowl into the white and gently folding everything together again. I then smoothed the mixture out into a paper-lined tray, a bit like a swiss roll (including the tapping of the tray to burst any air bubbles). The green looked amazing and I resisted the urge to plonk my face in it.

All in good time, Kiharu.

Whilst the cake was in the oven, I reluctantly cleaned up a bit before soaking some gelatine sheets in a bowl of water. You wouldn’t believe how annoying that stuff was to get hold of. I had no clue how to make it and got so frustrated that Sora-oba had to eventually speak to Kaiya-san to get hold of some for me. On the bright side, the woman now wanted to meet me…!

Once the gelatine had softened, I squeezed out the excess water with my fists (soooo satisfying) before dumping them in a bowl of microwaved milk. I saw no point to heat it on the hob, anyway.

Once mixed, when the gelatine had dissolved, I took a moment to remove the cake from the oven. Working quickly, I used the overhanging paper to lift the cake from the tin, onto the cooling rack and peeling it back from the sides. Hopefully it wouldn’t deform this way…

After mixing the milk/gelatine with the cream cheese (the closest I could, unfortunately, get to glorious mascarpone) to make a creamy liquid, I added the sugar and stirred until all the granules had dissolved. The last thing I wanted was grainy dessert, especially for Mikoto (EEK). Then, after rinsing the whisks, I whipped the double cream until it was textured (but still super soft) with the hand-held. Gradually, in stages, I folded in the gelatine/cream cheese mixture until they were completely combined.

Laying out five new bowls (I had to get creative, using some soup bowls because I honestly ran out), I spooned out increasing amounts of matcha into each one with a little water to get rid of bubbles. I then added equal amounts of mixture to each, so that each bowl turned a darker green than the previous as the amount of matcha increased.

Aw, this was going to be so cool!

Pressing the tin into the now-cool sheet cake (the rest of which I started to snack on), I poured in the palest mixture, which was crème with no matcha colouring it. One by one, I slowly poured the increasingly darker mixtures into the centres of the previous. The tin (already resting on a tray) was then placed into the fridge and I was glad that it was still early; it would need as long as possible in there to be ready for Mikoto tomorrow.

Finally, after blitzing the washing up, I grabbed the rest of the cake and went to flop on the Panther outside.

Chapter End Notes
A/N- I'm gonna consider this a double update! Anyway, I don't really have anything to add except somehow this included a legit 800-word matcha cake recipe. There's a version on YouTube I always use and it's the bomb. Hopefully, you'll like it!(the chapter, I don't mean the recipe)
Thanks again for reading x
Chapter Summary

No matter how much you insist that tea or coffee tastes better black...there will always be someone who adds two spoons of sugar and a fuck tonne of cream just to spite you.

And smile at you as they do it.

(Hehe, that would probably be me)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Just after eleven the next day, I left the house.

I had carefully dressed in a sapphire-blue yukata with embroidered swallows dancing along the hems, with my hair brushed with a drop of rose oil so it shone like tempered chocolate. I was also holding my best cake tin in my sweaty hands. Icky, I know but…

I was fricking terrified.

This wasn’t a ‘I’ve-Just-Died-And-I-Think-I’m-A-Foetus’ or even ‘That’s-A-Bijuu-Look-Kids’ kind of fear. It was more the ShitShitShit-What-If-I-Start-Coughing-Or-Trip-On-My-Face?-Maybe-I-Should-Call-In-Sick nerves, like going back to school. Urgh.

I’d woken up super early, Hitoshi curled up around me like my own personal, living and breathing blanket. The sky had still been dark but my head was filled with images of the Massacre, ‘Madar’ and Danzo. It took a long while for the adrenaline to eventually diffuse and, by then, the birds had started chirping. I had still worried that I wouldn’t be able to change anything this time. The Uchiha Massacre had changed everything but, if I succeeded, what if that made Konoha even more dangerous? All those angry warriors still alive? But I couldn’t let the innocent children or clan members be killed simply for their blood. But I also couldn’t let the same happen to the village.

And this was why I didn’t want to try and be a hero.

I had no illusions as to my capabilities. I couldn’t do a whole lot but I’d do what I could without getting in too deep. That would only get me killed and then what? I’d have accomplished nothing.

Maybe if I tried to draw the compound out of its isolation, some of the unease would dissipate.

Surely a no-name civilian girl, who had a bit of a rep for baking, could give the clan some good publicity. Even if it was just to make them look more approachable.

Hitoshi, who cut a striking figure with beautifully cleaned and brushed fur (that had taken most of the morning; he was sooooo fastidious for a creature who licked himself), waltzed along a step behind me. I was still tall for my age, 4ft9 already, but Hitoshi was massive enough that he could rest his chin on my head, if he so wished. But, then again, He’d grown alongside me as I aged, having only
being a teenager when I was born (summons had the same lifespan of their human counterparts).

Dressed/groomed to perfection, the pair of us gathered some looks as I marched purposefully towards the Uchiha Compound.

The guards gave me an uninterested once-over before disregarding me. Well, that wouldn’t do.

“Excuse me, Uchiha-san, Mikoto-hime is expecting me for tea.” I blinked as cutely as a child with two black eyes could and, as if to accentuate my point, extended the cake tin towards him slightly. Using ‘hime’ for Mikoto should butter him up; the title was only really properly used in the Daimyo’s court or for Tsunade and Mito.

The guy didn’t even blink.

Well, never mind that then.

I sniffed a little, whipping out my best heartbroken expression and clasped the cake to my chest. “B-but, it’ll melt soon,” which was true “and then the matcha will run everywhere. Mikoto-hime heard that I make new desserts and asked me to bring her one to try…”

Tears, like drops of perfect crystal that clung to my dark lashes, shone like stars against the night-sky of my eyes.

The man visibly wilted. Ha, sucker.

He sighed quietly and before popping his head behind the gate.

“Shunshin, quit training for a moment. There’s a visitor here for Mikoto-sama. Take them up to the house.”

Shunshin? As in-

A boy with the most beautiful head of black curls stood in front of me, looking for all the world as if he had been there the entire time.

Shisui. AHHHHHHHHHHH-

“Hey. Would you please follow me?” he smiled slightly, tilted eyes slowly taking in Hitoshi, the tin and I. As most boys were, he was almost half-a-head shorter than me at this age, even if he had a year over me.

Pulling myself together, as if I didn’t just have a mental breakdown at the sight of the Most-Tragic-Suicide-Cinnamon Roll-Ever, a genuine smile flickered across my lips. “Sure thing, thank you.”

Hitoshi didn’t even deign to acknowledge anyone, not even with a blink. He looked, for lack of a better example, like a particularly massive housecat, meandering along in my wake.

The Compound was like a mini village- organised like a neighbourhood but with one or two shops open as well. They were obviously built into the converted front of people’s homes and I wondered if they only sold exclusively to the Uchiha.

I’d said before that animation didn’t do these people justice in real life and I’ll frickin’ say it again. Shisui had curls. Not choppy, messy spikes. Honest-to-Kami curls, like some black-haired cherub. With insane ninja skills…
Due to our height difference, I had the perfect view of his hair and it was unbelievably distracting. I was too used to playing with Hitoshi’s fur and Hana’s tresses; my fingers itched to reach out and pet Shisui’s head.

The curls on top were tighter, inky black and glossy in the midday sun, but the ones brushing his hitai-ate and neck were loose, flicking out around his head endearingly.

I wanted to touch them so bad.

Remembering that Shisui had apparently been an extraordinarily perceptive person, I scrambled for something to say. Also, I was so not going to pass up on friendship with this little ray of sunshine.

“So, is your name really ‘Shunshin’?”

Oh, good going Kiharu! If I didn’t already know otherwise, that could have been potentially awkward.

Shisui glanced over his shoulder with a surprised smile before barking out a laugh.

“Nah, it’s actually Uchiha Shisui,”

Unable to help myself, I drawled out “Really?” glancing around the Compound comprised solely of the Clan, “I would never have guessed!” He looked surprised again before something that might have been joy flickered in his eyes. We exchanged grins.

I was insufferably pleased to note that his was just as mischievous as mine.

“Dazai Kiharu,” I belatedly introduced myself, as we drew closer to a large house and, before he could ask, I continued. “I’m here to have tea with Mikoto-hime—” Well, that name had stuck now, I guessed “—because she wanted to try the desserts I create.” I gestured with the tin.

“Oh, really? What’s in there?” He looked a bit eager and I wondered if he shared Itachi’s love of all things sweet.

“Oh, really? What’s in there?” He looked a bit eager and I wondered if he shared Itachi’s love of all things sweet.

“Ah,” I grinned cheekily and booped him on the nose with one finger. He went a bit cross eyed and I resolved to do it again, even if it killed me. “It’s a surprise, Shisui-kun!” and, well, I couldn’t exactly call him Uchiha around here, now could I?

The door slid open to reveal Mikoto, dressed in a lavender kimono that complimented her complexion, and Shisui quickly sketched a bow.

“Kiharu-chan, it’s wonderful to see you.” She actually smiled, eyes crinkling softly and Shisui did the Uchiha-version of a doubletake (his eyes flickered- ooh~).

Geez, why were all Uchiha’s so pretty? It was enough to give a girl a complex.

“Good afternoon, Mikoto-hime,” I smiled at the surprise in her eyes at the honorific. It felt a bit like a super slick-but-well-meant tease; I mean, when was the last time someone called a grown woman ‘princess’? “I brought the matcha green tea mousse cake we talked about and—”, I glanced uncertainly at the boy behind me but…he’d perked up at the mention of matcha and I was a sucker for Shisui so…

“Perhaps, if he’s not too busy, Shisui-kun could have some too.” I resolutely focused on Mikoto’s
face, worried that I’d been (again) too presumptuous with people. She looked surprised, then considering and then…gleeful?

A shiver of foreboding ran down my spine and I absently made a mental memo to never cross a woman who wanted daughters but got sons.

I risked a glance at Shisui.

He looked…I couldn’t tell. His eyes were all soft, which was a good thing I guessed, but his mouth was also clenched. Just a little bit. Why the hell was he hesitating? I wasn’t that weird right?!

But, more importantly, what boy would turn down a free dessert?

*Especially at lunchtime*?!

Sora-oba and kaa-san had half killed me when they realised that, along with their generous meals, I was essentially stuffing myself with enough cream and pastries each day to make an Akimichi sick.

I, of course, was unphased. Fullness was for the weak. After all, dessert doesn’t go to the stomach. *It goes to the heart*.

“Well, Shisui? Will you join us?” Mikoto’s voice was soft and we both snapped our heads up to look at her.

“Thank you, Mikoto-sama, Kiharu-chan.”

I beamed in success and bounded up the stairs before him. Ahh, I love it when a plan comes together, A-Team.

Naturally, Hitoshi followed, not even bothering to check if he was welcomed as well. Then again, this was a really ninja household- maybe he didn’t have to ask.

Like he even would, I internally scoffed at the thought.

The interior was very traditionally Japanese and Mikoto lead us through until we reached a small tea-room which had doors open into the garden. The room was washed a soft green with a delicate design of sakura tree’s and a low table, surrounded by cushions, was the centrepiece of the room. Baby Sasuke was asleep in a bassinet and Itachi (he was so small!) was crouched next to him, one little finger stroking over his face.

The trees made me wonder if canon Sakura had seen them and considered them a sign from fate that she was destined to marry Sasuke, in some creepy twisted way?

She had been batty enough about the poor boy, that I wouldn’t have put it past her.

Mikoto immediately started bustling around with the tea. She looked so motherly I could only stand there for a minute and greedily drink it all in. Whilst she worked, she introduced me to her sons but I didn’t get much of a response; Sasuke was a baby and, well, asleep. *Boo, you’re boring*.

And Itachi…At the sight of Itachi, Shisui had perked up, bounding over to the younger boy with a broad smile. It vaguely reminded me of those documentaries, when the joey bounced around Mama Kangaroo.

Wait. Maybe that wasn’t the best analogy…

I almost had a cardiac arrest at the sudden expressiveness and felt a sweatdrop form when Itachi was
just as solemn as ever. His eyes met mine however and he looked...a little bit happy? Surely, he didn’t think I was going to be used as a meatsheild against his cousin? Pfft, no way, gaki.

– Around 30 seconds later –

My eyes flickered to the sky outside, just in case, and- nope, the world wasn’t ending. I really had found myself sat between Itachi and Shisui, who both smiled at me. (well...Itachi’s eyes were a bit warmer)

Nani?

I set the tin on the table with all the tenderness of a mother and her new-born baby whilst Hitoshi wandered over to the closest patch of sunlight and slumped bonelessly onto the warmth.

Wow, so invested.

The boys’ interest was caught though and they gathered around the food like the curious puppies they were. A sudden mental image of the two with silky dog ears and fluffy tails flashed in my mind and I cursed that I had no Sharingan to preserve it forever.

Danzo and Kakashi flashed in my mind and- you know what? Never mind.

When I popped the lid, the Uchiha’s leant forward curiously and Mikoto smiled in delight.

“Ah! The gradient, just as you said, Kiharu-chan.”

I nodded happily, even as I did the honours and started slicing through the creamy treat. “Ah, the darker the green, the stronger the Matcha flavour!” I agreed, pleased at the anticipation in Shisui’s eyes. Itachi was, of course, doing his best impersonation of his own statue. Paint him gold and he’d have been a great street performer.

When everyone (minus the baby and Hitoshi, obviously) took their first bite, I tried to convince myself I wouldn’t care if they didn’t enjoy it.

(It was a lie, I’d be totally pissed)

Mikoto “hmmm”-ed happily, devouring her slice just as quickly as Shisui, who immediately took matters into his own hands and cut himself another slice (which just happened to be almost a full quarter of the remaining cake but, who was I kidding? I was thrilled).

Itachi chewed his first bite slowly, face as blank as ever, and I tried not to think of him as a connoisseur of all things sweet. I felt strangely reminiscent of that scene in Ratatouille, when Ego took his first bite of Remy’s dish.

“Itachi?” Mikoto, the angel, prompted him and her eldest obediently swallowed.

“...It’s nice.” He looked almost shy and squeezed out the smallest of smiles. I felt just a touch blessed as a scene of falling flower petals developed behind us...I resisted the urge to pull a dad and flop boneless to the ground in relief.

Wait. There was the mental sound of screeching tyres.

Eh?

‘nice’?
“Is it better than dango?” I cut straight to the point with all the grilling focus of an industrial laser and Shisui looked like he wanted to die of laughter. If he tried to, he’d probably asphyxiate around the massive mouthful he’d just shovelled in.

“…” Itachi blinked.

I glared a bit and Mikoto hid a smile behind her hair.

“…but, nothing’s better than dango, Kiharu-san…?”

Hitoshi wheezed.

“Should I be worried?”

Dad’s voice interrupted me as I glazed the jam donuts with classic white icing. The ring ones had been mirror-glazed in a spectrum of reds and oranges and the muffins were lemon and poppy seed.

“None of it’s for you, Tou-san!” the sharp crack of my voice had dad’s hand, almost touching the red velvet and cream cheese cupcakes, to jerk back as if I’d actually been able to physically strike him.

Once he had carefully retreated to a respectable distance, I relaxed a bit and set down the sharp skewer I’d reflexively grabbed. Oops.

“It’s for Itachi.” I shrugged.

3,2…1.

“NANI?” Dad exploded, looking like he was on the cusp of a mental breakdown. And, in terms of my dad? That was frickin’ severe.

“A boy? Y-y-you’re only seven, Ki-chan! I agreed to let you talk to boys when you were thirty, remember?”

“Err, was that when you mumbled to yourself for an hour when I made friends with Izumo and Kotetsu?” I tilted my head. “Conversations are two sided, you know. And anyway, Itachi’s five.”

Dad looked so relieved at that last nugget of information, he all but fainted.

Tch, such drama.

I resolutely ignored my own behaviour from earlier, when I’d tried to flip the table on Itachi for his little comment.

(the good thing about being civilian? No one had taken me seriously and so didn’t hold it against me)

Filling my cart with the treats, safely stowed in recycled take-away tubs, I marched straight back to the Uchiha Compound, which I’d left not three hours earlier.

“Shisui-kun!” I called as I drew closer and saw my new friend (after letting him eat pretty much the entire mousse cake, we better have been) and he smiled, if a bit confused.

“Err, Kiharu-chan…what is that?” he pointed at the selection of five different goodies and I grinned innocently.
“Nothing much…just a little something for Itachi.”

He snorted and led me inside anyway. “Yeah, to try to convince him that your desserts are better.”

Abandoning all pretences, I slumped forwards, depressed, and wailed, “I thought for sure he would’ve liked it better than that dry dango stuff!”

His arm slipped around my shoulders, which was a bit hilarious considering the height difference, and reasoned with me easily. His voice was disgustingly cheerful but he was so sweet I didn’t kick up a fuss.

“Itachi loves dango. He’s got a massive sweet tooth, yeah, but dango is like…on a different level, Kiharu-chan!” Urgh, how dare he sound so reasonable.

“And anyway, isn’t it more important that I loved it? What else have you got for me, ay?”

“Aha! I bet you’re only my friend so I’ll bake for you!” I accused, my voice triumphant as if I had solved an impossible mystery.

Shisui stuttered and I turned to him in surprise but he met my gaze squarely, smile wide and beaming, and his eyes fairly shone.

“Yeah, I guess we are those kinds of friends, huh!” He acted casual as we started moving again. Feeling gracious for once, I let him natter on about how I should give him premium taste-testing rights for all my recipes. I idly wondered if the peace would be acceptable exchange for the taint on my rep if I poisoned him once or twice.

When we arrived at the porch, Shisui took the back of the cart whilst I carried the front up the steps and, when a bemused Mikoto let us in, he gestured for me to go in first. But I couldn’t help but pause on the threshold.

“I…want to be friends with Shisui, for Shisui.” I whispered quietly.

A small pinkie briefly locked around mine and I knew he understood.

Shisui was such a character, I had little doubt he’d had a lot of friends but…Danzo was already shit-stirring and I wondered how many he had left once Danzo’s rumours about the Uchiha had reached their parents. By his reaction? Probably none.

I was reminded again of what little shits kids could be.

For example?

“But Itachi-chan, Mikoto-hime said you like lemon!”

(Apparently, it just wasn’t dango)

_Hn, who wanted the approval of a sweetness connoisseur and possible future Nuke-nin anyway?_

…

…_sigh…me._

......................................................................................

Five days later, I was delivering the usual tarts to Teuchi (without my carnivorous entourage, for
once). The old man had asked for double delivery and I wondered if he was starting to get a higher demand for them or was just being greedy.

It was at that point that Shisui flickered in next to me and I almost threw the box up into the air. He’d been doing that a lot.

“Good morning, Kiharu! What’s on the menu today?” and he tried to peek under the lid before I lifted it away from him.

“Nuh-uh, Shisui! This is the delivery for Ichiraku so you can’t have any!” I wagged one finger at him and he turned those massive almond eyes on with their full effect—

Until I planted one hand in over them at least.

“Oh no, you don’t! That hang-dog look gets you nowhere!” I growled. In response, Shisui’s warm hand wrapped around my wrist and pulled it down just far enough for his massive eyes to peek over the top. He blinked slowly and those ridiculously unfair lashes tickled my fingers.

“…you can have a ramen off my tally.”

I pointedly ignored his insufferably pleased expression and how, with a glance over my shoulder, he kept a firm grip on my wrist.

An uncomfortable cough interrupted us and we turned in union to see Izumo and Kotetsu. The two were red faced and unhappy. I was half-surprised that Genma-nee was nowhere in sight, making sure they didn’t fuck this up. Again. But, well…

Shit. I’d kinda been, well, not avoiding them so much as…avoiding the issue?

“Kiharu-chan.” Izumo broke the stilted silence. Shisui had his Uchiha mask turned on full and was glancing between the three of us, undoubtedly already placing pieces together. “Y-your nose and eyes…are you okay?” Izumo eyed my face with naked concern and took one aborted step closer, a small hand raised as if to touch mine, before he apparently thought better of it.

Great. Now it was even more awkward. Part of me wanted to just forgive them already. Another part wanted to break the tension with my fist.

Surely, we’d be even if they both had black eyes too?

“Dad says—” they both (a red-faced Kotetsu was currently staring, apparently absorbed, at my left foot) flinched noticeably but I soldiered on, viciously satisfied at their reaction despite myself. “—that it should start clearing up by the end of the week.”

Izumo nodded furiously, looking both deeply relieved and painfully guilty. It was silent for a minute or two as we both visibly floundered, and I desperately tried not to think of all the pointed and undoubtedly embarrassing things Tou-san cornered them about. Knowing dad, he’d probably taken the chance to say something to Genma as well, and wasn’t that just even more ridicu-

It was at that point that Kotetsu burst, like water from a dam.

“I’m really sorry, Kiharu! We didn’t mean to hurt you! I’m really, really sorry that we didn’t listen and for saying that you were a coward…” his head jerk up and, with clenched fists and all but leaning forward towards me, he basically yelled his entire apology for the street to hear.

Two ladies, outside the seamstress’s a few feet away, giggled like twits and I felt my eye
twitch.

I sighed. I knew they were both sorry but I was a bit…spooked about their opinions. After all, things said in anger always had roots somewhere.

It was depressing to think that most of the ninja probably held similar opinions. Maybe even Shisui… but I didn’t really want to go there right now.

At least Dad wasn’t an arsehole.

“It’s…I won’t say that ‘it’s fine’ because it isn’t. You really scared me but I’m sorry too, for the things I said.” I looked away, scratching my arm self-consciously and thought of all the petty fights teenage girls could get into. At least, boys were simpler to deal with, in general.

Well, I thought that. Up until Shisui took a subtle half-step in front of me before turning his back to the boys.

And that was an insult, a ninja insult, if ever I saw one. To put your back to someone was either a great show of respect and trust…or that you completely disregarded their skills so that they weren’t even considered a threat.

Somehow, I didn’t think it was the former.

For fuck’s sake, Shisui! I’m trying to help your clan’s image and I thought you, at least, were going to be helpful!

“Well, Kiharu! You said that you had an appointment to keep with Teuchi, right?” He smiled, perfectly innocent and I almost half believed his little show before catching the devil glares burning into his skull via the duo. Of course, I was too busy trying not to strangle the little bi-polar idiot to really be fooled by anything.

A sweatdrop pressed into my head and I wondered where the serene and unflappable Shisui from Canon had disappeared off to.

Well.

Leaning around Shisui’s form (it wasn’t hard, he was shorter – much to his annoyance), I smiled warmly at the duo who immediately looked at me hopefully.

“I’ll pop round Genma-nee’s sometime this week and get him to beat your asses for me, okay?” they gaped and I internally cackled with glee.

“I’ll bring Yondaime’s!” and bam, look at that! They were perfectly whole again. And, with a wave, I dragged Shisui off.

Turning around towards Ichiraku, Shisui acted like nothing had happened but I knew better. The little shit had done something, like a weird ninja powerplay-

I swore to the Shinigami-No! To fucking Jashin-sama (he was more painful, right?) that if those idiots thought they could have some turf war over ‘their’ civilian and her cooking…!

I would set both Tou-san and Hitoshi on them all before lulling them into a false sense of security and poisoning them. I wasn’t some pathetic girl from one of those OC fics where all the guys fell at her feet and she ended up with most of the main cast thinking the sun shone out of her ass. That was beyond stupid! And we were children. I mean, I certainly wasn’t going to be voted ‘Miss Popular’
anytime soon, considering I had about five friends – one of which was a ninja cat! The boys and Shisui were just being possessive little shits- like when your best friend starts getting popular and you worry they’re trying to replace you.

I’d had to forcibly restrain myself from acting that way at some of Noko’s parties.

But, just because I understood to a certain extent, didn’t mean I wasn’t going to tear them into kitty chow for Hitoshi.

Shisui shivered violently for some unknown reason and felt the need to move away from me slightly.

“Teuchi!” I cried joyfully, brushing past the signs and waltzing into the ramen stand, tins held aloft like an award. The man in question grinned at me happily and reached forwards to take the containers. When he cracked the lid and peeked on eye inside;

“Oh, Kiharu-chan, perfect as always! You sure do know your craft!”

I grinned in response, pulling myself onto a stool and ordering, even as Shisui sat next to me and smugly checked his off of my tally. The ramen was done quickly and we were comfortably silent as we stuffed ourselves past-full with noodles and delicious broth. Occasionally, I’d prompt Shisui to start talking and he eagerly told me about getting the drop on his training partner earlier.

He was always so keen to talk and laugh but, sometimes, it was only if I prompted him first. I knew Shisui was an orphan and he had briefly mentioned growing up with his great-uncle Kagami (I’d internally flipped my shit at being the first of the fandom to find out the official link between the two). He’d lost a best friend at the end of the war, which had activated his Mangekyou, and had recently become just as isolated as the other Uchiha children. And I knew the Itachi and Shisui had been like brothers (or more, according to come ships) before his death.

I just never figured I’d have the opportunity to wiggle into that void beforehand.

It had been a week and I was already pretty sure that Shisui would be Shunshining into my life for a very long time.

Speaking of…

“…Why haven’t you gone to get your eyes and nose healed at the hospital, Kiharu-chan?” His voice was muted and his eyes fixed on his chopsticks as he swirled them through the last drops of sauce.

I sighed and smiled ruefully. It was one of the things that pissed me off about this world because-

“For civilians, nothing which isn’t deemed ‘serious’ is treated with iryojutsu (‘Healing Arts’) because the hospital is limited on those who can use it. So, only Shinobi are treated that way for, well, everything in order to maintain their physical bests for training and missions.

“Civilians just have to…deal with it.”

His eyes popped wide and his mouth formed a little ‘oh’.

“I could…ask around the compound, if you wanted? To see if someone could help?” His hand came up to rub at the back of his head when I turned in surprise, meeting strangely bashful eyes before I smiled warmly.

He’d only known me a week but he was already so caring.
I couldn’t let a gem-of-a-friend like him fade away. And I’d probably, like the sentimental imbecile I was, do everything I could to save him and the Uchiha and Konoha.

“Thanks, Shisui-kun. That would be brilliant.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N- HI! It's been like...almost a week? I'm sorry but deadlines wait for no one. Anyway, please check out my first fanart, of Kiharu and Hitoshi, listed as the next work in this series! Hope you like it! Also, I think its hilarious if Kiharu bears a tiny grudge against Itachi's preference of dango/pocky no matter how much he likes her as a person. (not like-like, he's 5! ewww) Also, I refuse to have her get on with everyone smoothly/at all! This isn't one of those idealistic fics! (I don't think?) Also, how hilarious will it be when Kiharu meets Anko? *evil gleeful laughter* Anyway, I also think she’d make up with Izumo and Kotetsu super quick as that's what kids do. Also, little bear Shisui being all 'they hurt Kiharu, I'll protect her now' got me going haha. Anyway, thank you for your wonderful comments and please please leave some more! Thanks for reading xxx
Maybe I should have been a preacher?

Chapter Summary

Some things really get people going. Everyone has that one topic that they could rant about for weeks-

Like ice-cream flavours.
(mint chocolate all the way, guys)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I threw the notebook across the room.

“Argh!”

The pencil quickly followed and I launched myself off the sofa. The temper tantrum wasn’t my first and I doubted it would be my last.

Naturally, they had all been over Japanese.

I hate, hate, hated the language! Why was is sooooo fucking hard?

How difficult could it be to translate some Tangled? Let me tell you: very!

I just...the words just wouldn’t fit right! How frickin’ dare they. They just didn’t sound as good as the English and it was pissing me off.

I missed the sound of actual music, not my own reedy voice. I wanted orchestral ‘How to Train Your Dragon’ and Spotify and club music and, and….!

I hadn’t been dancing since a week before the car-thing.

I wanted shitty beats that got me obsessed and the most basic lyrics sung by millionaires just wanting to get richer.

I couldn’t even play an instrument here. There wasn’t any electric guitar or grand piano or DJs. I couldn’t play a note regardless (aside from a very shaky two-finger rendition of the opening theme to ‘Howl’s Moving Castle) but now there wasn’t really much to learn. Or, at least, the ones best suited to recreating those songs.

Sometimes, it was just so hard, you know.

It wasn’t truly homesickness. I’d kinda gone through the most of it in the womb. Although the occasional strike of melancholy did occasionally hit me.

This was just...frustration.

There wasn’t TV like I’d known and there wasn’t any internet or anything! I’d been spoiled with technology back then. Here, even though there was ‘romaji’, there wasn’t really any European
influence. Which meant no industrial Rev and no European music or food or anything. Not to say that Japanese culture was inferior without it but, just as the rest of the world would be different without Japanese influence, this world had developed differently because of it.

I wasn’t sure if the lack of ‘Despacito’ was a perk or a loss.

Fuck it, even that over-played tune would be incredibly welcome at this point.

Hitoshi was out hunting (that cat was too expensive and pampered for us to pay for everything) and dad was doing a shift at the missions desk again.

I need to fucking make something. Something I was good at, just to convince myself that my past life wasn’t completely incompatible with this one.

I eventually relaxed over key lime pie. Of course, this was after beating limes into a pulp (which wasn’t even necessary). And pushing the crust into the tart tin was actually really therapeutic. When I started in on the filling, I was humming.

By the time I was doing the dishes, I was belting out “Riverbend” and feeling much, much better. The window was open (I didn’t think of the repercussions of this) and the breeze had my hair flowing like Pocahontas’ herself (it wasn’t).

When Genma coughed, from where he was slumped casually against the island, I threw the plate at him. Naturally, the dick caught it but the suds still hit his face.

“Gah-k!” I clutched one hand to my racing heart and told myself the kitchen was just really hot.

I wasn’t humiliated beyond belief that I’d been caught dancing around the kitchen and singing off key.

Pfft.

My face was steaming.

I stubbornly turned away from my intruder as he smiled knowingly around a senbon. I wondered if I could make him swallow it. With my foot.

“Sooooo…” he smirked and I glared down at the spotless bowl I was scrubbing viciously. By hand. And it was squeaking. I had a lot of frustration, okay. “I didn’t know you sang.”

“....”

“Badly too,” he mused. Oh, that-

I whirled around hotly, one fist already raised to smack him (and ta dah! Bad mood returns!) before he started laughing, propping his stupid face up on one hand.

“Ha! I knew that would get ya’ going, brat. I was only kidding,” he reassured me. Unsurprisingly, I didn’t feel any better. “You weren’t half bad- actually pretty good.”

Wow, nee-chan. Way to make a girl feel good about herself.

“Well, thanks,” I groused “but why are you here?” I moved on quickly, hoping to preserve the scraps of my dignity.

“Are you alright?”
The words, said firmly and with no humour anywhere on his face, hung in the air for a long moment.

“...Fine.” my reply was just a tad too late. Well, so much for leaving me alone. Genma could be incredibly persistent and I knew if he had even an inkling of a problem, that damned ninja paranoia wouldn’t let him rest until he was satisfied.

I knew why he was here; It was always either to pick my thoughts or my cake tin.

Knowing Genma, it wasn’t to ask me if my face hurt or if I’d made up with the boys. He knew all that stuff already. It had been almost three weeks since we’d made up, after all.

He wanted to know how it affected me, instead.

I was, in my own opinion, incredibly tolerant. Especially considering the ideals I carried. More so than most people around here, ninja and civilian alike. I also knew kids. The boys may have technically busted my face but they were children as well as soldiers. They had little concept of what ‘play’ actually meant.

Ninja children didn’t play the normal games. Or with civilians.

All their games were carefully concealed training activities; ‘ninja tag’, ‘hide and seek’ and finger games for dexterity. Not to forget that they had been taught how to kill from the age of seven. And they fought each other in ‘play spars’. Violence was not discouraged, even bullying. So long as every soldier could fall in line when the time came and fight well, the teachers didn’t particularly care how they got there. So, technically, the boys really didn’t know any better.

But that didn’t mean I wasn’t furious.

I had brought Yondaime’s around to Genma’s just as promised, of course. I liked to keep my word, I made a point of it, but that didn’t mean I didn’t exploit loopholes; Genma and I had smugly eaten ourselves sick without letting them have a scrap. Genma had grounded them (for ninja’s, restrictions on routine were almost unbearable) and we’d done that for almost three weeks (at least once a week). I was pretty sure I gave myself a mouth ulcer from the sugar and I felt sick just thinking about it…but we’d been maliciously satisfied.

Poisoning them wouldn’t have been worth the hassle for the attempted murder of genin. Or the taint on my rep.

However, I couldn’t really stay angry at them. They were victims, in a sense, to their own system. The propaganda was extreme around here and the indoctrination started essentially from birth.

I was fully aware that if I didn’t have the memories of a political history student sat in my head, I would be just as absorbed as the other kids.

Jonin, and a few chuunin, were all aware of their own involvement. Being a ninja, a figure of total suspicion and paranoia, made one alarmingly self-aware. They treated the system as a necessity. Even if some, like my dad in particular, hated it.

They’d never known any different, though.

They didn’t know about the French Revolution or democracy or communism etc. They hadn’t had any of that stuff happen. Even the Warring States period was just used as an example of how ‘good’ the current system was and why the village was so precious, yada yada. I had about 600 years of world history stuffed into my head.
It sickened me to just sit here.

Well, I knew I’d never be able to translate ‘Les Mis’ which sucked balls. I adored that musical. Being charged with treasonous behaviour for singing “Do You Hear the People Sing?” would be really fucking stupid.

Now, I knew that I wasn’t going to, I don’t know? instigate a political uprising. It sounded cowardly, to refuse to fix something so broken, but...look at Kiri. Civil war destroyed their society. What a terrible place it was now. Actually, it had always been that shit, in all honesty.

Danzo and the Sandaime would cheerfully slit my throat before I could so much as grab a stool to preach on.

I could start screaming out feminism in the market place too (it really pissed me off when most women were told to stop working once married. That’s why Mikoto wasn’t a kunoichi anymore. And why Yoshino and everyone’s mothers tended to be housewives. Tsume was the rare exception, being the Head of a Clan that decided it’s leader through the pack-mentality of ‘Top Dog’). Kunoichi were taught different things to boys at the academy and either shuffled off into infiltration or the medic corps. So, seductresses or nurses, huh?

I wanted to go all suffragette and bomb the council member’s houses and chain myself to railings (maybe the Hokage monument?) but I knew I’d be jailed before I could so much as unravel the cuffs. I was exempt from too much stigma as, not only was I just a child, but I was cooking, an ‘acceptable female occupation’. I’d already been asked by some of the grocers in the market when I was going to join a restaurant.

Err, excuse you!

I was gonna open up my own fucking place and then they could all go screw themselves whilst I ran a Dessert Empire.

I was gonna kick this society in its stupid, patriarchal balls!

“Kiharu. You look like you’re going to stab me with that knife…” a warm hand wrapped around mine and lowered said blade back into the soapy tub. Shit, Genma had asked me something, hadn’t he?

“Well, that answers that question, I guess.” he sighed and I felt the warm air hit my scalp from where he stood behind me. Two hot bands, his long arms, wrapped around my shoulders (I guess I really was growing, almost reaching Genma’s shoulders) and pulled me back into a half-hug. A scruffy chin rested on my head.

“I won’t ask. You know as well as I how dangerous thoughts like that can be. But you know you can always come to me, depend on me, kid.”

I wanted to say something sassy about chickens and broodiness but I couldn’t bring myself to. This fear and vulnerability...it was real and I needed it. Fuck it, Genma- he always cut me straight through.

Leaning back into the dependable warmth behind me, I understood.

The boys might have scared me with their childish fickleness and strong views but...Genma was very intelligent and much older.

I could trust him, like neko-tou. I had to. If I couldn’t trust anyone...that was no way to live.
“Thanks nee-chan.”

A chuffed breath and a rough (but still considerate, never too harsh) squeeze.

“Brat...and to think I almost called you ‘imouto’!”

“...You know, that still counts, right?”

My eighth birthday was like any other I’d had.

At first.

Even the presence of newly minted genin Izumo and Kotetsu and Chuunin Shisui (who ignored each other admirably) didn’t make much impact.

Well, by ‘admirably ignored’ I meant that Kotetsu, and – to a subtler degree – Izumo, glared daggers into the back of the smug Uchiha’s head.

Maybe it was because he was their military superior and yet three years their junior. Maybe it was because he managed to stuff more cake in his mouth. Maybe it was because, Oooh I don’t know, Shisui’s gift wasn’t a new pack of cards (I would use them later to thoroughly thrash those two and scam all their genin earnings) that they had obviously opened for a game or two beforehand, to ‘test’ them out.

For the record, Shisui’s leaf-charm anklet was beautiful and I sensed the hand of Mikoto involved. Honestly, who could blame her? I’d fully expected Shisui to casually hand me a massive coupon for a year’s supply of dango out of pure unholy glee.

I tried extra hard not to think of how Natsuko-oba and Inokumo-oji hadn’t come. Or how Noko wasn’t here to give me a new hair-clip. How I’d had to get ready by myself without mum to brush my hair or squeal over my dress.

But anyway, the boys were pretending they weren’t idiots (an impossible task, really) but they were on their best behaviour. I mean, there was only them, Genma, Hana (and triplets, of course) and my family (including Sora and Inoichi and Ino) at the house.

Hana had been a bit miserable lately as her mum and dad’s fights (something to do with dominance in dog packs having to be proven through prowess – Hana’s dad had insinuated one-too-many times that Tsume was better off succeeding to him after two kids) had come to that infamous conclusion. Hana’s dad had his ass handed to him so thoroughly he’d had to flee.

It had surprised me as much as it...didn’t. The guy had been pretty cool, like Kiba had been (wild and reckless but ultimately a cool guy), but he’d also been arrogant and I’d always wondered how he and Tsume had co-existed for so long.

Hana had been sad for a while before her mum had taken her aside as clan Heiress. (Since then she’d taken to eying the boys up like particular pieces of meat hung over a butcher’s counter. Not in a fangirl way either; more like she was wondering how best to fillet them. It was a hilarious expression in her cute lil face)

So, anyway. The party was going as smoothly as it could. The cake was a two-tiered vanilla and caramel creation (it was my birthday, I could do as I pleased). Shisui hadn’t moved two feet from the
cake or me since he’d clapped eyes on how I protectively shielded it from everyone.

I was pretty sure having that boy as part of the unofficial and unspoken protection squad was a new level of counter-productive, but it was sweet nonetheless.

I tried extra hard not to think of how I’d made the cake by myself, without mum there to bop icing on my nose. Thankfully, Shisui was suitably distracting, especially when he all but slapped Genmanee’s hand away from a tempting drip of caramel.

It was Hitoshi who made things really interesting.

And it came in the shape of a scroll. Why, that stupid cat-

“‘Toshi? I can’t use chakra like that, you know?’ was my super polite way to tell him I wasn’t going to be a ninja and he could fuck off if, after all this time, he thought he could make a bid for it.

My dad was gaping (actually everyone was) and Hitoshi simply gave me his patented ‘you’ll thank me for this later, you ungrateful twat’ look.

“It will be much easier because, unlike other contracts, you won’t be signing for a group or a Boss...if you manage this, I will be with you always, except when Seiichi-sama needs me.” He growled, surprisingly polite for once. It was amazing how things could change at a party.

My eyes blew wide at the gesture.

For someone as tenacious (or, as I called it, ‘stick-up-their-ass-y’) as the panther, that was practically a declaration of love and dedication.

I’d have been less surprised if he’d named me his new religion.

“Hitoshi...summons are considered ninja business. It wouldn’t be...proper, if Kiharu-chan had a contract and didn’t use it for the betterment of our village through service.”

My eyes almost popped out of my head and I whipped around to stare at Inoichi-oji.

“It’s illegal? I’ll be arrested?!” my voice cracked as I panicked and the other children looked just as dismayed. Shisui looked half a moment from Shunshining me out of there and the triplets had circled me at a gesture from Hana. The boys were still gaping at the scroll- honestly.

I briefly wondered if I was too young to make a will. Stupid cat, thinking that the world would bend just because he wanted it to!

The Yamanaka Clan Head frantically waved his hands around at the sight of distressed children. He was almost sweating at the scene of the chaotic confusion (dad was now holding my body) and I absentely wondered how he’d survive a pre-teen Ino.

“No! No! It’s not illegal- but, the council won’t be – err – happy and some ninja might contest the decision...a civilian, seen to be meddling in places they don’t belong, might get...messy.”

I turned to look at the massive black feline, who’s smug expression hadn’t shifted (He really was ‘the cat that got the cream’-or rather, the summoner...dick), and his poisonously green eyes looked at me knowingly.

The bastard knew how I felt about fucking with people. Half the time he was my silent partner and he always seemed to be around anytime I decided to act out.
What a gift, eh?

His eyes gleamed again and the growing grin on my face was immediately extinguished. He was still an asshole.

I hoped I wouldn’t get killed for that smug kitty.

By June, things had shifted again.

After Akane-sama (a lovely woman in her mid-fifties who’d retired as a medic-nin when she lost her left arm in the Third War) had healed my eyes, solemnly supervised by Shisui, I had made a point to deliver her red velvet and cream cheese cupcakes every week or so.

Just as thanks, of course.

This had nothing to do with the merchant who, two weeks before my birthday, had told me to run home to my mother like a good little girl.

(I had slipped two mice Hitoshi had graciously provided me with into his money pouch) (I hoped they were rabid)

It also had nothing to do with the three more enquires for my baked goods (in return for some produce or favours) by an Uchiha gate-guard, an Uchiha police officer and one of the female masseuse from the Onsen.

On a completely unrelated note, Yuri-oba from the dress-shop had recently heard all about my business with the raven-haired dojutsu-users. I had completely forgotten that Yuri-oba was a civilian woman in retail and ergo a gossip turbine. Tut tut.

In other news, I’d also been ‘called in’ to watch Ino and Shika ‘round twice a week. Mainly when Yoshino-san or Sora-oba wanted extra sleep. I’d met Chouji briefly when he was being watched one time by Yoshino and, let me tell you, that was a cute baby. He was like a little dumpling with a tuft of ginger hair on top of his head. All he wanted was a bottle, though, which was hilarious but such a pain. So, whilst he was being fed, Ino would tug on a silently suffering Hitoshi whilst I snuggled Shika.

That was the best bit.

Shika loved me. I was this miracle that (his baby genius mind understood) was able to shut Ino up, get Chouji to stop fussing and I was happy to hold him whilst he slept. I was warm and I purred. I mean, sure I was a glorified pillow, his favourite place to nap, but I’d fucking take what I could get!

I relished in the love when Shika would spot me immediately and insistently reach his arms up for me, face grumpy. Then his head would tuck under my chin, one arm slumped over my shoulder and then his little hand would pat my neck until I started purring.

From an objective point of view, I was being treated like an instrument but…well, babies were super susceptible at this age. I was kinda on-purpose-but not-really hoping that Shika would be so attached to me for a long time.

The rest of his life would be great, thanks.
I wasn’t anywhere near as close to the Nara as I was to Sora-oba and Inoichi-oji. I had to take what I could get at this point. Like, emotional dependency from the Clan Heir.

Hitoshi in particular had spent most of my life purring at me. Even if I frequently wanted to skin him, I was incredibly attached to him. We could direct each other without words and, when he was gone, it felt like I was missing a limb.

I wondered if the feeling was mutual and that was the real reason the massive cat had insisted I inherit the summoning scroll.

Pat, pat, pat.

A tiny hand patted my cheek and I turned my head to meet the grumpy gaze of Shikamaru.

His dark hazel eyes stared at me impatiently for another moment before it came again.

Pat, pat.

A thick, rolling purr vibrated my ribcage, which the young Nara boy was nestled against. The purr was long and drawn out and I could see Shika almost going cross-eyed towards the end. With a hum of satisfaction, the baby tucked his head under my chin again and almost immediately fell back asleep.

For a while, I just held him, until my civilian arms started to ache and I had to shift him to the other hip. Kneading and whipping ingredients only strengthened your arms so much, after all. He was so soft and warm, smelling of skin and blankets and baby powder. It was comforting, reminding me strongly if my own childhood. My adult mind fully remembered this life as much as my last, nothing faded as it would with normal babies. I remembered kaa-san singing softly in my ear as the nursery slowly lightened at dawn. Even back then, she smelt of honey and jasmine. My throat felt tight and I had to swallow hard, holding Shika just that little bit closer.

Missing my mother…was like a homesickness that never disappeared. Sometimes, the thought of her made me laugh, all the silly things she would do. How her face would look when dad was particularly embarrassing.

Other times it was like wanting to run. Like I wanted to go home but didn’t know where it was.

And she was always there. Or rather, not there. So, so conspicuous in her absence.

She was in the purple flowers in the window-box and the silk kimono’s in shop-fronts. She was cold jasmine tea left too long and funny doodles drawn on the steamy bathroom mirror. She wasn’t there when I woke up at dawn and wanted a hug.

I brushed my own hair now and picked my own dresses. I practiced my own letters and did all the shopping. I was the one who sewed the rips in dad’s flack jacket or insisted on washing Hitoshi’s bandanas.

I couldn’t remember if Shika’s mother had survived the series. All I knew was his devastation at the deaths of Asuma and Shikaku. I clutched him a little tighter.

Yoshino came around the corner from the kitchen and sighed in relief when she saw all the babies were relatively settled.

“Ah, thank goodness we have you, Kiharu-chan.” She smiled warmly and I was once more reminded how lovely she could be when she liked you. If she didn’t…I’d recommend emigrating.
“Of course, Yoshino-san! No need to pay grumpy genin!” I eye-smiled at her and she snorted at the idea.

“Definitely not.” She agreed, moving over to take Shika before my arms fell off. “As if I’d pay for brats to drop my baby…” a grin broke over my face as I reached down for Ino.

“Isn’t Shika’s cousin Ensui a genin?” I settled the blond into the crook of my neck and she sleepily grasped my hair. Great, sticky fingers. “You could go all scary Matriarch and make him too scared to mess up?” I cackled cheerfully and she grinned back. With a frickin’ lot of teeth.

“Ensui?” she cocked a brow and—damn, she’s so badass. “That dunce would fall asleep 10 minutes in. He wouldn’t even wake up if I set his mattress on fire…” I wondered if she’d tried—

Turning away and rocking my imouto gently, I desperately bit my lip so I wouldn’t wake the babies. Poor, poor Ensui. He was around 16 and would be attempting the chunin exams at the end of the year. That was still a while for Yoshino to force D-ranks on him, though. Whether on or off duty.

I’ll say it again; poor, poor boy.

Speak of the devil and he shall appear.

The slide of the door 10 minutes later reveals a bedraggled teenager, who looked like he’d rather be at the bottom of the Naka than reporting to Yoshino.

Some days, I could completely relate.

Ensui was dressed in the standard uniform (booooring!) except for the most perfect green cat eyeliner.

“Your eyes are incredible” was out of my mouth before I could think. I stood for a moment and contemplated throwing myself out of the window.

Both Nara turned to me in surprise and I wondered if Yoshino thought I had some kind of thing for Nara men. In all honestly, she wouldn’t be wrong.

“Thanks.” The teenager looked uncertain and I smiled as reassuringly as I could up at him. “You… don’t think it’s weird?”

Huh?

“Err, no? I mean, you’ve done it really well? It’s even and everything…” I gestured to the smoothly curving line with one finger. Apparently, I was speaking gibberish as Ensui frowned in consternation and stepped closer to me. Genius Nara probably struggled with the little things.

“I mean, I’m a guy wearing makeup.” He squinted and I wondered if ninja also struggled with self-expression on top of all the other shit they couldn’t figure.

It was like Inoichi all over again. So, obviously, I told him as much.

“Urgh, you’re just like Inoichi-oji!” I placed Ino into her bassinette before whirling back around to the teenager and cocking my hip. “I’m a boy, I can’t be pretty!” he says. Well, I’ll say it again! Nothing is just for boys and nothing is just for girls.

“You can wear eyeliner because you want to and it makes your eyes look amazing and Inoichi-oji can have beautiful hair and Hana can roll in the mud with her dogs! It doesn’t matter. You could
wear heels and a dress and I could wear boxers and have short hair! We’d wear what we want and look good regardless.” Yoshino looked disturbed and I remembered that she herself wasn’t without prejudice, no matter how awesomely fearsome I thought she could be.

Ensui looked like I’d just told him up was down and the Hokage was a professional ballerina.

Not that they had those here.

“Now…” I continued on severely, moving forwards to hook arms with my new compatriot, who was still standing there gaping like a fish. I led him over to where his aunt had just set down a newly-fed Chouji and shoved the empty dishes into his arms. Hitoshi, who lay stretched in front of the steps to prevent any accidents because he was lazy and boring and responsible, chuffed at my unending ability to pick up strays. It was kind of pissing me off at this point. Even if I did only have five human friends.

“…where do you get your makeup from?”

Chapter End Notes

A/N- ahh! I'm so happy! The comments on the last few chapters really got me through to this weekend and I can't tell you how thrilled I am with the response to this fic (///o///) All I can say is thank you and please continue to comment! Good! now, I felt the last few chapter had been appropriately light-hearted so it was time again for some serious issues...

Anyyyyywayyyyy...thanks for reading and I hope you enjoyed it! xxx

P.S-mint choc ice cream; I'm a chocoholic, yes, but this is so refreshing and yet also chocolate-y I could eat it for weeks. It's the smart option, in my opinion, for chocoholics and big eaters...
And then there was Chocolate

Chapter Summary

I wondered if this meant I would be this world's Willie Wonka.
(chocolate could make you feel better, feel sick. it could be sweet and rich or dark and bitter.)
(all depends on how you go about it.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“-no, just the powder. I want *just* the powder.”

Daisuke, a merchant from Tea, was my new favourite person.

Who knew cocoa powder was so hard to come by?

“Domo arigato!” I bowed extra low as I clasped said powder to my chest. The man, who could have only been in his early twenties, blushed crimson in embarrassment. He was just starting out, from what I could tell, and I wondered if I was one of the few who’d given him a chance.

“Maa, Dazai-san, please don’t-!” He rubbed his neck, obviously embarrassed, but I maintained my 90-degrees bow a moment longer.

“But, of course! You’ve really, really helped me, Tanizaki-san. Please bring me some more next month!”

Once I had wrangled an agreement from the man, I skipped off happily to – you guessed it – Ichiraku’s.

“Teuchi-san!” I crowed joyfully, all but flinging the bag of cocoa across the counter, “look! Look! My desserts just got so much more interesting!” the man in question thoughtfully peaked inside the bag, eying the dirt-like powder dubiously, before he apparently decided to simply trust my judgement. A tiny Ayame (around 5) was poking around the crates of fresh ingredients and I was momentarily distracted by her cuteness. Her cheeks were huge, so utterly pinch-able…

“Kiharu-chan, you’ve supplied me with dessert for over a year now. Perhaps, you would consider having a small stand open in here, to sell more goods?” the ramen-chef smiled warmly, no hint of deception or pressure in his eyes.

Oh Kami-sama. Oh, Kami.

“Yes!” I breathed, face split in a massive grin.

This was the start of it all.

The bakery, making a name for myself (in the way I actually wanted) and not having to work for
someone else. I could make a difference, maybe even get a seat on the civilian council when I was old and grey. It sounded stupid, but business ran the word; whether shinobi or civilian. With my links to a good few of the Rookie 9 already, I could probably push forward some legislation through the Hokage office via Shika-

“I would love to Teuchi-san, so long as we are equal partners in it; when I’m older, with my own bakery, of course this place will be a most beloved business partner!” I ended with a cheeky wink and the older man chuckled happily.

“Deal!”

After the details (profits, selections, deliveries, etc.) had been hammered out, I all but raced through my market shopping. Running home was dusty (because I was excited, dammit) and, by the end of it, I was sweaty and red faced (even though I had meticulously kept up with Dad’s morning routine).

That afternoon was fantastic. Experimenting with tempering chocolate (it had been years) and then making a ganache, I was stuffed before 4pm and in no state to make dinner. Even the thought of it made me want to die.

I’m having…urgh, a food baby.

They had chocolate here already but…it wasn’t the same as European or American chocolate, which used a fuck tonne more cream and sugar. Homemade chocolate for Valentine’s or White Day wasn’t quite the same as all the crazy stuff I was itching to try out.

In a couple of years, I would undoubtedly have medics breaking down my door for introducing a new level of health problems to Konoha. Oops.

So far, I was still determined to keep it slow, I had only made basic cubes of chocolate (some of them were down-right hideous, hilariously) and a bowl of ganache.

Or at least I had. Until I ate it all.

I’m a very weak person, okay?

Dragging my unwilling body from where I had carelessly slumped onto the floor, I slowly started tidying up the bombsite that was the kitchen. It was quite embarrassing how hard these techniques were when it had been almost a decade and in a body with none of the muscle memory.

Wow, that was weird to think.

Regardless, it took an annoyingly long time to get everything sorted. And then I settled in to make duck pancakes, knowing full well that it would smell so good I might actually be able to eat it.

Not because I was hungry, just because I’d want to…hehe.

When Hitoshi and Dad got back from their tracking mission (one could assume), they smelled strongly of smoke and were over three hours late. Not that they kept regular hours, being ninja and all. I mean, the amount of times dad would go to bed at 2pm because he had been on a mission for over 36 hours or whatever. The pancakes were still amazing reheated though, if Neko-tou’s blissed out expression was anything to go by.

He found the energy to twirl me in a hug when I told him about my deal with Teuchi.

He’d been so proud, a beaming (if worn) grin on his face which stretched his tan cheeks and flashed
white teeth. Papa looked so content in that instant, freshly showered and fed with my face nuzzled into his warm, fern-and-cinnamon chest, and I closed my eyes to memorize this perfect moment forever.

Sometimes it hit me just how much I truly adored my father.

I then made a point of teaching him how to waltz me around on his toes, just because I could. Unsurprisingly, being agile and a shinobi, he was able to pick it up extremely quickly. Hitoshi, slumped in an onyx pile of velvet fur as he lay along the sofa, occasionally purred in tune with our made-up music.

We twirled around the living room for hours, humming senseless melodies to ourselves as the house flushed pink and then purple in the late summer sunset.

“…tilt your head up a bit…” Ensui murmured absentmindedly, as he slowly drew the brush across my closed eyelid.

Whilst Ensui used green eyeliner to make his hazel Nara eyes pop, we’d both agreed that a pale sky blue would look awesome with my colouring. I mean, sure I was only 8 but this was super fun! And I was firmly of the belief that makeup shouldn’t be hiding your ‘flaws’ but as another form of artwork, used to eventuate features.

Some Instagram accounts had definitely treated the face as a canvas and I had completely approved.

Ensui, I decided early on, was my soulmate.

Now, I wasn’t in love with him and I was just a kid in his eyes. It was more like ‘platonic’s, or whatever they’d been called in those fics. Like we were kindred spirits.

Honestly, sometimes I wondered how I’d lived both lives for so long without him.

He was just the best.

Ensui had the driest humour (even Hitoshi grudging admired it) and he slept all the time. But he never looked it! The guy could roll around on my sofa for four hours and then still sit up with hair pulled back into an artfully mussed ponytail and eyeliner perfect. And if it had smudged? It just looked smouldering.

I was insanely jealous.

“Hmm, that’s a nice colour, Ki-chan,” I felt Shisui lean in to take a look.

That was another point; Shisui had, somehow, hopped onto the bandwagon and we were now something of a trio. A trio of brunettes…?

I wondered how Ensui felt, hanging out with kids half his age. I mean, we were really mature but still.

Then again, he’d never given any sign he didn’t want us there. After my memorable first meeting with him, Shisui had popped ‘round (AKA Shunshining directly in front of me because he took joy in scaring me) and ended up being bullied by Yoshino into laundry duty with the older boy.

(I’d snickered gleefully at their suffering until Shikamaru’s patting demanded purring instead)
They’d gotten into a friendly discussion on ninja stuff (who cares? Not me) and then, when I’d left to pick up my gelatine order from the Akimichi provider, both Shisui and Ensui had strolled along next to me like it happened every day.

“Teuchi asked me to make more desserts for Ichiraku’s,” I filled them in whilst Ensui worked. “He wants to have a stall inside the stand—” I paused to blink and look upwards as the blue was blended into my lower lash-line as well, “—that would sell some more sweets, like my own stall within his stall.”

The older boy hummed in acknowledgement, using a pinkie to gently wipe away a smudge under my eye as he mumbled a distracted but sincere “well done.”

“Wow, Ki-chan, that’s amazing. You’re only eight and already building a business,” the Uchiha congratulated me, bouncing over to sit next to me on the floor (or, rather, the Uchiha-version, which was just sliding in beside me and smiling happily). “Most people our age are only just applying for apprenticeships!” It was unspoken that those were only the civilians and that Shisui hadn’t had a clue what civilian children did with their lives until he’d met me. Ensui too, actually.

“There, Kiharu-chan. How’s that?” Ensui leaned back before pressing a mirror into my hands as my eyes blinked rapidly a few times. The lines that greeted me were smooth, blurring slightly into a faint smudge of pastel blue in my inner lid, before settling into a strong flick that extended from the outside corner. Despite the blue colour, it wasn’t applied too thickly and the flick was only just long enough to make my eyes seem more almond shaped and the blue was light enough that it didn’t look heavy or too unnatural on my young face. It was still nicely girly and made my navy eyes shine.

Score!

“Ah, I love it!” I smiled happily before looking over to Hitoshi, for the approval of The Critic. The cat rolled his eyes but obediently replied.

“Very feline.” And I smirked in triumph.

Blinking over at the Uchiha present, I deliberately fluttered my lashes gently.

Like the darling he was, Shisui did not disappoint.

“It looks really nice, Ki-chan.” He smiled affectionately and I felt warm at the sight. He was like a little sun. Dammit, no wonder Kagami was Tobirama’s favourite Uchiha, if this boy was anything like him! (I had been faithful Tobirama/Kagami trash before my death and somethings never change.)

Ensui, like any appreciated artist, ruffled his feathers smugly as he packed away his stuff.

“Hey!” Shisui complained, “Why can’t I get cool eyeliner?”

The Nara and I shared a commiserating glance (and a sweatdrop) at the sight of our friend’s impossible lashes.

Tch.

Later, my dad would have a heart attack at the makeup, convinced it was a sign that I was growing up too quickly (Hitoshi had drawled that ‘Seiichi-sama’ probably felt terrified that boys would notice how pretty I looked like that. I had been delighted at the compliment, if somewhat unintentional, and resolved to get Ensui to teach me).

Almost a week later, Dad left on a short mission and I, naturally, took advantage of the empty house.
I was revelling, dipping cream puffs into melted chocolate that tasted so good my eyes rolled back in my head, when the ANBU dropped through the window.

With a shriek, I threw myself to the side, like dad had taught me when avoiding possible missiles, before my mind caught up with itself as I lay on the cold tiles. Then I realised that there could be very few reasons a Black Ops member would come calling.

Who…?

I jerked to my feet, staggering closer a few steps, before the ANBU spoke.

“Dazai-san, your presence has been requested at the hospital on behalf of Jonin Shiranui Genma.”

My vision tunneled as the bottom dropped out of my world.

_Nee-chan._

I must have looked appalling, I thought abstractly, for the ANBU offered me a hand after a moment of hesitation.

“I will escort you there, if you wish.”

Without a second thought, I slapped my palm into his and then we were gone.

The world swam and shifted like it was vibrating. It was over in an instant that had felt like an eternity. And I immediately thanked my escort by being violently sick on their sandals. Shunshin. How the _fuck_ did Shisui do it?

“Kiharu!” hands grasped me, pulling my hair back from my face and wiping a tissue across my mouth. I didn’t even realise I was crying until hands were frantically stroking my cheeks and then I was pulled into a scalding hot hug.

Since when did I get so cold?

The person smelled like toffee (mine) and grass-cuttings, their shoulder’s lower than mine. _Shisui._

We were moving now, my legs mechanically shuffling along and my head shoved into my best friend’s neck. His arms clutched me so tightly against him, I wondered if we could count as one person. Muffled voices all around us echoed strangely and Shisui was responding. My ears buzzed and I felt more than heard him speak.

“-not sure what-,”

“-Izumo asked for Ki-cha-,”

‘-ambushed-,”

A flurried conversation and then a hot breath was whispering desperately into my ear and my heart stopped feeling like it had been cloven in two.

“_He’s going to live, Ki-chan._”

He was going to _live_.

We weren’t allowed into the ward.
Genma was only just out of emergency surgery (I tried not to think about that) and was still being dressed and cleaned up.

I sat, half in Shisui’s lap and squashed up against Izumo (who, in turn, was pressed into Kotetsu) as we waited on the benches. The boy’s eyes were swollen from crying, not that I could say I’d fared any better. We all looked appalling and I knew that Shisui had just come back from a mission, clothing ripped and filthy in places.

There was blood too.

The medics had healed him but the half-dried crimson, that had soaked one arm and blotched his back, told a gruesome story. He hadn’t been able to say much to the boys and nothing to me but…the timings were too perfect and I realised, with a horror that twisted my stomach again, that he’d been with Genma.

Needless to say, there was no antagonism between the boys anymore.

When evening threatened to become night and there was still no sign of being allowed in, Inoichi-oji came for us. The boys put up a fight but we were all so exhausted it didn’t last long. When we made it to the reception, garnering pitying looks the entire time, my plans to go home and cry were foiled somewhat.

“Oh no, you don’t,” Kotetsu grabbed my hand, my other arm still firmly wrapped around Shisui’s waist (his was still clutching my shoulder and I was scared to ask what had happened on the mission to make him so clingy), and pulled me (and therefore Shisui) after himself and Izumo. “You’re staying with us tonight; you can’t go home alone!”

The flat felt silent and dark without Genma’s relaxed but solid presence. The pale-yellow walls looked washed out and, even with all the lights on, the shadows seemed to creep across the room.

It had been a while since I had nightmares or let my overactive imagination get the better of me. I found myself pressing desperately into Shisui’s warmth as figures danced in the corner of my eyes and I spooked myself when Izumo closed a cupboard a bit too loudly. It wasn’t cowardice, I reminded myself. It was comfort.

Shisui stayed, by unspoken agreement.

When dawn broke, the four of us were huddle like puppies across two futons we’d pushed together in the living room. Izu and Tetsu were a sprawl of limbs and I cracked open my eyes to see Shisui’s face less than two inches away, opposite my own. His shoulder was pressed into mine, hands clasped and legs entwined. His mouth was open a crack and he drooled slightly. That was okay, I knew I snored a bit.

I went back to sleep, pressing back into Kotetsu’s warmth behind me.

We were roused from our sleep by the bang of the front door. The boys, paranoia already setting in, grabbed the nearest weapon to them as we poked our head into the kitchen.

We were greeted by the sight of Hitoshi holding a paper take-away bag in his mouth.

Okay, Firstly? that’s so unhygienic, ‘Toshi! You lick your own crotch with that mouth and kill birds. Secondly? How in the actual hell did he get in here without opposable thumbs? Forget that, how did he get human food? He has no money and who would sell it to a panther? Well…if he stole it then, at least the ‘trail’ led to Genma’s and not ours.
And then the smell of hot and fresh meat-buns hit us and our four stomachs growled in union.

When the boys crowed with happiness, scampering forwards, Hitoshi looked away with disgust and ignored their attempts to retrieve the bag.

“Brats, the food is for the cub.”

As the boys stood frozen in shock and betrayal, I beamed in triumph and launched myself at the cat, babbling about how much he really did love me. Hitoshi weathered the attention admirably, as I plonked myself in between his forelegs and immediately shoved a roll in my face.

A glance at the boys, upon whom a black fog had descended, and I tossed them each a bun.

Just to disperse the atmosphere, of course.

When I tried to needle Hitoshi about his actions, he simply started towards the door. His words, however, succeeded in cracking the cheerful façade we’d all tried to maintain.

“Genma’s awake.”

We bolted.

“Nee-chan,” I whispered, curling my fingers gently around his hand. The other arm was firmly strapped (broken, my mind supplied), as was his left leg. Bandages covered most of his skin, from what I could tell, and they wrapped around his neck as well.

I tried not to think about why he’d need them there.

The medics had done all they could for now, but there was only so much foreign chakra a body could take in a short amount of time and so the senbon-user would be bed-bound for a good few weeks.

I knew that Genma was a Tokubetsu Jonin and an assassination specialist. He’d worked alongside the other elite guards and I figured he was ANBU as well.

Didn’t mean I was okay with this.

Shisui, I knew, would also be entering ANBU as well, sometime in the next few years. He’d only been Chuunin for a few months when we met but he was still insanely ‘talented’. Speaking of, Itachi would start the academy in the next term, which meant his ridiculously early graduation was already looming (and don’t even get me started on how people thought a seven-year-old would make an excellent killer, just because he was smarter), and I suspected that these two had been on the same squad. There was annoying little included in Canon about Shisui’s life, I internally griped for the millionth time.

I was going to lose my mind when my friends all started taking lives in earnest, like other shinobi. I mean, Shisui had been one of the extreme few marked ‘Flee-on-Sight’ in the Bingo Books, alongside the Sannin and Minato etc., and he’d died at 16. I wasn’t sure how I was going to cope, knowing that they were killing and torturing and maimin-

But I knew I’d have to.

I could never be a killer, I had never once considered being a Shinobi. I’d had decades of in my first life, supporting rights movements and world peace. There had been no way in hell I was going to surrender my morals for a few ‘awesome’ ninja moves. My ambition for a successful business wasn’t
just so that I could eat a shit tonne of cake or start pissing over the Civilian council. I wanted to create a safe place, for myself and my loved ones, far away from the bloodshed and violence. As stupidly idealistic as that sounded.

But, for the boys?

I hated it. I wasn’t like other civilians, who feared shinobi and so reviled them. I hated the system, both civilian and ninja, for what it made people. I hated how it was considered normal, no, good if a child wanted to become a killer. That I was thought of as weak for choosing not to. But, I wasn’t going to let that hold me back.

I’d loved my father from the get go in this world and I would be damned if I didn’t extend the same courtesy to my other precious people.

Genma had had it, that courtesy, for a very long time. But seeing him, so broken and knowing that no one could tell me anything except “mission, details classified,” stung like salt in a wound. I didn’t want to know but the fact that I couldn’t, even if I’d wanted to, was aggravating on a new level.

The man in question flicked half-closed eyes to mine and his mouth, strange without the usual senbon, curled into a weak smile.

I held his hand for a long time anyway.

………………………………………………………………

The rest of the week was spent visiting Genma in the hospital – with his favourite matcha-cream filled donuts, of course – and having Izumo and Kotetsu sleeping over at mine. I didn’t want them alone in the apartment, in all honestly. Naturally, Tou-san had kicked up a fuss until the boys had been allocated the room furthest from mine. Tch. The boys were 13; we were only children, silly fool!

When Friday rolled around, I pulled my little red cart (filled with boxed food, of course) to the ramen stand around 7am.

I’d figured a smaller selection that had enough variety was the best way to start off. Of course, I had to include my classic ‘Sun tarts’ and one large Yondaime’s, if people wanted to buy slices instead. Then, there were also glazed ring and jam donuts, cream puffs (with either caramel or chocolate glaze), pancakes (that Teuchi could easily reheat to order), mini Matcha cheesecakes and my new chocolate torte.

This was going to be brilliant. I hoped.

Teuchi had set up a small fridge counter, at the end of the original, for all the goodies to be safely stored and browsed by the customers. I laid the dishes out in neat rows with little paper-lace doilies under every one and with crimson ribbons on the fridge. Maybe not that most harmonious look with the theme of Ichiraku, but I thought it looked adorable. Ayame’s starry eyes were certainly encouraging.

I mean, she was five but still…

I was really nervous.

After we’d all set up, it was almost half nine. I popped back home to collect a few supplies (which somehow turned into two hours) before I made my way to my second stop that day.
Mikoto’s house.

Now, I know, I know, it was sad, just how determined I was to make Itachi see the light. Most
Fridays, I made a point of delivering dessert to the Uchiha Head family for Itachi to try. The Uchiha
on guard, Atsushi (I was on first-name basis with all of them by now and made a point to always
have their favourite sweets on hand for when I stopped by. It was good publicity, okay!) smiled at
me – his lips twitched – when I pressed a sun tart into his hand. Akane-sama was next, with a
delivery of red velvet, and then I was marching up to Itachi’s house once more.

The poor, misguided boy had particularly enjoyed the chocolate torte from last week but gone silent
when I’d wheedled him about dango comparisons.

I almost felt bad.

Well, I did, up until I walked in on the younger boy with a stick on dango shoved in his mouth.

I was gonna frickin kill him.

“Itachi!” I slammed the bowl of melted chocolate onto the table between us, throwing the bag of
marshmallows I’d made (which took days to remember correctly and by then, I’d spent way too
much on wasted ingredients) at his face. “How could you?! Look-,” I jabbed a finger at the chocolate
dipping sauce I’d made (which thankfully hadn’t started to set), “I made this for you and this is how
you repay me?”

Slowly, slowly, as one would when approaching a wild animal, Itachi pulled the dango from his
mouth and dipped it into the sauce before taking another bite.

My eye twitched. How dare he…

An expression of pure rapture spread across Itachi’s usually stoic face like the sunrise coming over
the hills. A smile- an honest to Kami, genuine smile- stretched his lips and his black eyes sparkled up
at me happily, even as he fucking pulled out another stick and dunked it generously into the bowl of
chocolate. Even Sasuke-chibi, curled into his brother’s side with fluffy hair that already stuck up,
looked like he was paying as much attention as a baby could.

I was flabbergasted. Not only was that particular combination gross (it was dango, duh- sticky and
chewy and just wrong- with luscious chocolate) but-

He was smiling. With rose petals!

B-but it was still dango-!

Small arms wrapped around my waist and Itachi, still smiling openly with the dango stick poking out
one side of his mouth, buried his head in my stomach.

“Thank you, Kiharu-chan, I loved it.”

Mikoto squealed behind me as she scooped up her youngest, babbling on about weddings and dream
daughters-in-law and my soul started escaping my body. Oh, the horror – fucking dango…!

Who said the Uchiha were stoic assholes again?

At that point, the door slid open again to reveal a tall man.

Mikoto’s laughter broke off abruptly and Itachi was suddenly stood in front of me, like he’d not even
been glomping me half-a-second beforehand.

The man – obviously an Uchiha – was silent but the harsh frown-lines, that may as well have been carved into his stiff face, spoke volumes.

Shit, I not met Fugaku yet.

Chapter End Notes

A/N- New chapter! I'm glad that everyone seemed to enjoy the last one and my little warning note about pairings as well. This chapter was a strange one to write. The plot is now planned so far ahead, it's almost weird to go back a few steps and then write, haha! Anyway, I hope you enjoy and please comment etc. You all know how I love to hear from you (: Thanks for your support and enjoy! xx
Shenanigans

Chapter Summary

Sometimes, you've just got to let loose. Whether that calls for a binge-fest (for me? usually S'mores, but made with mini-waffles instead of crackers) or creating havoc.

Unfortunately for those around me, I tend to do both.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Fugaku was scary as shit.

He stood like a brick wall in the open doorway, ignoring his family as he stared down his nose at me. I had no fucking clue what he was thinking, his face a perfect mask.

Well, if you ignored the disdain.

I assumed that was a permanent fixture.

Now, my first dad had been super stern- in fact, both my folks had been- and I'd always felt a bit sad for what happened to Fugaku.

This didn't mean I didn't think he was a massive arsehole. It was the kind of sympathy I had for my mean classmate that had ended up in Juvie (Obviously, this wasn’t quite the same but- it was a similar cocktail of emotion, jerks who kinda deserved what they got but were so miserable you kinda felt bad). The man was a massive douchbag and led his Clan to ruin…which was also filled with douchbags…but…his death had been terrible.

I didn’t think anyone deserved that.

Except, like, Hitler or someone.

“And who is this?” the silence was finally broken and I jerked out of my thoughts. Fugaku’s voice was cool and his eyes flickered briefly between Mikoto, Itachi and I.

I felt a bit bad for Sasuke, being left out of the western-style stand-off, before I remembered that he was a baby and therefore the luckiest person in this room right now.

“D-Dazai Kiharu, Uchiha-sama…” I subtly pushed my shoulders back, tilting my chin like my first mother had taught me.

If you looked in control, everyone thought you were.

“…Mikoto-hime,” the slightest twitch of an eyebrow and I congratulated myself, “Invited me around for tea a few weeks back and ever since I’ve come to visit a few times a week.”

“Shujin, Kiharu-chan is the one who brings the cakes.” Mikoto spoke up as Fugaku finally moved into the room, sweeping past me and seating himself at the table. Whilst Itachi was as stoic as usual,
Mikoto was smiling gently as she set out another cup for Fugaku. Jeez, I get that she loved her family but...the woman must have had terrible taste in men. As the adults redistributed the tea, Itachi and I sat ourselves down again, although I made a point to sit seiza as gracefully as possible.

Maybe I could have made a point by ignoring any and all social queues and spilling tea into Fugaku’s lap whilst stuffing my face with cream but, honestly? I didn’t really want Fugaku to think I was some ruffian picked up off the street. I was an adorable child! …Who also really needed to continue with her little business ventures/friendships with his clan…hehe.

Also...Neko-ka had taught me better.

Fugaku was going to look like an uncultured ape next to me!

“Cakes?” the man raised an eyebrow again and I smiled demurely around the rim of my teacup, resisting the urged to throw it at his head. My hand twitched and I had to put the cup down, lest the temptation overwhelmed me. It was a bloody good venture and I always got super defensive when people looked at me with that pitying-tolerant ‘I’m humouring you, silly child’ look on their faces.

It was going to work...grr.

“Yes, Uchiha-sama.” I carefully met Mikoto’s eyes across the table before continuing on, smiling pleasantly at the Uchiha Clan Head, even as his onyx eyes narrowed silently at me. “I’m going to open up a bakery.”

Fugaku was nothing if not a shrewd man, not just because he was a Clan Head, of the snakey-ish pit of snakes that ever snaked, but also because the man was a war-seasoned shinobi. And Chief of police.

AKA one badass motherfucker.

I definitely wanted the Police on my side. Not that I was planning on committing a crime any time soon, or any anytime, but it would be nice to have such an influential institute in my good books (and vice versa). Also, the most important thing about this whole set up...

Do cops really enjoy donuts?????

“I see...and you are friends with my son?” he looked between the two of us and I clenched a fist. Even if one was still a baby, the man could at least acknowledge he had two kids...It made sense in my head, okay?

I’ll admit I was being more than a bit biased towards the man. Maybe, I admitted reluctantly, even a bit...unfair. He’d not actually been rude or anything, yet. It was just... I couldn’t help but see that whole Uchiha disaster as his fault.

He should, in my eyes, have punted the elders out of Fire country if they were so troublesome.

“Yes, Otou-sama.”

“Yes, Uchiha-sama. I am also good friends with Shisui-kun, as well.”

“Hn. And you plan on making a business out of this, correct?” he turned to eye his eldest as Itachi obediently swallowed the marshmallows I absentmindedly nudged onto his plate.

“Hai, Uchiha-sama! Teuchi-san, from Ichiraku Ramen, has agreed to let me open a dessert counter in his stall.” I smiled at Mikoto, who looked surprised, before turning to look at her husband again.
Okay, so maybe my smile was just a touch smug. Could you blame me? “I hope to have a bakery open in a few more years.”

The man looked vaguely intrigued, his eyes no longer coldly humouring some random chit whom, in his eyes, his wife must’ve scooped off the street like some lost dog. I was, at this point, maybe a little bit interesting. A girl wanting to start a bakery was laughable. But if the girl already had her foot in the market, not even ten-years-old?

An interesting diversion, perhaps.

“What are you selling, Kiharu-chan?” Mikoto smiled gently, reaching to flawlessly top up my tea.

Aware that I didn’t want to dominate the conversion and look like a stuck-up prig (considering the Compound I was sat in, that was a laughable concept), I explained the treats on sale from that morning before I started asking about any more occasions Mikoto would like a dessert for. The woman eagerly (for an Uchiha, she just looked more animated by normal standards) started on about a tea party for all the women of the Clan that was scheduled in three weeks. I suggested Tiramisu (I’d started ‘experimenting’ with coffee the previous weekend) to which the Uchiha Matriarch requested a sample by next Friday. Fugaku actually looked like a normal husband at that point, as I could easily spot the look of bewilderment on his face.

Itachi had been silent this entire time, which wasn’t any different than usual, but I was still hyperaware of the delicacy of the current situation.

Fugaku may have been playing nice right now but there was a reason all laughter cut off when he entered his own home. And it wasn’t some kind of bullshit respect thing either.

I wondered if the tensions between Itachi, Sasuke and Fugaku had already started to emerge.

Then I wondered what kind of bullshit father neglected one child – one that was like a year old?? – in favour for another. (a stream of characters paraded through my head and I felt a sweatdrop form)

When it was almost noon, meaning dad would be back soon, I started to excuse myself. In typical fashion, of course.

Hey, just because I started out polite didn’t mean I had the attention span to see it through!

“Well! I think it’s almost lunchtime and Tou-san should be back from border patrol soon. Feel free to finish all this off, Mikoto-hime, Itachi-chan—” I pointedly glanced between the marshmallows and chocolate, “—and I’ll be ‘round next Friday with the tiramisu, if that’s fine with you?” as I spoke, I rose from my cramped seiza and straightened my clothes.

Two of the Uchiha (Sasuke didn’t count) were gaping wordlessly (meaning, their mouths were slightly open and eyes a bit wider) and I smiled smugly, pleased that I could still surprise them. Fugaku just looked affronted.

At this point, I was pretty sure the man was just like Hitoshi.

Except, minus the whole I’m-fond-of-you bit. Meaning, he was just a dick.

I was a whirlwind as I left, dropping a kiss onto Mikoto’s cheek and Itachi and Sasuke’s foreheads before waving goodbye as I skipped out the door. Ahhh, there was nothing like flaunting your closeness with someone in front of others. Especially if those ‘others’ didn’t like you.

Well, the only thing better was making strangers question Genma’s gender by using female
pronouns...hehehe.

The Compound wasn’t very busy, just a few people on the streets, but I made sure to smile and wave to all the faces I recognised.

Mainly, it was the brats who got sweets off me, the mothers who thought I was a cutie/a responsible lil’ girl, and all the men and guards who were suckers for a big-eyed puppy pout.

So, most people. (Minus the other half of the Clan that was made up of dicks, elitists or people who were both!)

Fugaku may not have completely scorned me but I could see the disinterest as clear as day on his face. I’d spent enough time in the Compound by now that I was getting pretty good as reading faces. If I wanted to created bonds between the civilians and the Uchiha, more personable bonds at that, then I needed to draw them out.

…With cakes.

Okay, it sounded better in my head.

As soon as I was clear of the property, the smile dropped.

I was hardly gonna take that lying down, now was I?

………………………………………………………………..

It was empty.

Empty. The fridge, the one I had stuffed full of dessert, was empty.

Teuchi handed me a wad of bills, a happy flush colouring his face and a massive grin shining proudly.

“Your desserts sold out by lunchtime, Kiharu-chan!” I gaped down at the money and swayed a bit on my feet. “We’ll need fresh stock for tomorrow!”

“H-Hai!”

I shoved the pouch into the special pocket folds in Hitoshi’s bandana, who’d met up with me on the Market Street, and tried not to think about how I’d just earned more money than I had ever had in this life. Well, independently of my folks.

I was a kid, it wasn’t hard.

I’d had a decent bit of money in my previous life, what with student loans and various jobs, but… that was digital. Just numbers on a screen, meaningless things that dropped and rose on an app.

Hard cash was a fair bit more…intimidating.

I wanted to do that Leonardo DiCaprio meme and roll in the money. I could totally understand it now.

It wasn’t that much, okay. I’d probably made just under 13,000 ¥ (about 350¥ each) which wasn’t a lot. But, come on! This was day fucking one! I’d made just under 50 desserts and I’d definitely have to up the ante for tomorrow.
“Yay, yay, yay!” I bounded round the panther as he prowled down the street. I got some weird looks but I didn’t give a shit. I may have been a self-conscious 20-year-old when I died but, well, I died. That kinda thing does wonders for your ‘fuck-it-I’m-gonna-do-shit’ attitude.

“Ah!” I caught sight of a welcome face and scampered over to Inoichi and Sora-oba (Ino on one hip) as they strolled towards me. “Inoichi-oji!” I grinned. “My fridge-stall went really really well! Teuchi-san thinks I’m going to have to make so much more for tomorrow – he sold out by lunchtime!”

The tall blond grinned down at me, even as he swept me under his arm, stride unbroken. “Congratulations, Kiharu-chan! Why don’t you join us for an early dinner and tell us everything, ay? Hitoshi,” the T&I Chief turned to my companion, who rolled his eyes. Tch. “Could you go and ask Seiichi to meet us at the Akimichi’s just past Yuri’s?” The over-grown housecat sighed like he’d been asked to bench-press the Hokage tower – kami-sama, those images before disappearing in a puff of smoke.

“Well!” Inoichi-oji twirled me with our joined hands (…I loved it, hehe) as Sora-oba smiled tolerantly and continued on down the street. “I hope you’re hungry, Ki-chan!”

The night was lovely, with the sky painted peach and pink as the sun set. Lanterns lit the streets and lights shone out onto the packed-earth paths from the various shops and restaurants that lined the road. People, on their way home from work or to work, for food or for goods, were milling around and there was chatter in the air.

All it really needed was some street music.

(I’d have to fix that when I was older.)

This Akimichi restaurant was called the Black Spider Lily (like Ino-Shika-Cho’s debut attack in the anime…?) and thankfully wasn’t overwhelmingly full. The room was filled with homely amber light, with framed photographs of Fire country lining the walls and large polished tables surrounded by chairs. The kitchen was in full swing, hidden behind an oak-panelled countertop and filled with sparkling stainless-steel facilities. The fresh and spicy scent let me know that this was a sushi joint… and the fact that everyone was eating sushi.

Oh my gawd, yessssss.

“Shikaku!” Inoichi called as he weaved between tables, waving off the hostess as he spotted the Nara family towards the back. The Jonin commander was already in on the sake and I could tell, even half way across the room and too short for a clear view, that Yoshino was glaring at it. The bottle would probably go missing before dinner was over, I had little doubt. Tou-san was already there (Hitoshi was absent, he was even more grouchy in crowds) and frantically waved me into the seat beside him.

He was endearingly like a little kid sometimes…most of the time…all the time.

Shika was slumped over like a ragdoll in his highchair (I would never recover from the prison which had been my own) and Chouji was swinging his cute little stumpy legs next to him. A black-haired woman – pixie cut on fleek – was pouring juice into a Sippy cup next to him. Sora-oba slipped in next to her as I scrambled into my own seat, dad’s arm already curling around my shoulders. The restaurant was pretty loud and, added to the din of the kitchen, Neko-tou had to lean into my ear to ask me how my day had been. His cheeks were flushed and the atmosphere, alongside my triumph at Ichiraku’s, had me almost buoyant with happiness.

“Kiharu-chan! This is Kaiya, Chouji’s mother and the owner of this restaurant!” Sora-oba raised her
voice over the noise with a gentle smile, gesturing to the other women.

“Hi!” I grinned, leaning over to grip her offered hand firmly. She was so cool! One of the few women to make an independent name for herself, I wanted to be like her one day. I would’ve pushed for an introduction before this, having babysat Chouji plenty, but I didn’t really want to rely on the success of my elders.

Kaiya had clawed her way up by herself. If I wanted to do the same, I couldn’t rely on those connections.

It would kinda defeat the point!

“I hear you sold out at the ramen stall,” the tall woman prompted and dad leaned forward eagerly at the news. I launched into my explanation as Kaiya sat back and listen attentively. She was pretty stern and I thought she liked me, but I couldn’t be sure. She was actually really intimidating, the kind of woman who’d silence a classroom of rowdy kids just by opening the door. Her hair, pixie-short and pitch black, made her sharp eyes (rimmed with orange eyeshadow) even more severe. She was a well-rounded woman, as was the norm for her Clan, but I would never mistake that predators look in her eye. She wouldn’t hurt me but she was definitely a shark in the business. Brilliant, but only if she was on your side.

I might never lean on her but I was frickin praying she appreciated my baby-charming skills.

Dad had already ordered my first round for me (avocado, always) and the food was just starting to arrive when Shikamaru finally dragging his head off the high-chair table. He was across from me and immediately latched his eyes on my face, a put-out scowl twisting cherub cheeks when he realised I was out of reach.

Did I mention how much I loved him?

I wiggled my fingers playfully at the two baby boys, making Chouji gurgle cutely and Shika stare. Okay, so he wasn’t exactly an interactive baby…but Shika-chan was brilliant for my ego! Yoshino was wafting a spoonful of foul baby ‘food’ (shit, I remembered) and getting exactly zero reaction. That boy was gonna get the spoon shoved in his face at some point, for the sheer cheek of ignoring a gale-force like his mother. Chouji, of course, had no problem eating.

His perpetually open mouth (even when full of food already, gross) reminded me of baby birds in a nest.

I really did need to get a grip on my imagination.

The meal was a cheerful one, filled with lively conversation and yummy food. Of course, Tou-san did nearly get stabbed with my chopsticks when he playfully went for my spicy tuna but, well, he should have known better by now. I mean, think of all the shit I pulled as a baby. I set dad’s flash cards on fire.

Regardless, it felt like family. We didn’t stay too late as I still needed to bake for the morning and the babies had a very early bedtime. I did, however, manage to purr for Shika for a moment or two when I gave him an eskimo kiss goodbye. Chouji got a peck on the head (that boy was snotty) and Ino was too busy crying for me to do more than wave at her red and snarling face over Sora-oba’s shoulder. Yikes, that girl.

Dad almost relapsed when I blushed red at the pat I got from Shikaku (and Chouza) whilst the women smiled at me.
When we got home, I blitzed through the products for the next day, emotionally exhausted from the whirlwind that were the Uchiha and my extended family and 300% ready for sleep.

I was so tired that my bed felt like it was hugging me back when I fell into it, fully clothed.

Turned out, when I woke the next morning, I’d fallen into Dad’s bed instead…hehe, oops.

The next few weeks were a whirlwind, where Teuchi and I finally had to draw the line and settle for 60 desserts per day. The first-come-first-serve policy was a bit tense, in all honesty.

“Pleaseeee, Kiharu-chan!” Hana wined, fully utilising the combined puppy-eye power of the Trio, as she grasped onto the front of my yukata. “I totally forgot and Kaa-san’s gonna kill me!”

“Hana,” I shrugged guiltily, even though it wasn’t my fault. The fridge was empty by 2pm and that was just the way it was. “I’m sorry but all my baking is for tomorrow’s batch…why don’t you get her something else?”

“Urgh, Kiharu…But she wanted key-lime and she didn’t even have a card to open this morning!"

I pinched my kouhai’s cheeks as I narrowed my eyes at her, face miserable and squashed between my hands. “Well, it’s hardly my fault if you forgot your own mother’s birthday!”

The demand had started decreasing gradually, however, as the novelty wore off. We still sold out by two o’clock most days but the hustle and bustle had eased. Maybe it wasn’t demand but just people getting used to availability? I didn’t know, I was a brat, after all.

I’d started regularly circulating a list of desserts (for my eyes only) which meant that the selection changed day-by-day. Despite this, after almost three weeks, the regulars had tasted almost everything I’d put forward for the stall. I was in no way out of recipes but I’d have to start experimenting again soon. But with the fridge, it wasn’t like I’d hit a wall, or anything, but I could sense a shift. Once people had tried the stuff, quite a few only came back rarely, some probably preferred the usual dishes they had grown up with and others were my faithful regulars.

Speaking of faithful regulars-

“Hi, Kiharu-chan!” an arm was slung over my shoulder (making me lean over wonky) and I was pulled against Shisui’s side. Or rather, he was pulled into mine, considering the height difference of almost 4 inches. It was adorable and I was very proud of it.

“Shisui-kun!” I whooped, looping an arm around my best friend’s waist and reeling him in for a hug. He’d been gone for weeks now, some mission I couldn’t know about. He was awfully busy for a nine-year-old. I ducked his head under my chin, pressed into my neck – just because I could – and squeezed the stuffing out of him.

He’d missed so much! And Ensui was no fun anymore without Shisui there to help me tag-team him out of training. We still got on brilliantly, of course, but our time together was so much more sedate without our energetic third member. And Ensui was only getting busier, the Chuunin exams drawing closer every day. The older Nara may have been just as lethargic as Shikamaru, but he was much more intense in his training regime. I’d last seen him a week ago, when I’d dragged him from his house in the early morning for a breakfast picnic.

As yummy as it was, filled with the Nara’s favourites, his baleful glare let me know I was in no way excused.
Shisui chuckled at my enthusiasm, patting my back and sighing in relief when I finally let him go. I’d probably been crushing his lungs as his face was all flushed and smile a bit dopey…he was a ninja! He could deal, huh!

That day was spent filling in the older boy on all he had missed. He tried to fill me in as well, telling me about a herd of deer he’d seen and all the cool stuff in the villages he’d passed through but…most of it was classified and some of the other stuff obviously reminded him of difficult things. When I saw the happy gleam in his eyes start to fade, I’d rush in with the latest anecdote and it would come flaring back, making me sigh with relief. It was an illusion of normalcy as much as it wasn’t.

We walked all over the place, stopping for chicken and coconut buns at lunchtime and then popping in to see Genma fight with his nurses (he aggravated his neck wound complaining so much and the nurse took malicious pleasure in assigning him another week’s stay). Shisui was a great listener; ooh’-ing and ‘Ahh’-ing (a bit cluelessly) over my display (and making my eyebrow twitch when he asked what the point of all the lace was if it wasn’t edible). Of course, Shisui wasn’t perfect, thank Kami. He ate far too much to be healthy for his stomach (he was my best customer) and didn’t get on with Izumo or Kotetsu (the respect after Genma’s hospitalisation had quickly faded back to some strange rivalry, as if each side had suddenly remembered that the other was a dick) as well as teasing me relentlessly when the mood struck him.

I loved him anyway.

Sometimes I just wanted to squirrel him home with me, where he wouldn’t have to go back to a cold house with some distant Aunt (I’d never met). He’d eat dinner with Neko-tou and Hitoshi and I and laugh and be a kid all the time, not just when he was with me and Ensui. I could almost see us, barefoot and in our pyjamas, drinking hot chocolate with the panther. I just…wanted them all to be happy. I’d used to wish the same thing about Itachi but Mikoto was such a loving mother, there was no one else I’d rather he be with.

I wondered if I was going to be this adoring of chibi-Naruto as well.

…sigh.

Undoubtedly.

The next morning, I was making my way to Genma’s room when I saw he already had a visitor.

To update on my escapades, my previous attempts at matchmaking had missed the mark, somewhat. Making them bump into each other, holding their hands as I walked between them and then trying to make them hold hands as I was leaving – these were all so amateur, I was frankly embarrassed by myself.

It was evidently the time for a more direct approach.

Coming from me? That was a heads up for catastrophe…at least for them.

“Genma-nee!” I bounced through the door, arms clasping a box of four matcha-cream donuts to my lil’ chest. The scene I had stumbled in on was one of an interrupted break-out.

Raidou was so responsible and caring in his own way-

The Tokubetsu Jonin was half-out of his hospital bed, already dressed in clothes from who-knows-
where, whilst Raidou was grasping his arms (cough, fists prepped to punch, cough) and almost shoving him back under the covers. The two were growling at each other (Genma had undoubtedly pissed his partner off) and I saw my golden moment.

“Is this what ‘Toshi calls mating?’”

The two men snapped their heads to look at me, Genma’s cool and Raidou’s collected façade shattering into identical expressions of horror.

They then went steaming tomato red and threw themselves away from each other. Raidou went arse-over-teakettle when he smacked into his abandoned chair. Genma almost leapt under the covers as he scrambled back into his previously-forsaken bed. As if that would hide him from me? Pfft.

Before either could recover, I continued maliciously (on the outside I was blinking like Bambi).

“Good.” I nodded firmly, seeing them separate. “Raidou would have to be my brother-in-law before you get all kissy!”

The ninja in question was frozen in shock on the floor whilst Genma let out a garbled groan from under the covers. Lunging over, perhaps enjoying my role a bit too much, I ripped the sheet from over his head and pointed impetuously at my second victim over my shoulder. “No, nee-chan! Don’t give in!” oh fuck, this was the best bit-! “Kaa-san said I shouldn’t let any boy near me without dating him for ages!”

“Raidou-nii!” well, I may as well be as pointed as possible- “Take my nee-san to dinner before you try and sedu – ggurk-!”

The hand over my mouth was connected to a cherry-red Genma. Who looked like he wanted to toss me in the Naka. And then, maybe, pitch himself in too.

_So frickin’ worth it though~_

………………………………………………………………………

Chapter End Notes

_A/N- I'm sorry! I had loads of deadlines before breaking up for Easter Holidays and then I had a tonne of travelling to do... But, excuses aside, I am here! With, more importantly, an update! I'm setting aside a fuck tonne of time this week as well to binge write some chapters. This means I'll hopefully be writing a few chapters ahead of posting so the updates can keep flowing even if I take some time off xxx_
Chapter Summary

Sometimes, luck just wasn't on your side.
Meringue could split and cookies could burn.

...Let's just get this over with, yeah?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The next few months blurred by.

One moment it was August and the next it was January.

?????

There were no more frantic hospital visits (even if Tou-san got a scar across his bicep from the Land of Rivers) or some horrendous event looming on the horizon. Life was relatively peaceful, if busy. October had been miserable and wet, ironically appropriate for the anniversary of Kyuubi. Dad had stood by Kaa-san’s headstone for ages, absently stroking the cold stone with a sad smile. I left some pretty glass beads for Noko, next to the silk flowers left by her parents.

Ino and Shika had celebrated their first birthday earlier in the month. I gave Shikamaru a hand-sewn felt deer (not all that aesthetic but it was sweet and I scented it thoroughly with my pine-soap – Hitoshi told me to, some weird cat-thing maybe – so it smelled of me) and a rose-patterned baby-kimono for Ino. But, aside from some small milestones, life just…moved on.

I was growing complacent at this point. 60 desserts each night and then shopping and work in the day. I was gradually refining my stock (just because I remembered how to make some stuff didn’t mean it was great) and settling on a more secure menu, based on the most popular dishes. Also, as much as I hated Japanese, I was slowly working my way through it. I wasn’t great, which was so annoying considering how much I had enjoyed reading and writing in my previous life, but I was slowly working on it.

There was absolutely no fucking way I was going to be uneducated.

I’d have to be reincarnated as a shrub to stop me from learning shit.

Dad was so much busier now than when I was younger. Whilst, for a while, he’d stopped taking missions outside of the village (when he became a single parent), the loss of Shinobi from both the War and Kyuubi meant there was strain to cover demand. Ergo, he was gone a lot. Ensui, who was in Suna for the Chuunin Exams at the moment, and Shisui were away more as well. Even Izumo and Kotetsu were always scurrying about on D ranks!

Hana had finally entered the Academy and was taking her class by storm. Itachi was in the same class as her and I was just waiting for the prodigy bomb to go off any day now.

Genma, back on the rota and still twitchy when the three of us (Raidou, Genma and myself) were in
the same room, was definitely in full-time ANBU. Not only was he never in the Hokage tower these
days, but he would go off on missions for ages, with barely a heads-up. I only really saw him once a
month, which was starting to piss me off.

Hitoshi was, of course, around, just as always. We got on like a house on fire, despite our biting
sarcasm. I’d have said that I’d never been closer to the cat but- we’d always been extremely close.
I’d barely been without the feline for the majority of my life, even if I still couldn’t summon him. It
had taken weeks of meditation – which was hard as I kept falling asleep – to finally feel the subtle
tingle of ‘chakra’ in my limbs

I was still half convinced that that was just pins and needles from sitting too long.

Anyway, that ‘feeling’ was about as far as I’d gotten with the whole ‘summoning’ front. Hitoshi
definitely overestimated how difficult it was to use chakra the older you got, even if I wasn’t really
committing myself, had the issues of my mind not quite believing I could, and I was only a little older
than most academy kids. It had been around 6 months of extremely half-hearted attempts and I
certainly was taking longer that conceivable possible. I should probably get a move on, anyway…

But the issue with Hitoshi, aside from being a stick-in-the-mud?

He was a fucking cat.

Call me crazy for wanting human companionship.

So, yeah, I felt a bit out of it.

Most of my friends were too busy nowadays to play around. They weren’t children anymore.

This coming from the kid who wanted to become a business owner before 12. Ahem.

Speaking of children, a civilian girl called Mariko had invited me to join in her game when I walked
passed the playground a few weeks back.

Ahh, warning signs already, right?

Yeah, that’s right. It didn’t go well.

Why were they all so stupid? The girls, whose names I unapologetically forgot as soon as they said
them, just giggled and sat around, playing with the swings. Now, I loved swings (who the fuck
didn’t?) but there were only two on the bars so we had to take it in turns. The girls were so slow,
barely swinging at all and then just loitering instead of moving off so I could have a go! And then,
when I started going as high as possible, they started squealing. And babbling about how dangerous
that was and they were gonna tell Kaa-san because that’s naughty to go so high and omg Kiharu
you’re so brave~

I wasn’t welcome back when I flipped them the bird and told them to stop being so annoying.

Not my finest moment, I’ll admit.

It was just-urgh. I’d been spoiled with ninja children, in all honesty. They were so much more mature
than my neighbourhood kiddies, talking much like I did.

I didn’t really feel older than my peers, especially with the boys, because I still felt emotion like I was
a little girl and they were all so mature. My older memories meant I was more jaded and had been
self-aware my entire life (it was weird when I dream-remembered being in the womb again) and
could understand things that would pass over the heads of others. Let’s not forget, as well, the
everitable encyclopaedia of Naruto in my head. And all my Uni coursework I sometimes caught
myself stressing over, before I remembered I had frickin’ died and so didn’t have to sit that exam.

But anyway! I was living as a child and everything but…that didn’t mean my matured and
developed brain didn’t get pissed off. I tried not to be so affected by a technical ‘age difference’ (I
was not gonna sabotage my own life and happiness by isolating myself from everyone, thanks very
much) but the girls…they were obviously their own people but, at such a young age, they seemed so
shallow.

I wondered if this was why ninja felt so disjointed from their civilian counterparts.

All they had talked about were flowers and dresses and, as much as I would happily have girl-talked
from dawn ‘til dusk, I hadn’t been in the mood. It frustrated me that that was all they could talk
about. They were sweet and simple but there was no deeper discussion. Their personalities weren’t
developed enough to engage me. Like when I played toys with my younger cousins, their thought
processes frustrated me. It was more fun to choose to talk about trivial things than to be forced to. Is
this what child-geniuses felt like?

I was also in a terrible, unforgiving mood which would never in a million years have mixed well
with children. I’d never been very good making friends.

My darling Noko had been a stroke of luck, a baby that caught my attention via my usual antics, and
then Hana and the boys had just fallen into place.

In my previous life, I had been part of a friendship group throughout my time at school. Despite over
6 years of friendship, as soon as we left we never spoke again. Until I met my best friends at
University, I’d never realised how empty those friendships had been. I’d always felt out of sync,
going through the motions of closeness but never actually feeling it. The children here were similar; I
could smile and wave and laugh with the kids in the market place, or in my neighbourhood, but it
didn’t feel right.

When you reached that level of closeness with some people, those other friendships just felt fake.
Because they weren’t actually real, just children passing time and not wanting to be alone. You
weren’t there because you knew them and loved who they were inside, but because your parents had
told you to go out and play and they weren’t annoying.

Noko may have come from a ninja family but she’d been a normal girl! She’d had no issues making
friends and I’d often wondered why she chose me, of all people, to cling onto. She’d been good and
pure and sweet and I missed her. She’d been my first friend here and I was so sad she wasn’t around
anymore to see my bakery or for me to cheer her on as a kunoichi. We’d already planned to live
together when we were older. We’d giggled and dreamed of times when Noko would stop being a
ninja and open up a flower shop joined onto my bakery. I’d have been her Maid of Honour and
she’d have been mine. And if we didn’t find love? We’d have lived together forever.

I’ll admit I’d fucked it up at the playground but I wasn’t invested enough to particularly care.

But…maybe I’d try again.

…When they all hit puberty and got vastly more entertaining.

My little celebration of Christmas (winter felt so long and empty without it) was interrupted by-
There wasn’t really anyone around to interrupt. Or so it sometimes felt like.

As the days grew shorter, the darkness had started affecting my mood.

My honey glazed pork (the smallest joint at the market) was just a touch too salty (I forgot to soak it the night before) and my parsnips were a bit charred but, all in all, it was tasty. Starchy and heavy food that I missed. Like the previous years, I had dressed in Kaa-san’s sweater with purple knitted tights and the throw from the sofa around my shoulders. It felt like a little ritual and the thought brought me comfort.

Hitoshi had left that morning to help dad on his escort mission to Tea (I asked for dried rose tea as a souvenir) and the house was silent. Normally, my family would never have left me home alone but, with Kaa-san gone and Dad busier than ever and in need of his summon, there wasn’t much choice.

Whilst I was sometimes glad for the time alone, where I could sit and remember and make plans, these past months had been pretty lonely.

There was such a thing as being stuck in your own head.

Thinking was dangerous. It made me panic and think about all the mistake I could have made. It made me sad, thinking about all that I had lost. Those thoughts really shook me. I’d never been a pessimistic person, sarcastic sure, but never anything I couldn’t immediately bounce back from. Thinking like this…I wondered who I was becoming. Was this because I’d died, because of losing people or from being born into a Shinobi world? I didn’t know.

I thought about being reborn again. I hoped I’d live a full life this time around but then, what if I was reincarnated again?

Would it hurt more to have another life cut off short or to have to do it all again?

I’d had nightmares before, about never living past my 20th birthday, like in that one book I’d read. The girl had been reborn countless times and, no matter what she did, she always died on her 20th birthday. Even when she tried to end it all beforehand, she would survive until then.

My imagination had always been overactive and now, in an empty house with leave-less branches pressing against the windows, I spooked myself more times than I cared to count.

I worried about what could be happening to the others, not just on their missions but in general. Was Gaara alone? Was Naruto?

I tried very hard not to think about Noko at this point. (There…had been a reason…I had been desperate for a body. It was a far-fetched theory- a nightmare, in honesty- considering all the missing people from that night, but my mind had never been very good at granting me peace.

I didn’t dare think about any of it.)

I tried very hard to focus on the cakes in the oven, the dishes I was washing, the kettle as it whistled.

It was at this time that I rewrote the most songs, branching out from Disney to include some love songs like Celine Dion or Ed Sheeran. Whatever I remembered best. It tended to be older songs, that I had sung for a lifetime, or the catchiest recent hits which had been stuck in my head when I’d died.
It was the easiest way to cheer myself up when I got it right or distract myself when I hit a road block. The house, for the most part a bit on the empty side (but then, when hadn’t it been after Kaa-san died?), echoed with my poor vocals. At this point in life, I didn’t even care if I sounded average.

I’d never missed fanfiction more. I sometimes smiled when I remembered a particularly funny headcanon or fanart from Tumblr. I remembered scenes from my favourite fics, ones I had read over and over and then I’d wish I could read them again.

Films too. I remembered the up-side-down car chase in *Men in Black* and the dance off in *A Very Goofy Movie*. I could hum along to the instrumental from *Pride and Prejudice* (any of them) or re-inact pretty much the entire *Grinch* movie. I’d drawn the Grinch when I was a kid, telling Neko-ka that it was a grumpy moss fairy and she’d laughed at my imagination. I’d pretended Cindy-Lou was her (the hair colour had been close enough in colour).

So, I had a lot of time alone and found myself seeking out company (no more playground kids, though). Sora-oba was always a good bet but with her came the screaming mood-killer of my imouto. After running for the hills after the first few visits were cut short by dulcet shrieks, I decided to suck it up.

So, that winter, I spent plenty of time babysitting.

At this point, I was pretty much the elder sister to the entire next generation of Ino-Shika-Chou, despite only planning on Ino. All three of them were permanent fixtures in my heart, though. Shika was always on my shoulder and Chouji, if I sat cross legged on the floor, would tumble like a panda cub into my lap and then happily stay put for hours. Ino was considerably more independent, shakily crawling around my general vicinity in between bouts of tears.

I wondered if she’d ever give up on making such a racket.

Remembering the fuss she’d made in the anime- never mind.

Heaving the babies around was not only good exercise (I needed to work off all that cream) but also an excellent distraction. They were incredibly time consuming and they made me feel so happy. I’d always loved kids and maybe, in this life, I could finally get to have some. Being the youngest before and an only child now, I revelled in the adoration of my charges.

Well, Chouji was my darling cinnamon roll (maybe a red panda cub?). Shika just used me like an audible cat cushion and Ino wasn’t too interested in anything but working out the fastest ways to get attention.

It also gave me plenty of time to chat with their mothers.

Sora-oba and I had never been closer. I was hesitant to call her another mother-figure but she was certainly as close to me as my elder sisters had been. My healthy respect for Yoshino had grown even more. She was a bit too mean for my tastes (I could be savage, I’ll admit, but for the most part that was *funny*) and I wasn’t sure how she could yell at Shikaku instead of shower him in adoration (*cough*), but kudos to her, I guessed. She was pretty bad ass. I just kind of wished she’d lay off Ensui, he was looking a bit peaky these days. Finally, Kaiya was a busy woman, running a business, but she always made sure to have time for Chouji and I admired her even more for that. She’d briefly mentioned the past week if I was planning on expanding my sales to other restaurants etc but I hesitated.

I’d been an idiot, I knew, thinking I could go it alone. Kaiya had given me a very stern talking to about the differences between good working relationships and being carried by others, but I was still
leery.

I’d been approached, both Teuchi and I had, about selling my recipes or working for others but I didn’t want to. Minato, the kind and wonderful man, had bought me a patent for my recipes when I’d called the Yondaime’s after him. (He’d floundered so hard when I’d cried, not knowing how to do that myself. Normally you had to get a patent for a collection or per item but Minato, being Hokage, had wrangled me a blanket one.) So, if any recipes that were knock-offs of mine emerged, I could press charges or demand royalties.

I just didn’t want to be used.

The next logical step was, in my mind, to start my own market stall.

Getting the council’s permission for that venture? Not so easy.

I was a civilian child wanting to own a valuable part of the marketplace, which was the most important contributor, aside from missions, to Konoha’s economy.

Haha, I didn’t think so.

I was almost tempted to start a petition (the Uchiha kids would definitely sign…well, the ones who were old enough to know how to write) but I figured it would be much more impressive if I went through ‘official channels’ successfully.

Also, I didn’t really think a bunch of brats signing a sheet would have much of an effect other than to piss off the bureaucracy by ‘wasting their time’.

Thus, enter diabolical plan #1.

Genma AKA plan ‘Lets-appease-ANBU-motherfuckers!’

“Nee-san!” I whooped, flinging myself with practised ease into the arms of my wandering older brother. The man in question, out of Konoha for two months, the bastard, caught me easily. I was hugged firmly for a few minutes before the man got bored of holding a girl half his size and plonked me back down to ground.

And what did I do in retribution for such a brief cuddle after such a long absence?

“Nee-san!” I grabbed his left hand between mine and gasped in disappointment at seeing it unadorned. “No ring, yet? But I want to be a flower girl!”

The hand was yanked from mine and Genma frantically glanced around for eavesdroppers (or maybe just Raidou). “Brat,” he hissed, pulling me into Ichiraku’s like one would enter a bomb shelter (hastily and with great paranoia).

“You can’t say things like that, kid,” Genma tried to convince me for the thousandth time as I smiled happily, trotting along beside him as he headed for the bar.

“Although,” I continued loudly, as if I hadn’t been so rudely interrupted. Ichiraku’s was busy, anyway. “If the two of you had gotten married without me, I’d never have forgiven you! I’d make your lives miserable!” I declared, pretending I didn’t hear the older man grouch that I was doing that already.

Ahh, sweet, sweet vengeance.
“What’s this about marriage, Shiranui-san?” Teuchi innocently asked as he came over to take our orders. I beamed when he winked at me, away from Genma’s gaze.

Of course, at this latest development, the senbon-wielder had smacked his head on the countertop with a low groan so he wasn’t exactly paying attention.

“Careful, nee-san,” I cautioned, ticking off a ramen from my tally. “If you hurt yourself, Raidou-ni might try and take care of you and then-” I stoked his head consolingly, “I’ll be forced to defend you again.”

I couldn’t wait to fuck things up when we were older and Genma became a ‘heart-throb’. I, rather evilly, planned to be my ‘sister’s’ own self-appointed ‘cock-block’ and I was sure to have a whale of a time (until he eventually killed me).

But, ahem, I had a mission so screwing with his mind would have to be put aside for now.

“Gemma-nee, do any of your friends want to try my cakes?” I cocked my head like a curious bird and Genma’s eye peaked over the top of his folded arms at the shift in topic.

I moved back, as did my companion, when Teuchi slid the ramen in front of us and took a moment to praise the man, before soldiering on.

“I know you’re a really important shinobi, nee-san…but Minato-sama used to say that little things made a difference, like my Yondaime’s.”

I pursed my lips, swirling my noodles and wondering why I felt so shy.

“Would…they like some dessert?”

Genma’s heavy hand came to rest on top of my head as he picked up his chopsticks with the other.

“That sounds nice, kid.”

Of course, all good things have to come to an end.

This particular ‘ending’ came in the form of a dessert disaster.

And it wasn’t my fault.

“WAhh!” I half-screamed, tiramisu flying up into the air, when a heavy weight crashed into my back and sent me to the ground.

There were yells all around us as the person who’d ploughed over on top of me scrambled up quickly, painfully stabbing me with heels and elbows. I lay there, head tilted to stare furiously at the mess of cake and cream on the dusty earth.

My beautiful tiramisus, specially made for Mikoto’s tea party (the first time around had been a great hit), were completely ruined.

Whoever that was…I was going to kill them-

“S-sorry! Sorry!” the criminal, a boy, babbled as he tugged on my coat, trying to get me upright. There were yells from above us – ninja on the rooftops, I figured – and the boy, holding me up by my hood, dropped me back on my face as he swore and continued running up the road.
Lifting my head, dusty and bruised and with a bit of cream smeared somewhere, I caught sight of a dark ponytail as the gaki bolted.

*If that was a Nara, they better have already picked out their funeral arrangements.*

Yoshino would definitely help me hide the body.

“You have my deepest apologies, Mikoto-hime,” I bowed lowly as I delivered the news that the cakes had been smeared on the pavement on my way over.

The woman was very forgiving, reassuring me that it wasn’t my fault, but I still felt horrendously guilty.

That and some of the women were tittering about the irresponsibility of children in the next room. Tch.

So, I left completely bummed out. It was even worse when I had to walk past the mess of tiramisu on my way.

Not particularly wanting to go home and mope, I made my way to Kaa-san’s favourite dress shop. Two hours of browsing and I felt considerably more chill. I meandered a few more shops, picking up a few things for dinner and a cute door knocker shaped like a Lucky Cat, when a random shinobi called out to me on the street.

“Excuse me, civilian-san.” The man was average height with salt and pepper hair (and a huge scar that bisected his mouth and continued under his collar) and looked pretty okay. As in, not about to kill or arrest me.

I was far more interested in the kid his was pulling along behind him by his collar.

That ponytail was disgustingly familiar and I glared furiously at my assaulter from earlier.

“You!” It was a touch dramatic but I thought the pointed finger really conveyed my sentiments perfectly.

The boy blushed scarlet in embarrassment when my shout drew the attention of those around us. Didn’t stop the lil prick glaring right back, though.

“I take it you are the girl he knocked over this morning?” the ninja, still unidentified, cocked an eyebrow before continuing. “Well, Umino-”

*What*

“-san was running away from the scene of a paint bomb prank he had set up, which resulted in the damage of public property at the Academy. Whilst fleeing the scene of his crime, he caused harm to your person and was later caught. He has been appropriately reprimanded by his teachers and now, he is here to apologise for the harm done to you, civilian-san.”

I didn’t want to deal with this.

I just wanted Older!Iruka, the cute and responsible cinnamon roll teacher. Not the younger prankster brat!

“Dazai Kiharu,” I absentmindedly introduced myself. “and he knocked my tiramisu from my hands,
which was an important delivery for Mikoto-hime’s tea party.”

The ninja, who identified himself as Kunikida-sensei, blinked at me in surprise, eyes wide. “You’re the one who makes Teuchi-san’s cakes?”

Aww, I’m recognised!

“Hai!” I nod and Kunikida’s mouth tugged into a brief smile before he became stern once more. Turning to his charge, who was still scarlet and staring somewhere near my shoes, he pushed the boy closer, moving to stand behind him with his hands on his student’s shoulders.

“Ah-I’m very sorry, Dazai-san.” He sounded like the most interesting combination of apologetic and grumpy. I was, of course, sobbing internally at the state precious Iruka was in. He must be protected, my inner fangirl chanted, even when he’s smol and angry.

Fuck this life, okay?

“Okay, Umino-san,” I tried to be mature for once. “You have to carry all my ingredients to make new tiramisu, though.” Nope, didn’t work.

The future-academy teacher gaped at me, probably not expecting me to enlist him as a donkey. Unfortunately for the orphan, his teacher seemed to think it was a splendid idea – “It is only fair, Umino-san,” – and, after accepting my offer of a free dessert from Teuchi as thanks for sorting everything out, the middle-aged Chuunin waved the two of us off.

I’d not actually planned to go ingredient shopping today but oh well!

Three hours later and safely back at my own house, I wanted to wrangle the brats neck.

He was so annoying! Yeah, he was a wonderful person…when he was older. As a kid? I wanted to kill him. I’d thought the shopping trip would prove to be a good opportunity to improve my opinion of him, a second chance, and also punishment for earlier.

It was torture for us both.

He was like the kid in the Wave Arc, all “woe is me” and “I’m so tragic”. Everyone in the village had lost something important to them but Iruka was all but self-sabotaging himself over the death of his parents. I knew that it wasn’t the same, I still had a family and everything, but I was a bit angry at him too. Acting out was never gonna do him any favours and I couldn’t live with myself if Iruka ruined things for himself in the heat of the moment. I wondered if the Sandaime had spoken to him yet, like in the anime, and hoped he hadn’t; If this was Iruka after Sarutobi reached out to him, I couldn’t image the handful he’d been beforehand.

I still kinda wanted to help him but…well, I’d already known that no character was perfect etc. but, Iruka had been so adorable I’d clean forgotten what he’d been like as a child.

The answer? A demon. (The joke…bit too close to home? Oops)

The entire time had been spent with me throwing bags at him as I tried to instigate a conversation, in-between haggling and chatting with all my favourite shopkeepers. The boy just stood there though, a deep flush on his face. I was pretty nice to him, not rude or snide or anything, but he was obviously uncomfortable none the less. It could have turned into a nice trip but it just ended up being an absolute drag. Even if Iruka had apologised, towards the end I’d wondered if he actually meant it.

I was almost tempted to visit him with cakes at the orphanage but…I wasn’t good at making friends
and was worried I’d be imposing. Like some blundering child who ends up insulting everyone and looking like I’m rubbing my own situation in their faces.

When you’re low, there’s nothing worse than pity, after all.

But for a kid who felt like they had nothing? Maybe a hand in the dark could make all the difference.

The next morning, I woke up to snowfall and a head cold.

Fantastic.

Chapter End Notes

A/N- Yo! Bit of a speedy update, I know. Lots of talk about pairings after the last chapter and I’d just like reiterate that the poll is early for a reason! I’m writing ahead of the chapter's posted and I need to know everyone’s thoughts, like, now. So, no panicking over super early romance. Also, Kiharu may have a 20yr-old past life stuck in her head but she feels the emotions of her physical body! She's not gonna be a cougar or feel bad about 'age differences'. When she swears or makes 'adult-y' comments, that's because she knows how to and what they mean. It's part of her personality! So, yeah, she ain't no perv, alright? Okay, rant over haha. Thanks for the amazing support, this last chapter got an insane response and I'm frickin' blushing. Thanks everyone!!! x P.S- someone asked if losing a parent wasn't a bit of a cliché but, in a ninja world, the chances of both parents surviving is even rarer and the plot twist of being orphaned is even more overused lol
Family stuff

Chapter Summary

There were certain foods that I'd long connected to family. Apple pies weren't the same if they weren't mum's, no one could burn cookies like my sisters and my dad and I would always make cinnamon rolls (I'd make, he'd pay/eat) when I came home from a long trip.

Tou-san was pancakes with strawberries.

...which I always ended up eating the majority of. (You snooze, you lose-!)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The cold was so fucking miserable.

I’d not really had colds that much, as strange as it sounded for an 8-year-old. But it was true; any sign of a sniffle, Kaa-san would tuck me up against Hitoshi’s furnace-like heat and fill me up to the brim with soup. As I wasn’t going out to school or anything, the illness was usually blasted away before it could really take hold. Of course, I’d had some stomach bugs (but they were just 24-hour things you had to wait out) and I’d gotten chicken pox over and done with when I was three (I was glad I was too young to remember it the first time around) but actual colds? That lasted longer and wreaked havoc with your body? Not that common. Of course, there were much worse things out there but, for a kid and also a 20-year-old who’d never really experienced anything bad (the car and nose aside), it really crushed my mood.

That was the worse thing about being sick. You kinda forgot how it felt to be well again, as melodramatic as that sounded. You were just a bundle of snot and swollen, watery eyes.

I lay there for a while, squinting up at the swirling dust motes and trying to find the will to leave my cocoon of blankets. Finally, with a put-upon sigh, I peeled back my heavy duvet, pulling up the woollen socks that had half fallen off during the night, and shuffled downstairs for supplies. A box of herbal tea, some rudimental ‘paracetamol’, a flask of hot water (ay, look at me, thinking ahead) and a box of crackers with some cucumber. Getting my vits and all that.

Except for pee-breaks and to get more food, I kept myself as snuggled up as possible for just under three days. Sora-oba had been around briefly to check up on me, as she always did when I was home alone, but left quite quickly; she really couldn’t risk getting anything or passing my cold onto Ino-chan. After her short visit, she must’ve immediately brewed some vegetable soup, which she sent around via Inoichi, who thankfully stayed for longer to cheer me up.

Still, the next three days were pretty hazy, even with the daily visits.

Hana popped around too but, as it was during school-time and the days were pretty short, she didn’t get to stay very long before it started getting dark and she was due back at the Compound. However, the puppies were super cute for cuddles and Hana had me giggleing over how her academy days were going so far. Apparently, it only took the fangirls until the third lesson of the day to sniff out Itachi as
the object of their obsession.

I would pay good fucking money to see that boy chased by girls, who weren’t even old enough for hormones. Talk about jumping the gun, ladies! (I made a mental note to try and make popcorn before witnessing such entertainment. It was just…corn in a pan, right?)

Anyway, it was after three days of misery that Hitoshi came home.

“And what,” a deep drawl had me shooting up in bed, flinging the children’s book from my hands in the direction of the intruder, “state have I come back to find you in, cub?”

The panther, evidently deeply unimpressed with my human weakness, leapt up to the bed and slumped beside me. The sudden scorching heat had me curling up into his side, my huddled body easily fitting against his tummy. I ignored the dust from the road that coated his fur, evidence that he’d come straight from the mission, and snuggled into his warmth.

Damn, I was glad he was home. I really did love that cat…not that I’d ever say it to the smug bastard’s face.

“It’s not like I chose to get sick, ‘Toshi,” I grumbled into midnight fur, already half asleep when the summon started purring. The vibrations were extremely soothing and I didn’t even bother to hum back, way too sleepy.

“You’re ridiculous enough to be at blame,” he pointed out.

Shifting to encompass me, tail curling up to flick against my cheek, Hitoshi settled his head down on my back.

“Sleep, cub,” his voice reverberated through my head, “Seiichi-sama will be back from the Tower soon.”

……………………………………………………………………………………

“-And I will always loveeeeee you-oooooh!” I belted out, wincing when my voice warbled out the shakier notes.

Whitney was super hard, okay? There was a reason why Simon Cowl always looked suicidal when the track started playing on the X Factor/BGT live auditions. And in Japanese? When I tried to sing it the original way, I sounded really disjointed and just plain weird. But like hell I was gonna completely revamp the entire thing.

Part of me felt bad for my neighbours. I was kind of surprised no one had come to see what poor animal was dying in my house but, well, ninja villages and all that. Weirder stuff happened…?

I probably sounded like a yowling cat, anyway. It was, hehe, the feline in me. And I was celebrating my voice returning to normal! Fuck you, cold!

With a final flourish, which was just a few beats too late to coincide with the song, I finished piping the icing on the last butterfly cupcake. They were simple chocolate and vanilla, decorated with orange and blue dyed icing and in cute little paper cases. Which I made whilst I was sick.

I’d never laugh at my sister’s origami again. Not like she was around for me to laugh at her…ahh, you get the point. It took way too long and the house is now basically empty of paper. At least it was something to do when I was sick but it was annoying because I didn’t even know how to do it (no glue stick to cheat, cry) and I had to keep them sanitary. Washing my hands and coughing out the
window got really old really fast.

Never say I didn’t see things through, though.

Humming the chorus, I popped the cupcakes into tubs I’d set out along the countertop before piling them carefully into my red cart. A quick glance in the mirror to make sure my ponytail wasn’t stuck up embarrassingly (it had happened before and Shisui, cheeky bugger, didn’t even tell me for the entire day), I donned my winter coat and furry boots before leaving the house, goodies in tow.

Wow, I hoped I wouldn’t regret this!

Knowing myself, this could go very very wrong.

It had been almost a week since I’d almost killed Iruka and I’d been bed bound for three days whilst the cold raged war with my sinuses. Being miserable and sick had given me a lot of time to reflect on what had gone down between the other boy and I and I’d come to a conclusion.

Older, cinnamon roll Iruka was worth the difficulty of relating to his younger self!

I’d yank the brat out of his funk and then convince him to adopt Naruto! When he was older, of course, _ahem._

But, for now, I’d settle for cupcakes at the orphanage.

The wind was bitter outside but, thankfully, the snow hadn’t stuck that much to the ground. It was early January, so winter was still in full swing and it could certainly be felt.

“Hitoshi!” I yelped, shoving the cat in question towards the gate. Well, _tried to_ might be a better description of what was going down; Hitoshi was as long as my dad was tall and definitely weighed more. “Please come with me!” I begged. Pride? What pride? I just didn’t want to go alone.

“Why would I want to go with you to some orphanage, so some sticky faced brats can pull at my tail?” The bastard didn’t even bother opening his eyes. It was winter; why was he on the porch anyway, if not to wait to go with me?

Sucker, I could see right through him.

“Tou-san told you to go with me if I left the house in this weather,” I pointed out reasonably, pretty pleased that I actually had a mature retort for once.

One extremely unimpressed side-eye later and the two of us were heading off down the street. Hitoshi was leading, seeing as he knew the village like the back of his hand…err, paw… and I’d never been to the Orphanage before.

The neighbourhood started to looking increasingly, and predictably, rundown, even if the fine layer of snow meant that the blemishes and cracks in the concrete were hidden. It was like some of the alleyways that led from the market place, a bit dodgy but still okay. Was this place similar or better than where Naruto’s apartment would be?

If the headcanon about the Red-Light District was right, I’d adopt the boy on the spot, child myself or not.

We’d been walking for about twenty minutes when I saw the sign for the Orphanage.

“Aw, hell,” I grumbled, eyeing the stained wooden gates, warped from age until they bent crooked
in their hinges. Surely a D-rank fence repair wouldn’t break the bank? Okay, maybe now I was just getting judge-y. Sharing a glance with Hitoshi – err, should I knock or…? – the panther shoved his shoulder against one of the doors and strolled right on through.

Right, sorry, forgot I was travelling with the King of the Universe.

Poking my head through the gap to scope out the scene, I gingerly followed my compatriot. Why did I feel like I was breaking and entering? Well, the ninja cat certainly wasn’t reassuring on the whole ‘legality’ front.

The gates opened up to a generic courtyard, half tarmac and half (currently dead) grass. There were a few balls abandoned around the place, dusted lightly with icing sugar-like snow. The building itself was a bit like an apartment block, washed sandstone with empty window boxes (not like anything would survive at this time of year). The noise inside, a muted and constant thrum of chatter, reassured me that there were people about. At least there was less of a chance of this being a wasted trip. Hitoshi had already started the stone steps up to the front door and didn’t even glance back at me. Tch, rude.

I wish I could be so self-assured, I grumbled under my breath. (His ears twitched and I knew he’d heard.)

Reaching up to ring the door bell (and knock a few times, just in case), I found myself twisting my free hand into the fur at my guardian’s neck, the other reaching behind me to hold the handle of the cart (still at the bottom of the steps).

An awkward moment later and the door was flung open, startling me so much I almost leapt a foot in the air and let out a short squeak.

Fuck, that was embarrassing!

A kid, maybe 12, stood in front of us, one hip cocked confidently to the side and still grasping the door like she’d slam it on our faces in an instant.

“Yes?” Well, shit, she even sounded in charge. Her brows were raised high on her forehead. Toffee latte skin and charcoal eyes that looked far too old in her face. Well, I recognised that impetuous look anywhere.

“Is Umino Iruka here?” I didn’t beat around the bush. With girls like her, you were best off cutting to the chase. Any faffing and she’d cut you down to the quick.

“What do you want?” So that was a yes then.

I narrowed my eyes. “To see him, obviously.”

She eyed me for a moment before letting me past. It was a bit awkward, turning around to lug the cart up behind me, but I resolutely ignored her as I shuffled inside. The hall way was considerably brighter, pale wooden floors and neutral green walls. An empty umbrella stand and a few stray toys with a white door at the end of the corridor and a long staircase along the far wall.

Hitoshi seemed to have zero issue strolling in like he owned everything, making a beeline for the door and casually reaching up to pull the handle with one forepaw. The room, obviously the main playroom, was stuffed full with kids. Some were only toddlers, all collected in a pen with cushions and a few carers keeping an eye on them. Most of them must’ve been around my age, a few closer to Ensui’s age but, by then, most had either moved out as shinobi (legal adults) or in with their apprentice Masters.
There must have been 30 kids and I broke a sweat.

Aww, shit, I knew this would go wrong!

Slowly, our loitering in the doorway garnered some attention and then we had a bunch of brats blinking at us.

A little boy, ginger and freckly and 5-years-old, howled in excitement at the sight of the great, fuck-off cat beside me. Well, I’m sure that was a pleasant change for the big cat, seeing as I tried to maim him when we’d met. (That special pillow was safely on my side of the bed, by the way…)

Small hands wrapped around the cat as the kids started clambering to touch the ‘Awesome-Ninja-Lion’ (when I heard that, I fucking \textit{wheezed}). The cat looked positively distraught, like I’d announced that dogs reigned supreme and I wanted to genetically alter him into a wolf. One day, I might just suggest that for kicks. He’d probably go grey all over from shock. Or, more likely, curl his lip in disgust.

Well, so much for pleasant surprise!

Glad for the distraction, I picked my way through the mob, relieved that I pretty much blended in with the other kids (if you ignored my outdoor clothing) and made my way to the ‘reading corner’.

That bottle-brush ponytail was like a flare and I made a beeline for it.

Iruka was curled up on an old red armchair (worn like ones in Grandma’s house), a book in his hands.

“Yo!” I popped up in front of him and he jumped so hard, he almost fell out onto the floor. Oops, but I wasn’t too guilty. Anyway, if this kid was gonna be a teacher, he was going to need to develop eyes in the back of his head as soon as possible.

“I brought cakes!” I announced, smiling cheerfully down at the older boy as if we were buddies and not ‘enemies’ a few days ago. Fake it ‘til ya make it, gal.

“I, err. I thought you might like some of my baking. Find out what all the fuss was about, ya know…” I shifted when Iruka made no move to right himself or speak. Strangely flustered, I shoved a couple of cupcakes I’d reserved for him into his arms before stepping back a bit.

Kami-sama, if I wasn’t a socially awkward person. I’d been quite popular in my past life and quite the joker. Well, you lose some, you win some, I suppose.

“Ah-er-arigato, Kiharu-san…?” The ponytailed boy fumbled, scrambling back into place and looking supremely embarrassed. Well, that made two of us. He gingerly held the cakes in each hand and I almost made a joke about dropping them. Shit.

“I brought some for everyone else, as well.” I continued on, hating the awkward pause. When Iruka blinked in surprise, I hurried on to explain myself, not wanting to sound like I was trying to ‘buy’ anyone. “I just! I didn’t want you to be the only one getting cake and I always bake in bulk anyway – force of habit, I guess – and this way, loads more people get to try my stuff and, yeah.”

“That’s…really nice, Kiharu-san.” Iruka seemed to recover and he sent me a small smile. Maybe I wasn’t so bad at this!

“Enjoy, Iruka-kun!” Nope! I was still stupid, and, with that smooth ending, I all but fled back to my increasingly-pissed off feline.
The chick from the door had taken the initiative and pulled my trolley through into the room and the hordes had descended. One of the matrons, Suki-san, rushed over to thank me for my little gifts and some kids – the older ones who had enough presence of mind to remember manners, were willing to or weren’t stuffing their faces – gave me smiles and quick ‘thank-you’s as well.

Hitoshi looked like he was on a new level of ‘so done with this shit’ and seemed to be resisting natural instinct’s call for violence by sheer force of will.

It was time to go.

We left in a flurry, assuring the kids that Hitoshi was busy as a ninja and the matrons that they could drop the boxes off at Ichiraku’s next time they were in the market. I most definitely didn’t look back at where Iruka was standing.

Nor did I wave at him as we left. Pfft.

(He looked bewildered, face pink and scowling with one hand raised in a weird little wave.)

When it was nearing the end of February (two months filled with snow, and rain, and Ino’s migraine-inducing teething shrieks and Ensui crashing at ours to avoid Yoshino’s nagging-), Hitoshi dragged me, screaming, to our back garden.

I feel it is only fair to note that the bastard was pulling me with his gross hunting-slobbery-crotch-licking mouth by my fricking ponytail.

“It,” He dropped my head without care as he swaggered to sit in front of my corpse, “Has been almost a year, you wasteful lay-about.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I rolled my eyes, rubbing my abused scalp as I sat up. “Whoopee, I’m almost 9.”

“And you’ve yet to summon me.” He was evidently insulted that I wasn’t absorbed in the magnificence of his gift.

Honestly? I thought the idea was awesome. The idea. I could have Hitoshi around all the time and, when dad eventually died of old age, Hitoshi could still stick to me. But, at the same time, I was really nervous. It was hard to learn, okay, and a part of me still didn’t feel like I even had chakra. I’d never known it and, whilst the horrible spine-shivers-some-one’s-walking-over-my-grave feeling I got when my nose was healed touched on something, I’d never felt it. Aside from roof-hopping, Hitoshi occasionally disappearing/appearing in a cloud of smoke and some other stuff, I’d yet to really see any chakra-y thingies, like jutsu.

“You’re going to try it, now.” Hitoshi growled.

With a put-upon sigh, I slowly signed through the finger twisting shit I’d memorised before slamming one hand on the ground. All I was rewarded with was a smarting red palm. Oww-eee-

Hitoshi, now sat at the end of the garden so I’d be summoning him ‘to me’, sighed and ordered me to focus and do it again.

And so it continued.

For three weeks.
At this point I’d become aware of pins-and-needles in my wrist and worried that I was damaging my hands. Shisui told me that his chakra felt like it crackled in his veins, as his fire-nature was really strong. I asked him if my hand looked swollen to him before using it to yank his ear.

By my birthday, Hitoshi looked ready to spend the rest of his life making me do this. Whilst he was getting impatient (could you get impatient if you’d never been anything else your entire life?), the cat also seemed to be taking a sadistic pleasure in my pain. He probably thought we were suffering together somehow.

It was at the end of March when the pins-and-needles flared like an oil-burn on my palm and Hitoshi half-way landed like a sack of potatoes (170 pounds them) on my shoulders.

My first summoning! And the fat shit landed me back in Akane-sama’s living room with a dislocated shoulder.

“AAHHHHHHhhhhghhh-!” I screamed when the joint was forced back in. I wasn’t sure, blinking away tears, what was more painful; the broken arm or the ‘fixed’ one. By the end of the day I’d make sure it was Hitoshi’s balls that hurt the most, though.

My horrible summon, smug as fuck – despite my suffering and being yelled at by Dad, scolded by Akane-sama and almost strangled by an Ensui-Shisui tag-team –, told me to suck it up.

He shut up quickly when I asked Akane-sama if she knew any tips about purposefully botching a castration.

After that, there was truly no rest for the wicked. Whilst I was forced to practice every day (once was shoulder was healed…I milked it for as long as possible, of course, until Shisui wondered if I should go back to Akane-sama and I had to let it go), my summon was now at my beck and call like a good little minion.

I took malicious pleasure in summoning him into spaces he wouldn’t quite fit or when I was around small children. I’d never walked past the academy and playgrounds so much!

My fun was cut short when, half way through April, Yuri-oba-san got sick.

I’d known Yuri-oba as long as I’d been alive. Kaa-san had helped out at the dress shop for years, lending a hand when business was particularly stifling or she wanted something to do. After Kyuubi, Yuri-oba had always kept an eye out on me and I’d made it a habit to get the latest gossip from her dress-shop/seamstress boutique. When I felt down or bored, I’d always end up browsing her store and, despite calling her Auntie, Yuri-oba was the closest I’d ever had to a grandmother in this life. She was in her late sixties, not too old, but still starting to get on. Her hair, fading slowly from auburn to pepper-grey, was always in a high twist and I’d never seen her without her jade beads.

On a Tuesday morning, Yuri-oba collapsed in a coughing fit in the middle of a dress-fitting. Whilst she wasn’t taken to a healer, I’d insisted on bringing Akane-sama to check her over. The two women, despite circumstances, got on rather well and, when I’d left to bring my washing in off the line, the two were talking easily.

It was a nasty chest infection, not great for anyone, but there was no use crying over spilt milk.

Yuri-oba had been a little girl when the village had been founded, her parents moving here when she was a little older than I was now. In my eyes, she was as much a fixture of the village as the streets themselves and I spent all day making chicken broth to prove it. She’d never had a family of her own
after the death of her parents and I wasn’t going to leave her alone when she was unwell.

My days got considerably more stressful.

Yuri-oba had closed the shop for almost two weeks at this point, but I knew it couldn’t go on like this. Whilst she’d been slowly getting better, the cough in her chest was still nasty and there was no way she could go work at the moment. She’d had two shop assistants, Gin and Hoshiko, who’d started their apprenticeships a while ago (Gin, two years, Hoshiko, eighteen months) and, the following Saturday, I asked them to come in the next day. Sundays were always slowest, when everyone was lazing around and buying off the rack. The shop was only open 10-2 on a Sunday as well, so I felt it was a safe bet for what I had planned.

Now, I’d be in deep shit if I wasn’t reincarnated. I’d worked a few Saturday jobs in café’s and then in Zara so I wasn’t going in completely blind. And I’d been around Yuri-oba’s store from a very, very young age. I knew where everything was!

Except, apparently, the keys for the till.

“Just go and ask, Ki-chan,” Gin patiently explained. I ignored her, rummaging beneath the countertop with blindly fumbling fingers. “Yuri-oba-san is asleep! She was coughing all night and only just settled down so it’s super important she gets her rest!” I parried back, ignoring the blonde.

Twirling one wavy strand around her finger, Gin moved towards the stairs herself and I resisted the urge to throw something at her head. She was all ‘cool-girl’ at 15 and it was a bit grating on my nerves.

How dare she cheek me when I was the one running this show. At least Hoshiko was sweeter, if a bit quiet. In all honesty, they were both nice girls and I got on okay with them. I was understandably a little tense.

After locating the keys (in her room, you idiot), we opened up shop and our first customer arrived.

Kobayashi-san was a merchant’s wife, plump and a bit on the well-off side of life. She wanted new shoes and I graciously led her over to browse the selection, helping her match a pair of red heels with the scarf she’d brought. After that, a few more women came in, either for advice or to browse and it was just like helping friends shop, if a little nerve-wrecking. We closed up just after 2pm, shooing out a few teenagers who’d been giggling over a lilac kimono for a good fifteen minutes. With a sense of satisfaction, knowing that Yuri-oba wasn’t going to run out of money if we could keep this up, we split for the rest of the day.

I’d hurried back home, sorting out the washing with practiced ease before quickly starting my daily baking criteria.

This week’s special was lemon meringue pie and it was flying out the fridge! (I’d had to awkwardly use a Bunsen burner as a bow-torch on the top…hehe.)

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday went fine. The regulars asked about Yuri-oba and I took great pride in loudly chatting about how wonderful Akane-sama was, also mentioning how she’d so easily fixed my nose. When I saw Akane-sama smiled at by most of the shopkeepers in the Market on Wednesday evening, I patted myself on the back and treated myself to a slice of torte for dessert.

Thursday, I had my first nasty customer.

Now, I know, I know, ‘the customer is always right~’ but, let me say; that cow was so fucking wrong, okay?
“This is so tacky-” she whispered really loudly, fingering a green dress by the door. She didn’t even have anyone with her to whisper to! And that signalled the start of her long tirade at the quality of the clothes. When Hoshiko went over to see what her issue was, she started in on her as well. My fellow brunette was only calmly explaining that most of the clothes were made within the shop when the woman started picking a fight.

We ended up asking her to leave, but she’d already made a scene and the other customers looked super uncomfortable.

I would never understand the thought processes of people like that! Ahh, there were always problem customers though, ones that were unnecessarily rude and acted like they only went shopping so they could vent some frustration of their next clueless victim.

Well, honey, not in this shop!

Other issues, however, started to crop up; women coming in, desperate for fittings and then leaving when we said we weren’t skilled enough to help them. I was feeling pretty miserable about the whole thing (man, I fucking hated retail) and eventually Yuri-oba started working again, just with the fittings etc.

She was still weak and spluttering out the occasional cough but, sometimes it couldn’t be helped. Whilst the girls and I had kept the money coming in, we weren’t qualified for a business venture like that.

I wasn’t going to be available at the end of the month anyway; Dad, turning a grand old age of 35, had been rewarded for 20 years of service with a month off from missions and, the sneaky minx, had kept it aside for when I was a bit older.

Like now, for example.

“Err, so where are you going again, Ki-chan?” Shisui inspected the knapsack bag Tou-san had bought for me and, when he tried to open it up for a peek, I batted his hands away. No way on this earth was I gonna let that boy glimpse my panties.

“Tea, or do you not pay attention?” Ensui replied on my behalf, lounging on my bed, as per usual. He looked well rested for once, finally caught up on the sleep he’d lost on Thursday’s escort mission. And, of course, his eyeliner was sharp as his kunai.

Hot damn, what goals.

The Uchiha in question, now poking around on my desk, cheerfully tossed “Only when forced!” over one shoulder as he snooped. I didn’t think too much of it, too busy holding up a mint green yukata and it’s forest green twin up to Ensui (ignoring me and half asleep-I kicked him about a bit, of course) to decide between.

Well, up until Shisui (endearing thorn in my side) held up a music sheet and asked innocently what it was.

I swear to kami, I’d never moved so fast in my brief life. Flying through the air, Shisui knew better than to move; he could control the impact if I was allowed to hit him; whereas, if he dodged, there was a chance I’d break my nose for real this time.

I vaguely appreciated the effort.

With a loud thump, I sent us flying, hands already reaching before we’d even hit the floor. We
landed in a heap, Shisui barking out a surprised laugh but I was all business.

“Give-that-here!” I punctuated each word with a thump of my fist and whined when Shisui flapped the page just out of my reach. Sitting on top of the boy, I used my longer reach to pry at his fingers.

And then he Shunshin-ed away.

“Cheater!” I yelled, jumping upright, looking a mess and breathing hard. Shisui was curled behind Ensui’s bored form, using the older boy as a meat shield. Ensui didn’t even look bothered, neither annoyed or disturbed by our rough-housing. What a weird 17-year-old, sometimes, not at all phased that his best friends weren’t even teenagers yet. Loved him for that though. And I was his favourite, I reasoned.

“Ensui~” I grinned wickedly, “Please grab him.” My smile turned smug when the older Nara sighed and rolled his eyes but still reached around for the other boy.

And then I went sour when he simply pulled the paper closer, eyeing the words with interest.

“Well? What’s all the fuss?”

Levelling both boys with a frosty glower, I cut the moment short. “I write songs, sometimes.”

They blinked in shock in union, sharing a look before glancing between the paper and my face.

When they started grinning, I started throwing things.

Chapter End Notes

A/N- Hey! This one was pretty sweet to write, and ironic since I caught a cold in Stockholm and was just as ill when I wrote it, haha. Hope everyone enjoys the dynamics and has a great Easter, if I don't post before then! Also, thanks all for your wonderful support, I read and laugh (when appropriate, obviously) at every comment :) Thank you! x
Why must things be so difficult?

Chapter Summary

Why couldn't things be simple, eh? My Kaa-san would've sprouted some sagely advice about how the best things in life had to be earned. There was a difference, I would then reason, between troublesome-but-worthwhile ventures and things that just took the piss.

...like trying to make structurally-sound gingerbread houses!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tea country was glorious. The weather had warmed up nicely, leaving the majority of the trip filled with streaming sunshine and baby blue skies.

The two weeks of travel to reach the first town were slow and strangely sedate. I could tell that Hitoshi and Neko-tou were used to travelling fast, jumping between the trees and being on high alert. I, on the other hand, had never travelled the land before. Hikes in the countryside and high-speed travel in cars, boats, planes and on my beloved motorcycle were all experiences from a previous life.

I was, with my short lil legs, quite happy to maintain our comparatively leisurely pace.

The first night under the stars (the sheet of canvas that was the roof of our tent didn’t really count), was awesome. Sure, I was lying on what felt like the sharpest collection of rocks this side of Fire country and Hitoshi was meant to be sleeping outside before deciding that I was a better choice of mattress, but it was so exciting! I’d only really slept in tents at festivals before and there was a certain thrill to it!

Maybe it was the uncertainty of a toilet or the constant fear of animals and creepy crawlies mauling us!

Okay, but in all seriousness, I was both excited and squeamish. Not to sound like a spoiled brat but, well…dad and Hitoshi were both boys.

As in, they peed standing up.

I needed a bit, err, more than that and well…the conversation had been beyond awkward. I’d been surrounded by girls in my previous life. In this one, I was always around boys and I’d probably have to prepare myself for more than a few awkward conversations…like periods…and bras…

Oh, hell.

Anyway, after having to remind my companions that I couldn’t just take a whizz against a tree, travelling got a bit better when I was allowed to move away from the two and take a bit more time.

When we got into town, I kept an elbow in Tou-san’s ribs, a reminder that I wanted the use of a shower before we did anything.
The hot water was glorious, even if the cubicle was pokey and not the cleanest.

I don’t know if I’ve mentioned before but summons… were a bit weird. They were animals, of course, and didn’t understand things like privacy etc. but, with a higher intelligence and raised in human households like actual people, by rights they should have been a bit more aware of some social cues. Before, the lady next door to us had had an old tabby that would come in the window. The amount of times I’d been getting changed and feel her curl around my legs… my roommates had even woken up to her laying on their backs. But anyway, Hitoshi was like any animal, albeit an extremely intelligent one, and even if he should have understood by now, he didn’t get what humans were always fussing about.

So, when I took a shower to wash the dust from the road, I was soon shoved over by a carnivorous intruder.

“‘Toshi!” I caught myself against the wall before throwing my summon an ugly scowl, “I was in here first, idiot! Wait your turn!” The cat, as always, ignored me in favour of wiping his filth along my side. I wasn’t even 10 yet but I was still naked and threw the cat a strange look.

“Listen, cub, don’t get all self-conscious with me now. By your standards, I’m a grown male waltzing around naked all the time…” He grumbled on a bit more about children and wrong species and I rolled my eyes as I wiped away the mud along my ribs.

Hitoshi was filthy, turning the water brown just by being stood under it, and I shuddered to think he’d maybe not washed since the last time I’d forced him into the bath… a month ago…

It took an age, lathering his fur until it was clean, and I didn’t stop until he was sparkling. If he wasn’t going to wash regularly, then I’d have to make the most of when I could get him to.

On the plus side, my hair spent ages with conditioner in and was super glossy when it dried.

Once we’d cleaned up, we set off back into the town for dinner. We found a nice little BBQ stand and shared a rack of ribs between us. (After taking one look at the prices and ‘Toshi’s licked chops, dad firmly shooed the panther to hunt outside of town for his own dinner, lest he bankrupt us on the first night.)

It was… a bit emotional, in all honesty, spending time with just dad. Here, there weren’t any family members, friends or missions to drag one of us away.

Dad had been so busy, away almost all the time, but then so had I been. Between helping Yuri-oba, baking for the stand and babysitting, we’d scarcely done more than share dinner and the house.

We talked until late, chatting about the cakes and funny memories as a child. Dad told me a bit of what he’d been like, just as silly and emotional as he was now. He’d been an only child, born to much older parents (an oops-baby or a miracle, I assumed) and an average student. He’d been on a genin team with Inokumo-oji and all but adopted by the two brothers, Best Man at Inokumo’s wedding (and vice versa) and worked a lot with my uncle, even when the other two were promoted to Jonin.

I’d learnt so much about the man who raised me in a single night and it set the tone for the rest of the trip. The next day (after sharing a bed when Hitoshi refused to move from mine), we explored the market and then left via the road, heading slowly towards the sea. We spent the next few weeks exploring the tea fields (I bought so much tea that dad was forced to seal them into storage scrolls when Hitoshi started looking like a pack mule), before we finally hit the coast.
The sea was a glorious turquoise, like when I’d visited Turkey with an old boyfriend, and scorching hot. The sun, reflected off the sea, was blinding and the heat hit like a wave the closer we got. Travelling south-east of Fire country, I should have expected it. The next few days were spent on the seaside, filled with early morning swims before the sand got too hot to walk on, sunburns and Hitoshi whining about the heat of his fur.

Tough titties, buddy.

Dad got a seemingly-permanent stripe of red across his nose and cheekbones and I had resigned myself to being pink for the rest of my life. My skin, fair from being inside an awful lot and from my mum’s genes, slowly had shifted from pale to olive to deeply tanned. The lines were awful and there was a constant pink tinge, but I thought I’d look brilliant when I finally rocked up back home.

On the coast was where I bought the last of my gifts for everyone back home. I’d already picked up a selection of fancy teas for Mikoto, teas for the lungs for Yuri-oba, and a box of mini dango for Itachi (as much as it physically pained me, I gnashed my teeth and told myself he’d love it). Ino got a coral necklace, a dumpling-shaped plushie for Chouji and some badass sunglasses for Shika.

*That* had me cackling, having flashbacks to *The Hangover* movie.

Ensui got a selection of shell and natural-remedy pigments. They could be used as paints (he used to paint when he was younger) or as toxin-free make-up. There were also some little tools for crafting, all about as long as my hand and wrapped in decorated leather. After being countlessly forced to fix the tools in the Compound by Yoshino, Ensui had started showing a bit of an interest in building something.

As a ninja who generally destroyed, I thought creative hobbies were an absolute must.

For Shisui, I’d gotten him earrings. Neither of us had any piercings but we’d talked about getting them done together. Ensui, as part of Nara tradition, had had his lobes pierced with studs when he’d been a child and, when he made Chuunin in the winter, Shikaku-sama had given him hoops. But, Shisui and I were going to go get them done together, when I turned 10 (dad’s only request). But these were beautiful and I knew he’d love them. They were simple silver hoops but, hanging freely from each, was a single bell. They were heavily engraved with seals and, when I’d asked Hitoshi what they meant, he said they delayed the chime by a few seconds.

I could imagine how awesome that would be when he was fighting, Shunshining everywhere but the chimes echoing just a moment too late, making him even more unpredictable.

They were gorgeous too, which was a plus.

So, after five days on the coast and almost three weeks into our trip, we started moving back towards Fire.

The last week was just as lovely as the rest had been but…it was also melancholic.

We wouldn’t be able to do this again for a long time, maybe not ever. Dad would have to save up another twenty years of service to pull off another trip like this. As a ninja, I doubted that would be possible. If he was a Jonin…he could do it in 12 years and if he was an elite? Six.

But, anyway.

Dad would be heading straight out on a mission when we got back and I’d have to make up for any lost revenue whilst I was away, a backlog of orders and a slew of issues that will have happened in my absence. And the trio of my babes could have made a fuss without me around to settle them~
I wouldn’t have changed this month for the world though.

When we returned, late at night, Tou-san collapsed into bed with the warning that he’d be reporting for a mission first thing in the morning.

I mentally waved my family time goodbye.

Puttering around the house the next morning felt both saddening and relieving. It was good to be home, the familiar cold floors underneath my padding bare feet, my kitchen (fridge stocked thanks to Sora-oba) and my beloved bed. But…it had been so good to get away from everything, be a kid with just dad and Hitoshi.

It hadn’t been that easy since kaa-san died.

So, once I was dressed and armed with all my gifts, I made my rounds of the village. I was eager to see everyone again, even if it was just familiar faces in the street. I’d never felt so short as I had in the crowd of strangers in the different towns, the unfamiliar market places and alien stalls. Even just little things like awkwardly smiling at Iruka as he hurried past, grinning at whoever was on gate-duty at the Uchiha Compound or simply recognising the merchants as they moved through the streets.

I’d scarcely stepped out of the house before I was waylaid by Gin and Hoshiko, who immediately started gushing (in their own ways) about my deep tan and the silken ribbons I’d bought them, as well as all the gossip since I’d been gone. Yuri-oba was seated at the counter at the shop when they ushered me inside, her face still pale and she wheezed quietly when she breathed. She kissed my forehead when I pressed the medical teas into her hands, savouring the scrap of affection from my pseudo-grandmother.

Hurrying to the market place, I quickly swung by Teuchi’s to press some spices into the older man’s hands and a red bandana into Ayame’s. Then, it was across to Genma’s place, knowing full well there was a good chance none of them were around. I could always give the other presents out when I went to Inoichi-oji’s place for dinner tonight. And Shisui and Ensui were away right now.

Surprisingly, Genma answered the door, looking absolutely exhausted.

With his wrist in a cast.

“Nee-chan!” I squeaked, pointing furiously at the evidence of a wound. “This is why we can’t leave you alone!” I stepped inside, making myself at home once I’d slipped off my shoes and melted into the sofa. I set out the spices I’d picked up for him, innocuous ones like nutmeg, which could be used as poisons in highly concentrated doses. Good for slow or extra sneaky poisonings (that part I tried not to think of in practice). I also pulled out the pair of mugs I’d bought from a cheap vendor, ‘Husband’ and ‘Wife’ mugs. A couples present for my love-birds, of course.

“We?” Genma’s eyebrow twitched and I grinned evilly at the trap he’d set himself up for.

“Raidou and I, of course!”

When it was September, Ensui celebrated his 18th birthday.

When we’d met, my 7 to his 16, he’d been in the midst of puberty with long coltish limbs and spots along his jaw. His nose had been long and eyes a bit too small to be considered handsome around
here, surrounded as they were in green eyeliner.

With another two years under his belt, as well as a promotion, Ensui had grown up quite a bit. He was tall now, almost my dad’s height of 6 foot, and his hair was even longer, falling from the customary high pony to brush his shoulders. He looked...more complete, his jaw firmer and shoulders broader. His skin had cleared up a bit, although from past experience, I could confirm that bad skin could continue far into your twenties. The constant exercise, however, seemed to have helped his complexion and I mourned internally that I wouldn’t have that advantage, tucked inside with tempting cream. He wasn’t dreamy, like I’d seen girls sigh over Dad, or Sexy like Genma, but he did have a bit of a smoulder going on. I couldn’t wait ‘til I was older and we could go out drinking together and we’d smash the town with our fierce make-up! Speaking of...

This party was...different from the others I’d attended up to now. Whilst most parties had been either focused on children or much older adults, this was the first year that Ensui really felt much older than Shisui or I.

We’d been invited, of course, but Ensui’s various Chuunin friends had been as well. And they were all his age.

And...drinking.

Damn, I missed me a ‘Porn Star Martini’.

A bottle of sake had been cracked open at some point and the group, a few girls and more guys, were laughing loudly, jeeringly encouraging the birthday boy to take a swig. Shisui looked as deeply uncomfortable as a social butterfly (and yet, an Uchiha) would let themselves outwardly show and I felt just as disjointed. We’d opened gifts (Shisui had paid for half of the tools I’d bought in Tea – the pigments had been his official souvenir – and we’d given them to him earlier. He’d loved them.) and eaten cake and then the younger Nara, Yamanaka and Akimichi ‘cousins’ had been taken home. I was due to meet Hitoshi just after 9 to walk home, giving us older ‘kids’ the chance to relax together for a bit longer without any of the adults or children around. I’d just made the cut but, seeing how close I was to Ensui, the adults hadn’t thought too much of leaving me with the rest of them. The party was supposed to be perfectly innocent, Shisui not much younger than the youngest of the other Chuunins but, well, the older boys had come prepared.

And that’s how we got here.

‘Here’, as in, huddled in the corner of the furthest sofa, two preteens trying not to kill the mood.

Part of me (the twenty-year-old that had been dying for a night of clubbing after 9 years) wanted to swan right into the proceedings, taking part in the drinking games like there was no issue and teach them all beer pong.

But...I was a fucking kid and an awkward one at that.

One of the girls, a 19-year-old strawberry-blonde named Kiki who was perched on the arm of Ensui’s armchair, slipped her arm around his shoulders and tipped her head to giggle in his ear.

Something hot and bitter curled into my stomach and I found myself slipping my fingers into Shisui’s.

Was I...jealous?

It was strange, I held no romance in this too-young body and I didn’t think I felt anything of the sort for the older Nara, but I knew that feeling well. I felt it when I saw kids with their mums or when
Noko had made friends outside of the academy. When Izumo and Kotetsu became close to Mari-chan on their genin team, when Shisui had to leave me for training.

It was the feeling of people moving away from me.

I was a…fairly possessive person. I didn’t try and control people but the emotions still came, nevertheless. It came, I had figured, from losing everything in my previous life. It made me hold on even harder to the things I’d gained in this one. It was also, maybe, because I was a civilian. Even though I’d never wanted to be a ninja, I still felt like I’d been missing out on something. I had only a few civilian friends, the girls from Yuri-oba’s shop and the market stall owners. But they were all older, adults for the most part, so that didn’t really count.

Ensui and Shisui, and the others, were my best friends, my boys. I felt…a bit left behind.

Maybe it was from being an only child in this life. Maybe I was just selfish.

I wasn’t going to spoil Ensui’s birthday though.

Threading my fingers through Shisui’s, I turned to smile at my best friend, who was staring down at our hands with surprise and pinked cheeks.

“Come on, Shisui,” I leaned over to whisper, casting another glance at the commotion of teenagers. “Let’s have some fun, ay?”

The Uchiha perked up again, knowing that, whatever mischief I pulled, he’d have a laugh and happily followed along when I pulled him across the room to the table.

Clearing a spot, I started setting up rows of cups facing each other in a triangular formation.

Ensui’s friends eventually noticed and moved over, still babbling as they passed the bottle around. I’d already whispered the rules to Shisui and the older boy looked eager to try.

In a house full of ninja and alcohol, this could either go very, very well or very, very badly.

Osamu, one of Ensui’s more recent teammates and a tall brunette of 15, was the youngest there besides us. The boy was nice enough, smiley and cheerful as he moved over to where we were setting up.

“What’s all this, Kiharu-chan?” he grinned, gesturing at my set up. Thankful I had an easy way of introducing the game, I beamed in return and held up the ball I’d found, left over from one of the kid’s earlier.

“Beer pong!” I announced. “You try and bounce the ball into the cups at the other side of the table. If you get it in, you drink and, whichever team gets rid of their cups first, is the winner!” That was the simplest version I knew, something easy enough for me to have ‘thought up’ and get everyone playing. Shisui and I had cups of juice, to replace the sake I’d dished out between the cups, and I beckoned the others over to join.

A few of the girls cooed over how sweet I was and the eldest boys ignored me, but Ensui had been setting a standard all evening by treating us like equals so, for the most part, no one was too ‘I’m older, I’m better’ towards us.

The first round was a bit chaotic, no one really remembering the rules, but then Shisui took on all the boys at once by himself and destroyed them, the ball flying so fast I could barely see it, and then the game was on.
Eyes considering, the boys re-evaluated my best friend and then, as I predicted, it all went to fucking hell.

By 10pm, half an hour after I was due to meet Hitoshi, Tou-san had dragged both Shisui and I out by our ears, bellowing about irresponsible teenagers and bad influences around his baby-girl. I think at that point, Shisui was just collateral damage in his eyes. Yoshino was yelling behind us about how she’d never been more appalled and I had little doubt that Ensui would be suffering more than a hangover in the morning.

Shisui was, to put it lightly, off-his-face drunk at the age of 10.

Staggering along before dad slung him like a sack of potatoes over Hitoshi’s back, the Uchiha was giggling as he swung our joined hands between us. Two rounds in, Shisui had been out of juice and a few of the boys, who had disappeared for a bit and then come back with a few bottles under their arms, had started refilling the cups. Shisui, still a lone wolf against the others, was playing so quickly he didn’t bother with distinguishing glasses.

The noise of the ball being catapulted through the kitchen wall had summoned Yoshino like an angel of vengeance.

At that point, I was being cuddled by Aimi (just a little against my wishes) as she drunkenly talked about her ex boyfriends and lamented over the stupidity of boys. Like jeeze, girl, I feel your pain but can you not squeeze me so hard? She was crushing me quite firmly against her boobs and I was feeling a bit of chest envy, missing my own girls after 9 years. Kiki moved over to us, swaying around as she walked barefoot, and plopped herself down beside Aimi and I, where we were cuddled under a duvet (from who-knows-where Aimi had found it) and on the cold kitchen tiles.

Yoshino and Dad, on separate missions (one for the riot, one as a rescue), burst into the house from two different directions and uncannily at the same time.

Finding me being crushed between two plastered older girls as they told me how to turn a persistent creep down, Tou-san looked apocalyptic. When his eyes drifted around the room – taking in the up-ended furniture and spillage of alcohol, Shisui in the centre of the impressed Chuunins and a ghostly pale Ensui backing away from Yoshino’s terrifying visage (my idol) –, he grabbed the two of us kids and frog-marched us out of there.

I barely had time to say bye, waving back at Osamu’s drunkenly-happy wave as the door slammed shut behind us.

After that, Ensui was grounded for, seemingly, ‘life’ and Shisui had nursed his first hangover at our place. He’d been very dizzy before bed and, taking pity on his growing bewilderment, I tucked him in between Hitoshi and I, a bucket at hand. Not wanting to make the poor boy uncomfortable (and feeling the laser stares of Neko-tou and ‘Toshi), I’d only stripped him of his jacket and sandals and dressed in my full-length pyjamas.

Shisui slept solidly, slobbering as per usual, until 11am. Thankfully, I’d already been up and showered, dressing in a casual pinafore and crawling back into bed. Shisui was snuggly and smelled amazing (if you ignored the smell of spirits), can you blame me? But anyway, Shisui came-to with a croaky groan and I easily tipped the bucket under his chin just in time. A messy few minutes later, the older boy sat back with a groan and I wiped his forehead. Shisui looked around my room and turned scarlet when he noticed where he’d spent the night, never mind the fact the Hitoshi was still dead to the world beside him.

“K-Ki-chan, did I sleep in your room?” His voice was the squeakiest I’d ever heard it and I smiled in
amusement. Shisui was planning on going for Jonin in a few years, did he really have to ask such obvious questions?

“Of course!” I ignored his bluster, leaning over to press a cold glass of water to his lips and tipping it before he’d recovered, successfully spilling it all down his face. “You were really sick, I didn’t want to leave you alone,” My smile turned more tender, thinking about if Tou-san had let him go home to that cold and empty house, waking up alone and sick with no one (his Aunt, what’s-her-bitch-face, would have surely ignored him so long as he wasn’t dying. I got that she was an old crone who was resentful for never having activated her Sharingan, but what a heartless cow-). My mind came back to find my fingers had passed the glass to Shisui and were now sweeping back the curls sticking to his clammy forehead.

“Do you want to lie down again? Or would you rather have some breakfast?” Shisui, obediently passing me the glass when he’d finished and downed the meds I’ve given him, asked if it would be okay to sleep a little longer and I gladly pulled the covers back up. Unable to resist (I’d been good for years), I pulled Shisui closer, pressing on his shoulders until he confusedly rested his head in my lap.

“Go back to sleep, Shi-kun,” I smiled as I happily sank my fingers into his curls and my best friend, red-faced and flustered, gradually relaxed back to sleep.

His curls were beautiful, springy and soft and I promised myself I’d insist on this again.

When he woke up after noon, I made a big breakfast and made him choke it down. And for Shisui to groan at the sight of a platter of my cooking? Boy must’ve felt like death, ha-ha! He’d thank me later~

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It was just after I’d finished my Christmas dinner, months later, that ninja burst into the house.

I was alone again, Dad and ‘Toshi two days into an escort to Iron, and I decided I hated growing up basically alone. I was feeling strangely resentful, remembering a childhood filled with cousins and siblings and a cul-de-sac that always had kids playing on the curbs.

Shisui had turned 11 in November, a party that had not been a disorderly mess but a stuffy tea-party of Uchiha elders (Shisui was, after all, the current clan favourite. Itachi, taking the academy by storm and blitzing through grades, was still an academy student), peppered with a few of us kids. I’d finally given Shisui the earrings and he’d been delighted, tucking them into his breast-pocket and then swinging me around in a hug.

He’d been doing that a lot since he’d grown a bit, now just a hairs-breadth taller than me, to my disgruntlement.

But anyway, Shisui had turned 11, the kiddies were now 2 and Tou-san was still gone all the time.

I was cleaning the dishes, some from my duck roast dinner and most from my earlier cooking. Stress cooking, I’ll admit. I’d made two massive gingerbread houses (and cried over them when they wouldn’t stick- it was stressful) and I’d end up delivering to them Teuchi for lack of anything better to do with them (I’d never introduced ginger before, let alone two mansions of it). So, I’d been stuck at the sink for a while.

It had been silent all evening, nothing but the padding of my socked feet and the sounds of cooking, eating and washing echoing in the house.
I was humming at some point, then mumbling. Soon I was singing, belting out ‘Best Thing You Never Had’ (slowly, I was no Beyoncé) when there was a small explosion of smoke and Shisui appeared in the middle of the kitchen.

I screamed, throwing the soapy rolling pin in his direction and staggering back.

“Kiharu!” His face scared me, something panicking in his eyes, and I wondered who was injured. What had come to ruin this week further?

Two quick steps and Shisui launched himself at me, ignoring my soapy arms and sweeping me tightly against him. Another bang and Ensui burst in the front door, breathless and tense. He looked extremely relieved when he caught sight of the two of us in the kitchen, immediately moving to join in the embrace.

“Come on,” he encouraged, spread arms shepherding us towards the back door. Shisui slung me over his back into a piggy-back, which was so weird considering the fact we were the same height and, by rights, he shouldn’t be able to lift me so easy. Not missing a beat, they both ran out onto the lawn before leaping up onto our roof and then making their way to the Yamanaka Compound. Just two streets over, I caught sight of Chouza a few rooftops away, his arm raised as he signed to Ensui, sweeping us in the direction of the Yamanaka’s.

What the ACTUAL fuck?

“What’s going on?” I demanded, only to be just as ignored as I had been this entire time. I wasn’t a fucking bag of potatoes, some commodity to be slung over shoulders – what was happening?!

I racked my brains for an event, anything, but, after almost 10 years, all memories had started fading and canon had started to blur. I’d already sacrificed so many memories of my previous life in order to focus on remembering the plotline and there wasn’t much more I could do. I easily remembered Naruto’s story the most, as the protagonist it was only natural, but the rest was much more difficult.

“Stop, STOP IT!” I yelled, snarling at Ensui beside me. We paused in a tree and I leaned into Shisui’s ear to snarl, “I’m not some scroll you can pick up and take somewhere; tell me what’s happening?!”

Hands, hard and too strong, gripped me from Shisui’s back and then Ensui was all up in my face, looking truly pissed for the first time in a long while. Shisui, whipping around to face me as well, looked just as angry, looking around warily like this was fucking covert-ops.

“Shut the fuck up, you idiot!” Ensui hissed, faced pressed right up against mine. “We’re trying to look after you, okay?” My expression dropped in shock as Ensui roughly grabbed me up and continued leaping, not even bothering to get me settled. We dropped into the Compound in a stony silence and I’d not failed to notice that they’d not given me a real answer. Sora-oba already had the door open when we reached the steps, thanking the boys with honest relief and gathering me under her wing.

“Kiharu,” Sora-oba pressed me into a sofa, “Thank god you’re alright.”

“What’s happening, Oba-san?” I growled, sat on the edge of the seat and severely pissed off.

“There was a breach in security, Nekki,” My Aunt sighed, settling in beside me, “The family and the boys were worried for you, alone in the house, and these two insisted on going to get you, so that I could stay with Ino.”

In a sudden flash of clarity, I remembered.
Kumo and Hinata, the kidnapping. She was three now, wasn’t she?

“Kaaaaa-san~” A small blonde head bobbed around the corner before blue eyes caught sight of me.

“Neee-kiiiii!” and Ino clamped herself onto my legs. She was tall for a two-year-old, walking shakily and with burningly bright eyes. I swung her up into my lap, glad for the excuse not to have to look at the two boys sat stiffly opposite me.

I’d been a brat and, in all honesty, I wouldn’t look so much like a horrible bitch if they’d not slung me up like a carpet.

“Imouto, hey-ya,” I smiled happily, tucking her head under my chin and purring without prompting. “Shall I, err-” I glanced at my aunt and then down at my limpet, “-put her to bed, Oba-san?” when Sora nodded, I clambered to my feet and sneakily glanced at the two boys.

Who were ignoring me.

I wondered how it was that Shisui and Ensui had known my aunt wanted me moved here and, suddenly, guessed that they’d both ignored the alarm and come for me instead and Oba-san was simply giving them an alibi. Maybe. Perhaps.

Idiots, I thought guiltily.

Setting Ino into her bed, I rubbed her back in time to my purrs, feeling her fists unclench and breathing deepen as she fell asleep. She nuzzled into her pink pillow when I lowered her down, sighing happily as I reached to turn on her soft yellow night-light. I pressed a kiss into her forehead and sat on the edge of the bed, lost in thought.

I wasn’t in any danger from Kumo; not a ninja, important, rich or in possession of a bloodline. But, then again… fear made you paranoid. I was home alone, one of two holders of the Big-Cat summoning contract, whose origins were uncertain, and a ridiculously easy target. I could be used to put pressure on the Ino-Shika-Chou leaders, the Uchiha, a large part of the Market-place and business owners and had been a favourite of the Yondaime.

Aw, shit, I had more political impact than I’d ever considered.

The boys had probably just been scared, thinking the village unsafe, and wanted to make sure I was firmly in their sights.

I suppose I’d have to apologise.

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They’d been avoiding me for a few days before I caught them, shamelessly using Yoshino and Mikoto to corner them at a quiet spot on Yamanaka land.

They froze when they caught sight of each other and, then, of me.

I was stood in a cherry-pink yukata with a fur coat and a trolley of their favourite treats parked behind me. I was nervous, unsure if they would just leap or Shunshin away before I could even open my mouth. When they simply stood there, I felt slightly better. Coughing awkwardly, remembering their disappointment when I’d violently refused to do this for the past 6 months, I took a deep breath-

“Let it go,
Let it roll right off your shoulders.

Don’t you know,

The hardest part is over—"

My voice was the only noise as I shakily made my way through ‘Little Wonders’ from that *Meet the Robinsons* movie, hands nervously grasping the sheet of translated lyrics in my hands. I stuttered and stumbled, trying to fit the foreign words into the familiar tune and also, when I made the mistake of risking a glance upwards to see the two boys in front of me. It was easier when I pretended they weren’t there, burning me with their eyes as they gaped, and I slowly relaxed. The notes came easier and the long verses didn’t seem so bad anymore.

When I finished, belting out the last few lines, I cracked my eyes and immediately remembered that I was performing.

My violently red face felt like it was steaming in the cold.

Ensui was smiling, face still surprised, but eyes smug as he understood just what I was doing.

Shisui was catching flies.

“I, err,” I choked, coughing awkwardly, “I’m sorry for screaming the, the other night. I don’t like being treated like I’m something pathetic, lifted and laid, but I’m sorry I didn’t trust that you were just trying to watch out for me.”

Ensui stepped forward and hugged me with one arm. He was so tall now and I easily slotted in under one arm. The thought made me warm, for some reason. “I’m sorry, too, Ki-chan. We shouldn’t have just grabbed you like that, without explaining and scaring you.”

He ruined the moment by leaning behind me and swiping a mini Yondaime’s. Tch.

Turning hesitantly towards Shisui, I took in his wide eyes and rolled mine.

“It wasn’t that bad, right?” I slowly walked closer, snagging his hand and pulling him towards the trolley. “It was meant to be an apology, not shock you to death!”

“Ignore Shisui,” Ensui mumbled around the entire tart he’d shoved in whole. “He’s incompetent; you have a good voice, Ki-chan, and your song was very well written.”

“Y-yeah!” Shisui jerked back to life, like the little dork he was. “I was just surprised, you said you’d rather shave your head than sing for us!” he eyed my hair nervously and I prayed no one would hold me to that-

“-in fact, you should sing for more people!” Ah, ha ha, cute! No.

“-I’ll mention it to Mikoto-sama-”

I shoved the slice of tart in Shisui’s hands into his mouth, effectively shutting him up before he got the idea of a concert or something in his head.

I was going to kill these two if I had to, in order to keep this as under wraps as possible.

“Anywayyyy,” I drawled, pretending I wasn’t choking one of Uchiha prodigies, and turned to Ensui. “What’s happening with Kumo, now?”
The older boy sighed, taking the handle of the cart and leading us back towards the main house and out of the cold.

“They have demanded that Hiashi-sama is turned over to them, as compensation for the murder of their ambassador.”

“What! They can’t say something like that, wasn’t he trying to steal that little girl, the Heiress, right?”

Ensui sighed again and I could almost hear the ‘troublesome’.

“The only one who could confirm that is dead, the would-be kidnapper himself.”

Itachi graduated the academy at the record-breaking age of 7, spending only a single year within its walls and I was at home, screaming into my pillow, within an hour of hearing the news.

Fuck, fuck, shitty fuck fuck-

Dammnit, Itachi! The village was buzzing!

The Uchiha were beyond smug, Fugaku one of the worst. The rest of the village, especially the civilians? Words like ‘wary’, ‘suspicious’ and ‘intimidated’ worked pretty well.

I’d been so fucking busy trying to make them look good, making a spectacle of myself in the market place when I waved like a loon at any Uchiha I recognised. Akane-sama was one of the most appreciated for her help with Yuri-oba (and their slowly growing friendship since then) and I’d always stood out for running around with my arms looped with a brightly beaming Shisui.

Itachi was an unwitting difficulty. He didn’t mean to make me suffer this way~

But I’d been trying for so long to try and make the Uchiha look more approachable, integrate them slowly back into the village. And then here comes Itachi, the son of the Clan Head, a man known for having his head shoved so far up his ass like Hiashi-sama, and a genius that leaves his peers in the dust. He was a ‘natural’ shinobi and, in being so, a threat.

To the Uchiha if he favoured the village. And for the village, if he moved in the interest of the Clan.

My poor baby, what the actual fuck was I going to do??

After celebrating my 10th birthday, Hana insisted we had a sleepover at my house, citing that we’d not hung out in ages. She was 300% correct, I’d not spoken to her for three weeks before my birthday and we’d been gradually moving apart as the years passed.

I was eager to reconnect with my only close female friend.

We chose the weekend afterwards, as dad and Hitoshi would be out of the house and, in preparation, I’d stocked the house with all our favourite things. Whilst I did make a lot of stuff, I treated us to a fuck tonne of garbage processed food as well. In my defence, recently the fridge at Ichiraku had been growing and I was tuckered out from churning out so many goodies. On top of that, this increase had started after I’d started leaving gift baskets of bite-sized treats on Genma’s doorstep, labelled “For nee-chan’s friends, xxx”.
Teehee.

I was pleased that the hidden elite seemed to be boosting my sales, albeit so discreetly that Teuchi had been worried some of the stock had been stolen (they were nabbed straight from the shelf, with the money left under the empty dish on the sideboard behind the till).

Anyway, Saturday morning brought Hana and the Triplets, a duffle bag of equipment thrown over the 8-year-old’s shoulder, to my doorstep. I beamingly let them all in, sweeping the Inuzuka Heiress into my arms and lugging her over the doorstep before squatting and gathering the three excited pups into my (tragically non-existent) bosom, happily smothered in doggy kisses.

I may be part feline but I would never say no to puppy love. Speaking of being part kitty, when in Tea Tou-san had explained that Hitoshi’s chakra had become so entwined with his – because, as the summoning contract dwindled, their personal bond increased –, and had been mixing with dad’s for so long, it had started to change my dad physically, which had then passed on, via genes, to me. Dad’s effects were more obvious – a deeper growl/purr, sharper canines and increased senses – whilst mine were less so, a purr and sharp teeth with keener ears. Regardless of my alliance with the ‘enemy’, I happily collapsed under the combined adoration on the Triplets.

We had a feast of sushi for lunch, lounging on my bed with our hair wrapped in hair honey-masks and giggling over the trashy magazines Hana had picked up on her way over. She ‘ooh’-ed appreciatively over my new piercings, simple blue gems I'd gotten on that Wednesday. (Shisui had yelped like someone had ‘trod on his tail’ but the earrings looked incredible, as I knew they would). In return, she told me all about how the academy was going; she was one of the best but Itachi, my sweet little baby bird, was so far ahead of the pack that Hana was starting to get a bit pissed off.

Hana, who had to work so hard to be special, saw Itachi’s natural intelligence and resented him for it.

Disregarding the fangirls, I worried that that jealousy would only grow. It would be annoying detrimental to my master plan. Which was going swimmingly (well…regarding the recent peak in popularity of Akane-sama…).

So, I listened to all her issues and, by god, Hana was pouring out some shit. She pretty much unloaded everything that she’d worried over for the past few years, since Noko had died and her dad left. We spoke for hours, sometimes laughing, mainly talking, and crying a bit too.

Mainly about Noko, Hana a bit about her dad.

It was like a tension I didn’t know I had had been released.

We talked late into the night, passing out on the covers with our hair in crazy braids and surrounded in empty food packets.

The next day we painted our nails before packing a picnic and heading towards the Naka.

After setting out our gear, I stripped off my sandals and tucked up my three-quarter linen trousers before running into the shallows. The river here was lax, the exact reason we’d chosen this spot, and spread out into inviting pebble-riddled shallows. A few larger stones acted like natural stepping stones and Hana and I danced across them as morning turned into late afternoon. The dogs panted blissfully, soaking themselves (and then, inevitably, us) as they threw themselves into the water.

Interrupting Hana as she moaned about Itachi’s early graduation for the millionth time, I waggled my eyebrows playfully, even as I swept my hair back from where the latest splash had plastered it to my face.
“Are you sure, Hana, you’re not just sad to see him go?”

“I-err-Nani??” Hana gaped and I enjoyed the flush on her cheeks. Sweet kid probably didn’t realise that most would take that as a confirmation.

Like me!

“Do you fancy him, Hana-kouhai~?” I sang, only to swallow a mouthful of water when she splashed me.

Grrrr, brat-!

Whilst I made a, erm, tactical retreat, I pondered over Hana’s attitude to her year-mate. The issue still stumped me though and I was chillingly reminded of how quickly the time had passed.

What more could I do?


Chapter End Notes

A/N- Happy Easter! I wrote this whilst killing myself with chocolate, hope you all had a lovely day! This chapter is longer than the others and a bit fragmented. there were loads I things I wanted to include (Tea, Shisui/Ensui/Kiharu fluff and the reconciliation with Hana) whilst thinking about all the tensions arising so this kind of just happened. Someone said this fic was getting really boring and I just wanted to say that I don't like making massive time skips as important development is happening. If I just skipped to the date of the Massacre then we'd miss the build up, how this all evolved and how Kiharu is preparing. It just...wouldn't work. So, what I'm trying to say is that I'm sorry if you think I'm being boring but I think it's important we do it this way. This is Kiharu's story, not just her perspective on the plot, but her actual life she's building. I'm not getting at you for saying that, you're completely free to comment these things and maybe you just meant it to encourage me to shake things up, but Kiharu is a civilian and she'll never in a big fight etc. Sorry for the massive paragraph, but I felt the need to write it. I'll probs end up waking up in the morning like 'Shit, that was too much' and editing this, but for now I'm putting it in.

Anyway, thank you for reading and supporting this fic and for all your comments, whatever they may be about. Thank you! X
Reading that title, did anyone else get flash-backs to the GoF Dumbledore Meme? ("FIY-AHHHH?")

*Cough* Anyway, back to my moment of misguided wisdom I consistently inflict on you-

... ...
... warm pudding, anyone?

(why aren't I asleep?)

Chapter Notes

warning: vague references to suicide.

Also, comment any song requests for Kiharu to translate

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“This…will change everything.” I announced with great importance, slowly setting down the plate with all the reverence of a holy relic.

Ensui didn’t look so convinced.

“Isn’t it just a round cake?” he drawled, mirroring me with one hand propping up his chin.

I looked over his shoulder like I was in The Office at his naivety and he groaned.

“Why do you always do that?” I covered my eyes, shoulders shaking with giggles when I realised I’d been caught, “There’s never anything there!” He glanced suspiciously over his shoulder and I tried not to die. *Ahem*

“THIS is a brownie.” I waited for the applause and was predictably disappointed when Ensui merely squinted at my creation.

“A what?”

“A brownie bomb!” I announced proudly and then burst out laughing when the Nara threw himself out of his chair in a rare show of alertness.

“Who the hell gave you explosives?! And what are they doing in a cake?”
My, ahem, *creation* of centre-filled cakes took off, in my friendship and family circles, like a rocket.

Not that they…had them…here…

I started off relatively simple; melt-in-the-middle brownies, sticky toffee puddings and volcano desserts. The difficulty of selling this stuff was the fact that they were meant to be warm, for the most part.

The next time I was in Ichiraku, gulping down a Miso’ at the bar, I outlined the latest creations to the Ramen Chef.

When I told Teuchi about the hot desserts, he stroked his chin for a while in thought, pacing behind the counter at Ichiraku at 7 in the morning. As for the earliness of the hour, when you were a business partner, you got ramen no matter the clock. Teehee.

“Well…you’ll just have to make them to order then, won’t you?” he decided, gesturing to the area around where my fridge was set up.

“B-b-but,” I gulped, “I’d need an oven then, Teuchi-san, and a fridge and a freezer and loads of equipment! I couldn’t do that! This is your ramen stand, I can’t just come in on that!” I wasn’t going to elbow in on his limited space any more than I had. It wasn’t fair, Teuchi had worked a lot for a place like this and I couldn’t just take up a third of the available room with my own business venture.

I was going to have to ‘move out’, wasn’t I? Aww, shit.

I was back to square one with the stall! Sure, I could just stay put and forget about the idea of made-to-order stuff but, well, progress! I needed the kick up the arse to get moving again and this might just be it.

I’d been lavishing ANBU with bite-sized treats for a good 6 months now and my unseen customers had only grown. Demand was still consistent and, with the amount of dessert I threw around the various Clan Compounds, I really did need some better facilities. Heck, I was only 10!

But how was I going to get a place???

Sure, I had a small fortune from my maternal grandparents (they’d worked hard as silk merchants well into their 60s, accumulating a lot of savings and not spending too much), but I wanted to keep that aside for any nasty surprises. Business and all that jazz. And money wouldn’t get me all that far with regards to an actual stall.

On that front, my enemy wasn’t the ninja system or money but the Civilian Council.

Bunch of fuckers-!

Feeling their own lack of importance, the rich – and stereotypically old – Civilian Council members had been trying to puff up their own importance in the last few decades, as far as I could tell. They kept a strangle hold on whatever they could get their pampered little paws on.

Which included the Market.

Now, I may have considered ANBU phase one but, in reality, it was half a phase, if anything. I wasn’t providing life or death commodities, so any pressure from my Elite customers would be considered materialistic. I had cultivated their support (or at least their interest) but I needed something more than just increasing my popularity through the shinobi ranks.
But I now had another plan.

(I’d have queued evil cackling but, well, I was eating and it was only 7am.)

………………………………………………………………..

“Kiharu-chan, right?” A vaguely familiar voice asked beside me when I was walking back from the Yamanaka’s and I turned to meet a grinning brunette.

“O-samu-kun?” I guessed, recognising the taller boy from Ensui’s party months ago.

“Yeah, that’s me!” he smiled easily and my lips twitched up in response. The last time I’d seen him, he’d been the dopiest drunk I’d ever seen. In both lives. And, coming from a student? That was a serious claim. Then again, he was only just 15, if my memory served.

“How have you been?” he asked, easily falling into step beside me. I wondered if he did everything with such an easy-going attitude.

“Oh,” I shrugged, “Just fine, everything’s been peaceful. And you?”

“Couple of missions here and there, most with Ensui.” We dodged a few younger kids as they came bounding around the corner and I wondered where this random-ass conversation was going.

“Good.” I coughed.

It was silent for a few moments as I tried desperately to think of something to say other than repeating ‘good’ again.

“Well…” The older boy sounded just as awkward. “I’m glad that everything is so peaceful. Although, I can’t imagine it would be anything else, for a-”

“Kiharuuuuuuuuu!” Kotetsu swooped in to save my soul and I all but threw myself into the other 15-year-old’s startled arms. My favourite, I tell you! I’d never cuss him out again!

“Tetsu!” I grabbed him and started pushing us both back the way we came. “You needed me, didn’t you?!”

Unfortunately, the older boy was just as quick as most 15-year-old males.

Meaning, slow as fucking shit (it was all puberty, I tell ya’).

“Wha-? No, I just-” Kotetsu looked at me like I was deranged and I wished I knew how to telepathically tell him to get me out of here. Tragically, I had to make do with what I had and, thinking fast, I shoved the apple core I’d been holding (waiting for a bin like the good little eco-warrior I pretended I was) into his talking mouth.

Hopefully he wouldn’t actually die on me.

“Oh no!” I gasped, hands still clamped over his mouth as the genin started choking. “Quick!” I whirled around to Osamu – who was looking like he had no fucking clue what was happening, I didn’t really blame him – “Get help, this poor boy is choking!”

Thankfully, we’d moved onto one of the residential streets at that point and there were no street vendors to call me out on my bullshit.

When the Chuunin had run off, I finally removed my hands from my friend’s face.
Tetsu wasted no time in spitting out the apple core, face red as he scowled up at me with his hands rested on his knees. Even bent over double, he was almost my height. Jeeze, how my boys had grown up~

“What the hell, Kiharu?!”

Rolling my eyes and patting his back consolingly, I told him that we all must make sacrifices for the sake of friendship.

He, understandably, didn’t look too impressed.

“What did I just witness?” Another voice lamented behind us and I prayed to Jashin-sama to spare me my social life.

“Heyy there, Iruka-kun! Fancy seeing you around here!"

“…”

(Kotetsu continued coughing in the background.)

“Kiharu-san, the Orphanage is right there.”

I went to Yuri-oba’s shop on a Thursday in May, armed with fresh strawberry tart and straight from the hairdressers (a simple trim of my face-framing bangs and a cut from my thighs back up to my hips).

Akane-sama was there when I arrived and I beamed at the evidence of the two older ladies’ friendship. The shop was empty except for two older women browsing the silks, aided by Gin, and Akane sipping tea behind the counter with Yuri-oba.

“Good morning!” I sang as I opened the push-door with my hip, arms nursing the cake tin.

“Kiharu-chan!” Yuri-oba beamed, shakily rising up to greet me before I rushed forwards and mothered her back down. Waving away my concern at her paleness, she poured me a drink without having to ask. “And what are you up to today, young lady?”

“Well,” I grinned guiltily at my own transparency, “I wanted a new dress for my tea party with Mikoto-hime, one specially for her birthday.” She would be having some big event to celebrate her 35th birthday with the Clan on the actual day, so I planned for our usual Friday tea-party to be extra special instead.

Maybe it sounded strange, for a bunch of kids to hold a party for a 35-year-old Clan Head’s Wife, but Mikoto had always loved spending time with us and Friday’s had come to be our days for tea.

I invited Hana and Shisui, alongside Mikoto’s boys, and I hoped it would all be okay. I’d wanted to invite Ensui as well and maybe Ino-imouto too, but Sora-oba didn’t like Ino out the house with just me this young and Ensui was pegged for a C-rank around then. Thankfully, I’d already hounded him to make something small for Mikoto’s official gift, using the crafting tools I’d picked up for his birthday. He’d done an amazing job and I’d gaped at him for a solid 2 minutes when I’d caught sight of the little red gem earrings (with tiny rubies I’d painfully forked out for). They were continuous rings, a single spiral of wire with delicate flames curing along the metal and a dot of ruby at the centre. There were no fasteners, the hoop just curved through the piercing and hung from the lobe. Don’t ask me how he went from fixing weaponry to crafting something like this.
They were *perfect*.

So, despite not being able to attend, Ensui had really helped me out and I knew I owed him one. Again.

The likelihood of Hana getting on amazing with Mikoto was high, they already liked each other in passing.

The likelihood of Hana and *Itachi*?

I planned on cornering Shisui later to work out a battle strategy.

But I’d planned the picnic to be on the hills beside the Hokage monument, outside of the Uchiha Compound and easily visible from the main playground and most of the residential buildings. Whilst this was a bit daunting, knowing that as soon as we were recognised we’d have a tonne of noisy buggers watching, but this was all part of the plan!

I was 10, Shisui would turn 12 in a few months, and I was getting nervous.

I estimated that I had until Itachi was almost 13, another 6 years until it all went to hell. He would be eight in another week, as well.

If I couldn’t stop it…how could I rest knowing that, on the other side of the village, Itachi was on a spree with Tobi? That Shisui would already have…died? Casting himself into the river, blinded and hopeless. Nothing like the smiling boy I loved.

No! I couldn’t! The thought of having to live the rest of my life without them, years that stretched ahead of me, empty of Shisui and Mikoto-

Would I even be able to stay in my bed, knowing what was happening and wondering who at that moment had died? I…wasn’t sure I could bare it. Would I be stupid enough to leave the safety of my home, wander across to the Compound to hear the screams and probably get caught up with the death?

It was different this time; rather than waiting for Kyuubi like a natural disaster, I was trying to stop cold-blooded murder. I had been ruined by Kyuubi, the guilt and the self-hatred, and that had been when I’d known nothing I did could help.

If I failed this time, after actively trying? I didn’t know how I’d cope, in the eye of the storm.

After all, I’d already died once, right?

“Well, then!” Yuri-oba jerked me back to the present, gesturing for me to follow her into one of the fitting rooms, one of the ones furnished with a sofa, fitting stool and wall-to-wall mirror. Akane-sama followed along behind, carrying our tea and my cake tin with her, looking amused. As we walked, Yuri-oba would occasionally stick her hand into a rack and yank something out and I was in awe of how well she knew her stock. A glimpse showed that they were all similar enough measurements for me, ones that could be easily altered or taken in for when I grew without wasting fabric.

After the two older women fussed and settled themselves on the sofa, they turned to look at me expectantly.

What?

“Well?” Akane-sama quirked a brow and I wondered how she made everything look regal. “Go try
them on!”

I scrambled behind the changing curtain post-haste.

Changing rooms were weird places, I mused as I picked a pastel pink dress first. If you were in a good mood, you could be the vainest bitch in the world! Posing like it was your very own magic mirror, sometimes it was a photoshoot opportunity that wasn’t to be wasted. I’d had moments when I’d thought ‘my makeup is fineeee, this day’ or I’d felt super confident.

Other days? Even the nicest dress could make you feel like a potato, wrapping yourself in a duvet and depressing yourself trawling through fitness accounts on Insta. You felt ‘blehhh’ and just wanted to go home afterwards, if you even managed to drag yourself into the changing room in the first place.

We all did it and we all felt that way sometimes. Good days and bad days, it was the effect of social standards towards beauty and our own body image. I’d had days before when I felt tall and strong; other days, I felt ‘manly’ and clumsy. I’d never had small fingers or delicate bones. I was strong, from the gym and my fencing, tall from my 6ft plus parents. My glasses hadn’t really helped either; no matter how stylish I got them, I always felt a bit like the girl in the films before the transformation.

As I undressed now, even at 10, I couldn’t help but note how my body had changed.

I was thin and gangly, my tan fading but still leaving slight lines decorating my shoulders and thighs. My face was round, still full-cheeked in my childishness, and my nose was pointy. Thick brows, yet to be touched besides making sure I didn’t have a mono, arched a bit sarcastically above my huge blue eyes. My ears were a bit big and the skin of my hands already leathery from all the baking.

It was wonderful.

I wasn’t perfect. I wasn’t a knock-out beauty at age 10 but there was a certain warmth to my face which made it nice to look at. I wasn’t going to be a Mary Sue child supermodel but my face was familiar and, like with Ensui and Iruka, there was something about my expression which made it appealing.

My death had made me treasure the little things and find a marvel in everything. I’d complained about spots and greasy hair beforehand. Now? It was just another aspect in life. Sure, I was gangly and my face was a perfect circle, but it was a part of this new me and, from someone who’d already had one body, I could appreciate everything about this one. In this one, I didn’t have a lung condition or a terrible nut allergy (milk still made me itch but I didn’t give a shit and drank it anyway). Things like bad skin and stretchmarks, which would come with time, would just be proof of how I’d grown. Marilyn Monroe would’ve had them, Audrey Hepburn too. It didn’t make them any less wonderful, did it?

When I started getting lines and wrinkles, I’d consider it a success, a trophy for living long enough this time.

Like with Inoichi and Ensui, I liked to think I could find beauty in anyone’s features, regardless of gender or anything. Not that beauty was the be-all and end-all, but it was important to recognise how everyone was beautiful in their own way.

Wow, I was really getting poetic about this.

My English lit and Art teacher would’ve been so proud!

The first dress was a delicate pink colour with a sweetheart neckline and floaty skirt. After racing out
to spin for my two aides, we all decided it was way too dressy for a picnic. Whilst Mikoto and I could make the theme work, the boys would be careless enough to rock up in their training clothes.

Hana would probably complain too.

The second was a gorgeous fresh green, like mint-leaves, and had a softness to it. A simple scoop neck with loose cap sleeves, I set it aside to buy for casual wear but it wasn’t really anything special enough for a birthday party.

Third times the charm! This one was lovely, a lavender kimono-dress that fell to my knees with short sleeves and an almost-white pink obi. The fabric was quite light, decorated with white daisies and with a single, simple white shift underneath. The fourth dress, a sunny yellow number with a flowy skirt and white buttons, was adorable and I ran out to ask the ladies what they thought.

At this point, they’d drank their way through a second pot of tea and were making good headway with the tart. I rolled my eyes at their antics, holding the two dresses side by side with my head popping out between them.

“Well?!” I prompted when Yuri-oba started whispering and gesturing to the hem of the yellow one.

Tapping one finger to her chin, Akane-sama scrutinised the two looks with a flicker of her eyes and I wondered if I’d not gone a bit OTT asking for their help.

“The kimono.” Yuri-oba declared and Akane-sama started exclaiming her agreement.

“Not the dress?” I asked, “What about looking more approachable and relatable?”

Akane-sama turned to look at me in surprise.

“What are you talking about?” she tucked her finger under my chin affectionately. “Approachable? Relatable? You’re just having a birthday picnic!”

Crap, I didn’t mean to say that out loud-!

“I-err-I just meant that I don’t want Hana thinking Itachi is any stuffier than she already does!” I nodded quickly, “She already thinks he’s stuck up because he’s so quiet and has already graduated. I’m trying to, well, make them friendlier. So, I want everything to be as relaxing as possible and my dress can’t be so formal that we all look stuffy.” I noticed how Akane-sama’s eyes had softened, undoubtedly thinking about how isolated all the Uchiha had been feeling recently, and I went in for the finishing blow.

“I just want them all to have more friends.”

A warm hand grasped mine as another pair came down on my shoulders. “Oh, Kiharu,” Akane-sama smiled and I thought I saw a proud sparkle in her eyes for a moment.

“You’re such a sweet child. Those boys better know how good you are to them.”

Blushing and a bit flustered, I cleared my throat and glanced away.

“Still the kimono, then?”

Yuri-oba snorted and squeezed my shoulders, throwing the lavender garment over my head.

“Yes, Kiharu-chan,” I heard the smile in her voice. “You’re getting that kimono, even if I have to leave it on your doorstep.”
On the Friday before Mikoto’s birthday, I left the house on a mission. I’d finished all the preparations the previous day, dropping round the Uchiha and Inuzuka Compounds in person to make sure everyone knew where to go and at what time etc.

I’d spent a good two hours rummaging through Hana’s wardrobe, snarling about appropriate outfits as Tsune cackled in the doorway.

When I’d finally admitted defeat, I’d dragged Hana’s reluctant body back to my house, shoving a nice top into her arms and, when she looked to be on the cusp of bailing the entire thing, a nice pair of shorts. They were baby blue linen, with an eyelet lace design along the edge, and fell loosely to mid-thigh. The top was matching, the same material and colour, with a high neckline and no sleeves. After all, who said you needed a dress to look fresh AF? The pair was also too small for me now, bought the previous summer before I’d grown again, and I insisted that Hana keep them. Aw, didn’t I just feel like a real older sibling now?

By the time I’d terrified Hana into coming, it was dinnertime and too late to track down Shisui.

So, early this morning was when I set out.

“Shisui!” I called, noting a dark head of curls near the academy fields. “Shi-kun!” I tried again and voila! His head whipped around, eyes popping at the nick-name. I’d only ever called him it a few times, mainly when one of us was sick or I’d really missed him.

The academy kids were waiting for school to start, milling around on the other end of the field, and I scampered over to my best friend where he was sitting against a tree.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, plonking myself down beside him, noting the handfuls of grass he’d ripped up around him.

“Hmm?” He continued staring towards the academy.

“What’s got you all melancholy?” I bumped shoulders with him and he shrugged me off. “You know, you can talk to me abou-“

“It’s nothing, Kiharu. Leave it, okay?”

Lips parting, I stared straight forwards. “How do you want to get Hana and Itachi talking tomorrow?” I asked casually. Shisui had never spoken to me like that before. He’d yelled and screamed, we both had. When I was eight, we’d fallen out for an entire three weeks because of some stupid misunderstanding about being too busy to see each other.

Shisui was my absolute best friend and he’d never spoken to me so coldly before.

With a sigh, a warm arm (so familiar in fact, it felt like Shisui had been with me always) dropped around my shoulders. I was taller again, even just sitting down, and his shoulder had to dip upwards to reach.

“I don’t know…how do you want to go about it?”
“Hana might ignore him – at best, in all honesty – and Itachi might just go silent,” I folded my knees up to my chest, pulling away from leaning back on Shisui’s arm. “The best we can do is try and get them talking, maybe about something other than ninja stuff so Hana doesn’t get huffy about Itachi’s graduation.”

“So…what, then?”

I let out a startled laugh, forgetting myself for a moment and turning to flash him a grin over my shoulder.

“Hmmm…dessert?”

For the first time since I’d arrived, Shisui looked away from the school-grounds and smiled.

“Come one,” I clambered up, brushing away the blades of grass that Shisui had ripped up and had clung to my yukata. “We’re all meeting in a few hours so do you want to grab a quick breakfast?”

Reaching up to grab my hand, Shisui gave me a cheeky grin as I pulled him up.

“Sure…so long as you’re paying, of course!”

Dressed in my new kimono and some pink pumps, I heaved the huge cake tin into my cart.

When I turned 10, Neko-Tou had given me a new one; taller and a beautiful scarlet, it was no children’s toy cart that rolled close to the ground. It almost reached my ribs and had a strong push handle, like on a supermarket kart or a pram.

Wheeling the cake to the field, I nervously checked on the bottles of lemonade I’d made as well, listening to the basic glass clink heavily against each other. It was homemade, so wasn’t fizzy (I didn’t know how the fuck that worked) but I remembered the recipe well enough from the stall I’d had to run in secondary school.

Never thought I’d be thankful for Miss James’ stupid group projects…

When I finally arrived, Hana was just coming up the hill behind me and jogging to catch up as we reached the site. We set up on a slight slope, close enough to some trees that we had a bit of shelter but not so close we’d be bothered with leaves and birds.

Hana had brought some bento boxes of food to share, sushi and other various nibbles we could eat with little fuss. Spreading out a large blanket (I ignored the dog-hair…with Inuzuka, you just had to accept some things and I didn’t give a shit anyway), we set out some cups and the boxes.

A few minutes later, Shisui had appeared next to me on the blanket and Mikoto was coming up the hill with a massive smile, holding Sasuke on her hip and walking beside Itachi. The bag slung over her shoulder was revealed to hold the rest of the food and some picnic plates.

I couldn’t help but smile smugly at how nicely she’d forced the boys to dress until-

“Shisui, weren’t you wearing that this morning?” said boy just blinked at me as if he couldn’t conceive why he should have changed, even if I knew he’d been training since dawn.

The inevitable squabble only ended when Itachi was grabbed as a meatshield and I remembered I needed to give Mikoto her present. (Behind our backs, Shisui and Hana both slipped me some notes
and I consequently handed the gift over, saying it was from all three of us and Ensui.)

Needless to say, she loved it.

Not only were they red and designed like a curling whirl of flame, they also reminded me of the spinning Sharingan. When I said Ensui made them, the considering look on Mikoto’s face had me wondering if the older boy would be opening his own stall next to mine one day.

Well, if Noko couldn’t be here to have her flower shop annexed, then maybe a jewellery stall would work instead.

The meal was great, outside in the sunshine and the food. I whipped out the desert, which I’d nervously noted had been out of the fridge for almost an hour at this point, and everyone stared blankly at the heap of white on the tray.

Well, until their eyes lit up when I lit it on fire.

What a nice debut for my Baked Alaska, I mused.

The fire theme seemed to please the ninja and the ice-cream was happily smeared all over Sasuke’s face. With no one from the Clan around to turn up their nose, the almost-three-year-old was eating as messily as he pleased. Well~

“Sasuke!” Mikoto laughed, leaning over to wipe at her youngest’s mouth, only for the little boy to squirm away. Watching the 3-year-old’s antics for a minute, Hana laughed and easily reached over to swipe at the mess and, when we all looked surprised, she simply shrugged.

“Every baby is easy to deal with when you’re used to one like Kiba!”

After that, Sasuke seemed to take a bit of a shine to the Inuzuka, especially when she proved to know all the best games to play. I was pleased to see some of the tension ease when both Hana and Itachi were pulled into a game of Hide-and-Seek. It wasn’t fixed, they still weren’t really talking, but it was better than awkward silences.

“Mikoto-hime,” I took the reprise to turn to the Uchiha Matriarch, “I actually wanted to talk to you about something.”

I knew it was bad form to talk business at a party, never mind with the birthday girl, but I wanted to get it off my chest ASAP. Sue me, I’m tense!

“I…want to open up a stall. I’ll get an actual shop eventually, when I’m older, but I can’t camp out at Ichiraku’s forever! It’s been three years and I think I need to move on.” I shuffled a bit, pointedly watching the other three play around the trees, and trying not to think about how silly it sounded.

A 10-year-old business owner? Did that count as prodigious?

“Oh, Kiharu-chan, that sounds wonderful!” Mikoto turned to me with a smile before a slight frown pulled at her brows. “But what does that have to do with me?” I knew she knew I wasn’t playing a political game here, whether from befriending her or the children, but it still made me nervous to think that some people might’ve thought I’d come in with an ulterior motive.

I mean, I had. But the whole ‘I-Don’t-Want-You-Guys-To-Be-Slaughtered-In-The-Night’ was a considerably more hush-hush operation. Membership number: currently 1.

But anyway, this was the awkward bit. And to think, I needed to ask Sora-oba, Yuri-oba, Yoshino,
Kaiya and Tsume as well (the more, the merrier). Fuck my life.

I blushed scarlet, embarrassed, and fiddled with the folds of my kimono.

“Would you…sponsor my petition to the Civilian Council?”

Chapter End Notes

A/N- Hey! So, don't know if you noticed from my opening lines but I am sleep deprived. *audience effects gasp* Yes! Yes, it's true! I should be sleeping. Thank you all for your incredible support and I could only hope that you'll all comment like that again! (every chapter would be nice, actually, it really makes my day and I read every single one, even if I don't reply to everyone.) Thank you and enjoy! X

P.S- If anyone's wondering, commenting on every chapter isn't seen as annoying or creepy, it will probs just make you my favourite person and I'll probs end up writing with you guys in mind lol

edited this- it was some sleep-deprived, embarrassing shit lol
Small Girl, meet World...err...Council

Chapter Summary

You never know how much you rely on stuff until it's not there. Like internet, phones... ...or online shopping.
(I just want to be able to buy what I need, for once, and not have to 'invent' it-!)
Or friends and family.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kaiya-san had ended up being the one to propose my petition to the Council. I figured she would be the one to make the most impact, considering everything.

If it had come from me, I’d have been laughed out judging by looks alone and I doubted the secretary would have even let me in (I’d met her, she was annoying).

The ladies had been eager to help me, after having a good old laugh at my expense when Mikoto told them about how shy I’d been about the whole thing. I’d let them, inwardly pleased at how the women seemed much more casual after a good laugh. Even if it was at my expense.

It had been embarrassing, okay? I knew I had a bit of an independence chip on my shoulder, but it was still awkward to ask for help. I was trying though, which is what mattered, I guessed.

Sadly, but predictably, my business petition was moving at a snail’s pace through the bureaucracy and I had to reach a certain demand and income before I qualified as a business owner suitable to take up a part of the Market place.

Meaning I needed an increase in customers.

Not many, mind you, but enough to make me need a game plan. And, honestly? I wasn’t sure I could do it by myself anymore. I was already dedicating most of the day to my baking and I was only one person, a small girl at that. Even if I was already something of a delivery vendor, I needed to really up my game. If I was older, richer, maybe just a man, it could maybe be easier.

I didn’t know what to do anymore.

This was different from choosing not to be a ninja. I wasn’t going to be a killer but I wasn’t living a normal life either. If I was just some average kid, I would’ve got an apprenticeship when I was 12 or 11 with Yuri-oba and then lived an unassuming life, married at 21, maybe taking over the shop when I was 30 or so. Two children, one a ninja and the other another craftsman. A few grandkids and then a happy retirement.

I sounded alarmingly like Shikamaru.

Maybe it changed when I met Hitoshi, learning about how strange our family’s connections were.
Maybe it was when I started baking and people were so interested.

Maybe it was when I couldn’t change Minato’s fate, the memory of his smiling eyes overlaid with Shisui’s and I realised I couldn’t walk away a second time.

And so, here I was, 10 years old and trying to spread my wings. Regardless, it was too late to turn back, even if I had wanted to. There was no such thing as a simple life. Sure, I’d had the fridge at Ichiraku’s but that wasn’t an independent venture; in comparison to this, that was Teuchi seriously humouring a young girl who’d been favoured by the village dictator. But, maybe I was trivialising it.

I’d started the whole process at the end of June, the Council meeting scheduled directly after I’d spoken to all the women I wanted as sponsors.

I wasn’t that I couldn’t ask some men for help, it just happened to be all women, but the Clan Heads were all incredibly busy and I didn’t know them as well. I also didn’t think the Council would appreciate it if I got active Shinobi involved etc., and Teuchi was a relatively new owner himself, only having set up when I was 6 (5 years, in the grand scheme of things, wasn’t that long).

But now, I needed something new, something fresh-

“Ugh, I’m so hungry!” Hoshiko groaned under her breath, her arms filled with plastic-wrapped silk from the Merchant’s stall. As I walked beside her, arms clasping a paper bag of ribbons and threads, I couldn’t help but laugh at her uncharacteristic complaint, used to the older girl being rather shy.

“Do you wanna grab something really quick?” I tipped my head in the direction of Market Street, “We’re not due back for a while yet.” And it was really early anyway, I could definitely have a second breakfast. Unfortunately, Yuri-oba had a rush-order wedding veil to embroider so there was little rest for the wicked.

Hoshiko smiled ruefully, heaving the silk upwards when it started slipping and continued on back to Yuri-oba’s place. “It’s too much hassle, let’s just get back and then we’ll sort out some snacks.”

Hmm, ‘hassle’?

I followed the older girl on autopilot, barely blinking when Yuri-oba directed us to set the materials down on the main workbench.

Hassle, hassle, hassle- what could I make that had little-to-no hassle? Sure, my desserts were popular but they needed a plate and utensils!

Pretzels? Popcorn?

“Yuri-oba, I’ve just remembered something I need to do, can I please be excused?” The seamstress looked up from where she was examining a wedding veil design, her expression startled before it warmed.

“Of course, Kiharu!” she shooed me off with a wave of her hand, “I know you only come in here to beat the customers to my latest stock and check on these old bones!” I laughed at her cheeky wink, already half-out the door.

Once outside, I started running.

“Excuse me, Nara-san!” I called, puffing as I slowed to a stop at the Nara Compound gates. “Is Ensui back from his mission?”
The older Nara, a man named Ojiro in his late 30’s, opened one eye from where Yoshino had told him to guard, half-asleep and slumped on top of the wall. Poor guy, he probably just wanted to go home.

In the early-November drizzle, I couldn’t blame him.

“No, Dazai-san,” Ojiro drawled, pulling a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and lighting one. The smoke drifted upwards as lazily as a Nara and I watched with narrowed eyes how the man took a long drag. “Yoshino-sama will probably want to speak to you, though.”

“…those will kill you, you know.”

Jerking his free hand into the ram seal, shadow stretching to open the gate for me, the older Nara tapped off the butt of his fag.

“Rather a smoke did me in than Kumo.”

Not knowing how to respond, I merely nodded and pushed through the gate into the Compound. The click of the lock behind me, as Ojiro stretched out his shadow once more, sounded strangely final.

The Nara Compound was very different from the Uchiha and Yamanaka. Whilst the dojutsu users were organised like a miniature village and the Yamanaka’s were a simple collection of houses, like a cul-de-sac with a perimeter wall, the Nara’s land included woods.

As in, they lived in the woods.

Too many fairy tales leapt to mind.

In the anime/manga, I hadn’t realised that quite meant that they literally lived like Goldilocks and the Three Bears. Various cottages dotting the wilderness with a tall fence marking the boundaries and the houses peeked out between the massive tree-trunks.

It was strangely mysterious. The woods were extremely quiet, like some reverent shrine to nature, and I felt like I was intruding on something every time I came around.

The deer herd were also nowhere near as shy as the ones I had seen before. They were bold, like actual people, and strolled between the houses and through the grounds like we were the ones intruding. As I walked, one of the older does started trotting along beside me and I carefully rubbed her flank. Her head turned to assess me, her large black eyes strangely intelligent, but she didn’t do anything. After years of visits, I had little doubt I was easily recognised. And if I was a hostile? I’m told that stags could maul humans very easily with those huge antlers.

It was different, seeing the effects chakra had on summons, and then, on normal animals.

Take the Forest of death, for example! (Actually, let’s not go there.)

But, whilst it could be considered a bit freaky, all I could think of was how much I’d loved Disney’s Bambi.

The Clan Head’s house came into view, the only sign it was different from the others being the large herb garden out front. Just another thing I admired about Shikaku-sama, the fact that he didn’t live to a different standard than the others~
“Ohayo!” I called, letting myself in the back door. After years of visits, we were all pretty casual by now.

“Kiharu-chan, nice of you to drop by!” Yoshino appeared around the corner, apron on and I wondered what she wanted with me. Yoshino was only so outwardly pleasant in her own home when she got her way. (Even if she was in a good mood, she tended to look aggravated. I wondered if it was some game she liked to play with all the lazy Nara, giving them all heart attacks when they were at their most relaxed…)

I wasn’t left wondering for long as, in the same breath, Yoshino continued. “Shikamaru is in his room, maybe you should go and say ‘Hi’… and get that boy up before the morning’s over…” she grumbled the last part, turning back to the sink and scrubbing up the dishes from breakfast.

It wasn’t really a question, I internally noted, amused despite myself.

The house was built along traditional lines, with a small garden in the centre, so there were no stairs to climb. Shika’s room was towards the back of the house, separated by Yoshino’s fig tree from his parents’ room, and was strangely empty. There was little in the way of toys, only a few stuffed teddies dotted around (mine had yet to move from its place of honour beside the 4-year old’s pillow, I noted smugly) and everything seemed to be a similar boring shade of blue. The lazy boy probably wanted it that way- less hassle, or some nonsense-

“Shika,” I called softly, tapping on the doorframe with a single knuckle. The small lump under the duvet twitched before slowly rolling over.

“Nee-chan,” A little voice grumbled out beneath the cover and a small hand appeared, twitching to beckon me over.

Huffing out a near-silent laugh, I sat on the edge of the bed and pulled the bundle of blankets over me, slipping under the covers like it was the laziest blanket-fort in the world. Well, Naras and all that, I supposed.

“What’s got you hiding under here, ay?” I stroked a single finger down a babyish cheek, smiling when Shika puffed out his cheeks in annoyance. “Was it Ino-chan, again?”

“Why won’t she let me sleep?” The young Nara groused, eyes half lidded and silently annoyed.

“She probably just wants to play, you know,” I reasoned and listened intently when Shikamaru told me how she pushed him awake three times.

“She probably just wants to play, you know,” I reasoned and listened intently when Shikamaru told me how she pushed him awake three times.

“Girls are so troublesome,” he declared. Oh no, I wasn’t going to let that rest, boy-o.

Making my eyes widen and water slightly, his own eyes popped open in panic and he scooted closer to rest against my shoulder. “But not you, Ki-nee-” I made sure to still look hurt and the younger boy fell for it hook, line and sinker.

He was only three, he’d learn eventually.

“You let me sleep and show me the best places to cloud watch. And,” he blushed slightly, probably realising he’d talked quite a lot to my face, “you never get angry.”

I couldn’t help but smile, slipping an arm around his shoulders and rolling onto my back so the younger boy was rested against my chest. After carefully eying me to make sure I wasn’t actually crying, the younger boy relaxed slightly. Hmm, I probably shouldn’t enjoy shaking him up so much. Yoshino must be rubbing off on me.

“Hana is loud and very energetic but I guess she’s okay. Hisa,” Shika’s nose scrunched up in distaste and I resisted the urge to bop it, “is troublesome, she keeps pulling my hair out.” That made me frown but I wasn’t too concerned, the other girl was only 6. I’d leave that for now.

“Sora-oba makes mackerel whenever you have dinner there,” I pointed out fairly and the boy grudgingly agreed.

“So, girls aren’t all troublesome, are they?”

He didn’t respond, so I tried a different angle.

“Does that mean that boys aren’t troublesome?” Shika huffed in defeat, nodding that I had a point.

“Shisui,” he agreed and I rolled my eyes so hard it hurt.

Why the hell didn’t my otouto like my best friend?

Shisui was great with kids! Ino and Chouji loved him, he was such a great play-partner. Even Sasuke, who clung to Itachi like a burr, liked his older cousin. Shika, however, would scowl like I’d kept him awake for 48 hours whenever Shisui would pop up, glaring as he clutched at me – as if Shisui would what? Rip me away forever? Tch! – before shoving his face in my neck and transforming into a very small, Nara-shaped rain cloud.

Knowing it was a lost cause to address that last bit, I simply rubbed noses with him, enjoying how his eyes closed happily when my purr started up. He was so precious!

“Shikamaru!” Yoshino yelled. “Are you up yet?”

The boy in question groaned loudly, rolling his eyes and smushing his face into my collarbone, as if that could drown out his mother. I snorted and sat up, bringing my little brother with me, and casually hooked an arm around his legs. Standing up, Shika curled on my hip, I walked across to the kitchen.

“Yoshino-san, Shika wants to visit Chouji. Can I take him over?” I felt Shika smile against my neck and I grinned at Yoshino, who cocked an eyebrow but let us go.

“Don’t let him sleep the day away, Kiharu!” The Lady Nara called after us and I couldn’t hide in my giggles any longer. “And make sure he actually walks at some point today!”

Ignoring his mother immediately, Shika conked out on my shoulder before we’d even left his Clan’s grounds and I walked the ten-minute stroll to Chouza’s house listening to his fuzzy little baby snores.

So cute.

The Akimichi at the gate, Akihiro, took one look at the pair of us and grinned, waving us through without a fuss. The rain, which had blown over whilst I was at Yoshino’s, started up again and I pulled my cardigan around Shika as I ducked my head and ran for the house.

“Hello, Kaiya-san, sorry for coming over unannounced!” I called as I toed off my shoes and plonked a disgruntled Shikamaru down so he could do the same.

“Kiharu-san, it’s a good thing you’re here, I just heard back from the council.” The ebony-haired woman came around the corner and leaned against the wall. I gulped nervously, slowing what I was
doing to look up at the mother in front of me.

“They’ve set a date for your petition; it’s on the first of December.”

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“Ensui, praise Kami-sama!” I sighed, hugging my friend as quickly as possible before I started dragging him over to the table.

I’d been at Kaiya’s house for 2 hours, in the middle of playing cats-cradle with Chouji with Shikamaru curled up napping like a cat in my lap, when I’d remembered why I’d left Yuri-oba’s in such a rush that morning.

Aww, shit!

“Kaiya-san, how much do I need to increase my demand by before I meet with the Council, again?”

The Akimichi Matriarch looked over from her paperwork, tapping her chin with a pen in thought.

“Hmmm, I’d say an increase of 100 more regulars, to be on the safe side.”

Ah yes, that’s why I was sweating.

I was so screwed, wahhhhhhhhhhh-

“You,” Ensui had tapped on the kitchen door and, in my eyes, the weak sunlight behind him made him glow like an angel of mercy. “Ojiro said you were looking for me, Kiharu?”

And that’s where we were now.

“Ensui, I need you to make me something, okay!!”

The 19-year-old glared at me, undoubtedly sensing both trouble and more work.

“And what would that be, hmm?”

“A special pan! The Blacksmith would take too long and Goro-san gets huffy when you want anything diff-”

“You do remember that I’m not an actual craftsman, right?” Ensui interrupted, brow raised.

“…Ensui, I have four weeks.”

It had been a while since I saw the Nara boy look that unnerved. For a long few minutes we just sat and stared at each other.

I noted his sloppy ponytail, how the wings of his eyeliner had been rubbed away. He was just back from a mission, wasn’t he? I had little doubt that Ensui was cataloguing my own scruffiness intently, taking in the dark circles and tense shoulders. I certainly felt shit so I had little doubt I looked it too.

Ensui sighed explosively through his nose, dropping his forehead to rest on his folded arms. I felt shit, knowing how drained he must feel, but I needed his help, badly.

“Okay.” His voice was muffled and made me feel even more exhausted at the wave of relief that washed over me. “Okay. How do you want to do this?”

………………………………………………………………………………………
The next few weeks were explosively busy.

Ensui and I had ended up borrowing Goro-san’s kiln, in the end. The man was such a grouch, I almost didn’t want to give him that discount for the Ichiraku fridge but, well, it was the payment Ensui suggested and that was that.

Bother.

At least I was down to 99 more regulars, now, I guessed.

It took us four days to get my pan done, with minimum sleep and a sense of calculating urgency. Despite what he thought, Ensui was a massive help, somehow knowing things like the right alloys and how to forge casts (I started thanking Yoshino like she was a goddess after the second day, thankful that she’d made him learn these things when replacing the Clan’s weaponry). After wracking our brains for the best way to do it (Ensui had learned long ago not to ask how I knew things, assuming it was either too troublesome or he trusted that my creativity sprung from random places), we then settled down to actually make it. We worked like Yoshino herself was breathing down out necks and I couldn’t bring myself to regret it; Who knew when he’d be called out on another mission? Ensui didn’t even really get what is was we’d made but, when I used it on a tester batch, he agreed that this world’s first ‘Waffle Pan’ was pretty worth it.

(This time around, Inoichi-oji bought me the patent – Ensui didn’t want in – and I found myself crying in relief again; that it was mine and that it was finally done.)

The next three weeks, I made more cakes than ever in the evening, temporarily overloading Teuchi so much that Fridge wasn’t emptied most days until almost 5, rather than the usual 2pm.

In the morning, I camped out in Ichiraku’s and sold a tonne of Waffles, Crepes and Soft-pretzels.

I had a trolley filled with different toppings, flavours and fillings, that I’d prepped the nights before and I was ready to fucking rumble. The cold weather seemed to, in fact, help boost my sales. People still had to go out for food and shopping, no matter the weather, after all and my steaming goodies seemed to attract them all like flies.

Matcha-green waffle or crepe? Done.

Cinnamon pretzel? No problem. Oh, you want to try the hot apple sauce as well? No problem!

I was a ray of sunshine, happily serving even the most stand-offish of customers with a delighted grin. On the inside, I felt like death warmed over with a curl of fear squirming in my stomach like a live snake.

Every sale, every treat sold, I fretted over my deadline. Part of me was thrilled that they all seemed to be going down so well (I was glad that, current circumstances aside, the demand hadn’t curbed my enjoyment of baking) but I was so stressed.

There were other good side effects, though.

I mean, I’d never seen Genna-nee more that when he’d discovered my churros could be ordered in batches of twenty. If he wasn’t burning through all his calories in ANBU, I’d have felt guilty for making him eat like a pig. Even better, when he came sniffing for his new favourite lunchtime snack, he also brought Raidou around, probably figuring that it was safe by now.

How foolish!
A younger guy, I assumed he was the third Guard, Iwashi, was also tagging along. He was super quiet, reminding me of my eldest sister, and the thought made me smile at him in welcome.

I stopped smiling when he declined my dessert with a toss of his head. Ehh, never mind, I don’t like that bitch.

“Raidou-nii,” I smiled warmly at his nervous expression. It had been a good month since I’d last seen him, when I’d pressed a travel-bento box into his hands (Genma hadn’t been by in a month so he was ignored and didn’t get one). Fondly eying how Raidou approached like I was as sharp-clawed as Toshi, I appreciated that at least one of them had the good sense not to underestimate the damage I could dish.

I always did like him best.

“What will you have? It’s on the house, of course!” Genma, currently stuffing his face into his full-price Churros, choked.

“Oh, err,” The scarred brunet floundered and I grinned at him. He was so cute when he was flustered. And I hadn’t even started teasing him yet!

“Just a cinnamon and sugar pretzel, please, Kiharu-chan.” I hummed happily as I got it sorted, rolling out and twisting a pretzel that must’ve been twice the size of the others. A small crowd of children and curious adults had gathered around to watch me make the customary twirl and I mentally applauded myself for having the foresight to practice so furiously, I could have done it with my eyes shut.

Nothing more embarrassing than fumbling in front of a crowd, after all.

When I popped the tray into the oven I’d commandeered from Teuchi, I turned around to see my queue (mainly composed now of the kids who’d watched and then dragged their parents over) had grown out the door.

“Yes, please?” I called the next one over, lamenting the loss of a good teasing opportunity.

When the egg-timer ‘ding!’-ed, I pulled out the pretzels, putting in another tray and resetting the timer again. Taking Raidou’s monster, I brushed it in melted butter, picking it up with a pair on tongs and rolling it in a mixing bowl of cinnamon sugar. I then popped the steaming hot dough into a paper cone, passing it over with a napkin and grinning at the flabbergasted look on Raidou’s face.

“Are they, err, always this large?” The ninja eyed the pretzel that was larger than his face and I blinked innocently up at him, aware of the families currently watching.

“It’s your ‘Welcome Home!’ present, Raidou-nii!” I smiled with stars twinkling in my eyes, feeling scarily similar to my dad’s unintentional Hashirama impression. “I missed you!”

Just as planned, the crowd ‘aw’-ed at the heart-warming display and Genma – hypocritical, if you asked me – looked betrayed at the back wall.

Serves him right, for being so bad at visiting and not calling me ‘imouto’ and not dating Raidou and getting married so I can plan the entire thing and be flower-girl-

I had a few bones to pick with him, I’ll admit.

Ignoring the initial teasing of Raidou and the unpleasant discovery that Iwashi didn’t like sweet things (poor boy, what kind of life do you lead-) (I tried not to remember that Kakashi was the same
and that I hated eggplant), that kind of set the tone for the next few weeks.

As in, curious crowds, greedy Genma, showering Raidou in affection.

Not to forget, frenzied baking in the evenings, staying with Inoichi-oji and Sora-oba because dad was out of town on a B-rank and I had started hating being home alone, and passing out on my bed from exhaustion every night.

I didn’t have time for tea with Mikoto on Fridays anymore (she came to see me in the evenings instead and had started helping me meet my daily quota…she was the first person, since Kaa-san – and Sora-oba, years ago – who I’d taught anything to) and Shisui, when he was free for lunch, dropped round for a few free crepes whenever he could.

(I’d tried to get him to at least help with the cooking but…not to buy into any stereotypes…Shisui was better off sticking to his mission campfires. I knew he could cook a decent meal and the few times he’d made me lunch had been pretty tasty, but heaven forbid that boy get technical in any way! Even if it was just making sure the Churros didn’t burn-!)

And there wasn’t an issue with giving certain people discount or free food- I didn’t need the start-up money to increase, I needed the people to.

And, by some fucking miracle, they did.

I was so frenzied that it wasn’t until the night before my meeting with the Council, the one to negotiate buying shares and a stall in the Market Place, that I realised why I felt so wrong.

Tou-san wasn’t going to make it back in time.

Sat on my bed, in the room beside Ino-imouto’s, I stared down at my nervously shaking hands.

The last time I’d seen either Toshi or dad had been two weeks ago.

Hitoshi had purred the entire night, knowing how upset I’d been when Tou-san had unhappily announced that he had to lead a tracking mission to Frost in the morning. Which meant Hitoshi had to go as well.

I’d nodded, of course, putting on a brave face and finishing my dinner like my stomach hadn’t just turned to iron.

It wasn’t just that dad had been leaving on more and more missions outside of the village with Toshi, longer missions that he couldn’t even tell me the most basic information about, that it was even more dangerous now with the high tensions with Kumo, that his mission was going to take him scarily close to Cloud’s borders.

That I’d half-moved into the room next to Ino’s and that, the first night I’d stayed over, I’d cried in Inoichi-oji’s lap because it wasn’t Tou-san holding me through a nightmare about Shisui’s suicide.

It wasn’t just because it felt like dad hadn’t been around for anything important in a long time. Because I knew it wasn’t his fault, that it didn’t mean he didn’t love me. It wasn’t because that didn’t make my heart ache any less.

It wasn’t. It wasn’t.

I wasn’t that selfish.
Except, I was.

So, the night before my petition meeting, I cried into a pillow I half-owned, in a bed that didn’t stink of panther, in a room Sora-oba had filled with touches of green because it was my favourite colour, and in a house that had other people in it.

A soft ‘pat-pat-pat’ of little feet had me turning towards the door, quickly scrubbing away tears that I knew would upset Ino if she saw them.

A platinum blonde head popped around the doorframe, face set into a stubborn expression and I beckoned her inside, knowing that she wouldn’t let it rest until she felt she’d investigated and sorted things out.

*My darling little terror*, I thought fondly, letting the younger girl climb into my lap with an ease that spoke of practice.

She was very quiet.

As much as Shika liked to moan, and I could attest to her tantrums, Ino was a very clever girl and she knew exactly how to play people. I tried not to think of T&I skills being genetically transferrable.

“You know,” I whispered to the dim room, breaking the silence. Staring up at the ceiling, the only light came from a small, yellow desk lamp in the shape of a flower on the far side of the room. “I was there when you were born, imouto.”

“Really?” Ino asked, her own babyish voice lisping a bit over the whisper.

“Really, really.” I nodded, clasping my hands around Ino as she sat in my lap, her back to my chest with her head tucked under my chin. “And I promised Sora-oba, when I saw you, that I would try and be a good nee-chan to you.”

If Ino felt my tears when they hit her hair, she didn’t show it, merely snuggled further into my cuddle.

“And I’m your imouto!” she whispered, giggling a little and a tiny smiled tugged at my lips in response.

“You can always come to me, even when you fight with *Shika,*” I teased gently, “…and I’ll always be around to listen.”

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“You look lovely, Nekki-chan,” Sora-oba assured me, nervous hands smoothing down the fabric along my shoulders.

My kimono, red with white flowers along the hem and a white obi, was pristine. My hair was brushed into a very neat ponytail, my bangs falling to frame my face and skim my jaw. My teeth were brushed and my face washed, hands too. My shoes were spotless and my stomach, in defiance of my twisting worry, was filled with a hearty breakfast.

I was a mess.

It didn’t help that Sora-oba was dressed up as well, not as much as I was, but I was the one trying to make a point here. Sora-oba didn’t have to prove herself like I did.
“Ready?” She stepped back and turned towards the door, dropping a kiss onto Ino’s forehead and Inoichi’s cheek as she swept past.

“You’ll be fantastic, Kiharu,” My uncle reassured me as, behind us and stood on the sofa, Ino impetuously declared that I was the best. No pressure, kiddo…

“Thanks!” I managed to squeak, gulping convulsively as we left the house and started down the street.

*I’ll never fucking forgive myself if I vomit now, of all times!*

The petition was being held in the Council’s meeting room, on the third floor of the Hokage Tower and, waiting outside for us, were all my leading ladies. Amongst them, Yuri-oba was looking just as pale as I felt but, nowadays, I wasn’t sure if that was just because she was still coughing. And Tsume, Tsume was dressed in clothes that looked alarmingly like her Jonin outfit, all prepped and ready to fight dirty.

I tried not to whimper.

We were led upstairs by a bored looking Chuunin and I was pretty sure we wouldn’t have to wait too long, my appointment scheduled for nine on the dot and we’d timed it perfectly. Then again, you never knew with bureaucracy.

I did feel a bit better when I saw the very important-looking ledgers in an even more important-looking Kaiya’s hands. *At least someone will know what they’re doing.*

They were running 10 nerve-wrecking minutes behind schedule when we were let into the room.

It was a traditional board room, with the Council Members arranged in a long line facing me. They had low tables in front of them, all sat traditionally on the floor.

It felt very like a trial.

Lowering myself into a respectful bow, I introduced myself, comforted by the presence of the women behind me.

“Ohayo gozaimasu, Honourable Elders. I am Dazai Kiharu and I wish to open my own stall in the Market place.”

I waited a beat or two before slowly rising and lowering myself into the traditional seiza, sending up a quick prayer that my legs wouldn’t go dead before this was over. Shuffling behind me let me know that the ladies had followed suit.

That was one of the worst things about this; not being able to see a friendly face, sitting out in front on my own.

I felt a little too like an offering to feel comfortable.

“Dazai-san, you are, as I understand it, only 10 years of age, correct?” The man in the centre spoke. His glasses and grey hair were…uncomfortably…familiar.

*What the fuck was Homura Mitokado doing in the Civilian Council?*

“Hai.”

“And you do not find yourself too young?” Not a single twitch, of his eyebrow or of anything. The
man was a fucking rock. A militaristic one, as well.

“Whilst it may be true that I am young, Elder-sama, I have been baking since I was a very young child and, for the past three years, have sold my wares at Ichiraku Ramen. As my clientele and the demand for my goods have flourished, I believe this is the next logical step.”

“Please,” I swallowed nervously, “I have prepared a small selection of my wares for you to sample.”

Sora-oba, who’d been carrying the tray the entire time (my hands were shaking too much to be trusted with it), gracefully handed the tray to one of the attendants along the side of the room. Small samples of my fresh strawberry tart, matcha mousse cake and other titbits (that wouldn’t go cold or melt when we were waiting) were neatly organised on tiny dishes.

Inoichi-oji had said they were beautiful and I focused intently on those words as the dishes were distributed amongst the Council members.

Some of the members shifted slightly, one older woman’s brows rising in surprise, at either my words or the food, I couldn’t tell.

Did they not fricking read my file? I had to consciously stop my eyebrow from twitching, focusing instead on how a few members took carefully small bites of the cheesecake option.

*That’s Mikoto’s favourite*, I mentally chanted, *and she’s a Lady-

“...Market is an extremely valuable part of our village’s economy,” A blonde woman leaned forward, cold eyes assessing me shrewdly. She had the same shark-ish feel about her as Kaiya except this woman, I knew, wouldn’t hesitate to deal me some real damage. “There are plenty of people of who petition for access to the Market. Why should it go to you, especially a girl of your age? There are plenty of food vendors in that area already.”

“If I may,” I reached one arm back for Kaiya’s folders, who handed them over so smoothly I was impressed she could roll with the punches so quickly. She was the one meant to talk figures, after all. Then again, with Kaiya, I should have known better. “I have here a ledger outlining my profits from the past 3 years, starting with the patents provided to me by Yondaime-sama.”

I wasn’t shaking at this point.

I was cold and smooth, adrenaline making my eyes even sharper and every touch a deliberate movement. They’d fucking pissed me off when they questioned my right for this, as if I was some spoiled little girl who wanted to play shop. And I wasn’t below using the gifts and advantage’s Minato had given me before he died. The last Namikaze had been a genius after all; I doubted he hadn’t thought of this when he’d done me those favours in his name. And I wasn’t afraid of using any means necessary to get this done as quickly and smoothly as possible. Even if it did irk my independence-chip to realise and act on it.

“The Yondaime?” A balding man spoke sharply, the plate in front of him already clean, but I all but ignored him, my eyes boring into Homura’s.

He sat back, letting the other member’s whisper sharply amongst themselves, but his eyes missed nothing. Even if I didn’t already know all he was capable of (well, as much as the limited information provided by the anime/manga allowed me), I would have been wary of the look in his eye. Mentioning the Yondaime could make or break this petition. Whilst he was extremely beloved by the village, I knew that Danzo and the other two had no love lost for him.

What did it mean when a famous Jonin Elder, a teammate of Sandaime-sama and a student of
Tobirama, sat in the centre of the Civilian Council like he was a King holding Court?

“Dazai-san, please retire outside whilst we discuss your petition further,” Nodding warily, I backed up and rose on slightly numb ankles. “Please leave the ledger and dishes here with us.”

The sound of the door closing echoed slightly in the small waiting room we found ourselves in.

Breathing out a shaky breath and, conscious of the thin walls, I broke the silence with a whispered, “Did I do okay?”

As if a dam had broken, the women gathered around me in their various outfits (Tsume was, naturally, grinning like a maniac from where she leaned against the wall in her Jonin uniform) like birds enfolding me in their wings.

“Oh, Kiharu,” Yuri-oba murmured into my hair, “Your mother would’ve been so proud.”

The peace of the morning, on a quiet and focused Wednesday, was broken by a small girl making a spectacle of herself.

For anyone who recognised her, this itself was not unusual.

The fact she was wearing a violently-scarlet kimono in the middle of the snow-covered village made her all the more eye-catching.

The fact she was screaming with joy, crying messily as she wafted an official-looking scroll around her head like a lunatic as she dashed towards a certain Ramen stand, made her a memorable source of entertainment for those staring out their windows for a break in the monotony.

“Teuchi!” I beamed like the massive mess I didn’t give-a-shit-that I was, “Teuchi! I got it!”

The man in question dropped the empty wok he was holding, staring blankly between me and the deed I was furiously hugging. Two Chuunins in the corner watched on, looking vastly entertained.

“You…got it?”

I nodded furiously, accepting the flying hug from Ayame as she squealed and threw herself around the counter and into my arms.

“Congratulations!” The older man roared, louder than I’d ever heard him, and his hand came down to warmly ruffle my hair. It must’ve ruined my ponytail, one I’d spent ages fretting over this morning, but now I didn’t care.

Because I’d gotten it.

Beaming up at the man who made it all happen, I unwrapped one arm from Ayame and stuck it out to him for a hearty shake, which he happily obliged.

“It will be a pleasure doing business with you, Honourable business-partner!”

“Kiharuuuu!” Kotetsu howled behind me and I whirled around to see both boys booking it down the street.

“We just heard in the Hokage Tower that a girl got the deed to the last free Market stall!” Izumo was the first to crash into me, altering his centre of gravity at the last moment so we wouldn’t go flying
and swung me around in a circle instead. With my face smothered his uniform, I couldn’t even muster the usual aggravation at how much the two had shot up recently. Another body pressed into my back and I found myself squashed in a Izu-Tetsu sandwich.

“Was it you? Was it you? Was it you?” Kotetsu chanted desperately and I yanked myself free for a moment to breathe and nod furiously.

“Yatta!” They crowed and I had little doubt that my own grin was just as massive as theirs were.

“Come on! Genma will have a cow if you don’t tell him yourself!”

I barely had time to wave back at the father-daughter duo as I was yanked out of there.

“Oi! Genma!” Tetsu led the way to the training ground I’d noticed Genma preferred over the years. And, when I said led-

“Put me down!” I thumped my fists against his back, aiming for where I knew his bony vertebrae stuck out. “I can walk and tell him myself, you know?!”

The Tokubetsu Jonin stopped whatever he was doing (I wasn’t exactly in the position to see) and let out a tolerant sigh at his ‘ducklings’ antics.

“What are you doing to Kiharu, now, boys?”

In his indignation to defend his intentions, Kotetsu let go of my legs and I prepared myself to be reunited with the ground. Via my face. Thankfully, in a blur, Izumo caught me and gently set me upright on my feet.

I always knew he was my favourite, see?

“Nee-chan,” I whirled around to face the assassin, completely undeterred, but immediately changed course once I caught sight of who he had been training with.

“Raidou-nii!” I crowed happily, flinging myself across the space and into his embarrassed arms. “I got the deed!” and, to my everlasting bliss, the hug was suddenly happily reciprocated.

“Wow, Kiharu-chan, congratulations!” Raidou smiled, still looking a bit uncomfortable with my blatant acts of affection, but he obviously meant it and that’s what mattered.

I ignored Genma’s squawking reaction behind me, still miffed that he and Raidou weren’t an item. Or taking my attempts as anything other than a joke. Poor Raidou was such a sweet and innocent soul, it was obviously all Genma’s fault they weren’t happening. Anyway, the greedy pig was probably just thinking of all the Churros I could make him—

Once the bliss had worn off a bit, I was supremely embarrassed by the party Sora-oba had gleefully thrown for me that evening.

I couldn’t believe I’d thought she was all graceful and serene at one point.

Oba-san invited everyone.

Shisui had Shunshined to a stop half-a-foot in front of me when he arrived and I’d not even had time to blink before I was swept into a massive bear hug, his face in my shoulder where I could feel his grin and his enthusiasm making us rock from side to side.
This, naturally, was one of the extremely few things that could spark Shika into action and the boy had promptly interrupted us, winding Ino up like a toy-master and then setting her off in my direction.

I’d been hit with a rogue bowling ball with less force.

But the floods had then descended, with the next generation Ino-Shika-Cho all demanding to be picked up for a hug. For the sake of equality, seeing how much I saw Ino and carried Shika when he wanted to nap, I chose Chouji to cuddle. Shika looked disgruntled that his plan hadn’t worked all the way through – he’d eventually learn about planning for different variables – and I had to act fast to distract Ino from whining.

Thankfully, Chouji really liked Shisui from how often the older boy would tag along to my babysitting gigs and was more than happy to be cuddled between us.

I squinted at Yoshino suspiciously when I could’ve sworn I saw a camera flash.

Everyone was content to simply mill around and chat and, I couldn’t contain my smug expression when I saw how happy Mikoto was when everyone accepted her presence so easily. The Uchiha Matriarch was effortlessly chatting with the other mothers, smiling gently, and I closed my eyes for a moment in relief.

Mikoto might just be the saviour of her Clan.

On the other hand, Fugaku was, apparently, stuck in a meeting with the Elders. I’d barely seen the man, except in passing and, whilst the pity remained, I felt increasingly impatient with him. He looked like a hard-ass but I was becoming more and more disappointed at how he didn’t leap at the opportunities provided by Mikoto, Shisui and I to better the Clan-Village relationships. We were being nice for a reason, you know! (Well, I had little doubt that we were all try for the same reason, just without any acknowledgement between us)

Thankfully, Itachi had been able to come and was contentedly holding hands with Sasuke, who beamed up at his brother.

Speaking of Sasuke, I briefly saw him introduced to his future academy-mates but was pulled through the crowd to greet Akane-sama before I could crane my neck to see how they hit it off. Well, there were no explosions of Ino’s shrieks (love-struck or furious), so I could only presume it went well.

Hana turned up late, covered in grass from training and trailing behind her hyper puppies, who were more than happy to shower me with kisses. With a bit of shuffling, I also managed to get the puppies interested in scenting Itachi and he thankfully proved to be a dog-person. (Imagine if he’d hated them or been allergic? Any change of warming Hana up to him would’ve been impossible!)

When the Triplets seemed inclined to stay with Itachi for a while, Hana grudging asked him about his genin team, looking like someone was holding a kunai to her neck.

Still, progress was progress and I took what I could get! (Shisui and I snickered into our juice, huddled together, at the picture the pair painted. Oh, I was so getting Shisui in on project GenXRai if this was how much he enjoyed my low-key Hana and Itachi match-up…!)

I was disappointed though that, after everything he’d done for me, Ensui wasn’t yet back from Grass. I mean, the older boy had played a huge part in getting me where I was now.

I wasn’t even going to think about the Dad-and-Hitoshi-shaped elephant in the room.
And I told myself I didn’t have to!

Until they came back a week later.

………………………………………………………………………

I was in the middle of beating some eggs, just starting my daily baking quota for the evening. I still did all my baking at home and needed to make my stock for Ichiraku; Teuchi’s Fridge was still up the in the air, we hadn’t decided if it should stay as a dessert branch in the stall or not.

When the front door opened, I frowned, wracking my brains for who could be coming around at this time, but the pad of paws on wooden floors had me freezing.

“Cub,” The panther rumbled, prowling over to me at top speed and thumping his head into my torso. I slowly set the bowl down on the counter, sliding down the cabinet and wrapping my arms around his huge, black shoulders.

“’Toshi,” I mumbled, “I got the deed.”

Purring loudly and slowly rubbing his head against mine, Hitoshi lowly congratulated me and curled around my huddled figure. Swallowing hard, I remembered that if he was here, then Dad would be back from the Tower soon. We settled down to wait in silence.

I was…furious.

When the door banged open again and Dad – tanned skin dusty from the road, flak jacket ripped and eyes frantically meeting mine – rushed over to us, I tried to keep it in.

I was so happy to see him I could cry.

So, when I opened my mouth to welcome him home, I somehow ended up yelling instead.

“I got the deed, Tou-san,” My mouth was twisted bitterly and something ugly was rising in my stomach. “And you weren’t here for it.”

Before he could reach me, Dad froze.

“K-Kiharu,” his eyes, soft and bruised in his face, widened with hurt but I’d started this and I told myself I see it through.

He deserved to know how I felt, that was the only way we could maybe move past this. Dad couldn’t make more of an effort if I didn’t ask him to.

“I know, I know,” My fists came up to scrub my cheeks of their own accord and I noticed the Hitoshi had gone completely silent, like a very life-like throw on my lap instead of a real summon. “It’s not really your fault, you have to take missions – you’re ordered to! – but, Neko-tou-” and here was when my tears finally spilled.

“When are you ever home anymore?”

Dad looked devastated, like I’d punched him in the gut, and his own eyes started watering as he started down at me.

“Nekki,” Seiichi lowered himself down in front of me and I started crying even harder at the nickname he’d not called me in years.
“Oh Hime, Nekki, I’m sorry.”

And then boiling hot arms curled around be, pulling me to an achingly familiar chest. Even straight from the road, he still smelled of cinnamon and pine.

The both of us sobbed like children and I felt like we’d somehow made a breakthrough.

By the summer after I turned 11, things had changed.

After our little heart-to-heart, Tou-san and Genma pulled some strings in the mission office, explaining that, even if I was technically considered a prodigy by most people’s standards (which had ruffled more than a few feathers when it came out I wasn’t going to be put through the system like Itachi), Tou-san needed to be around more to look after me.

Whilst the in-village duties paid less, Dad and I now both had strong incomes and it wasn’t a real issue.

Despite getting the deed in December, it took months to get everything sorted. Despite being the largest Hidden Village, there was a back-log on orders for the resident carpenters and I had to wait for the weather to clear up and them to make time for me for another month, which took us into January.

Then I needed to accumulate all my equipment (I couldn’t just strip our kitchen at home) and then spend weeks making a fuck tonne of custom napkins and bags. They were just disposable tissue but there wasn’t a company around here that printed things for you, like there’d been before, so I almost killed myself with boredom, stamping and hanging out to dry thousands of napkins and paper bags.

When any of my friends were annoying or the kiddies needed punished, they ended up helping me in some form or another. (Yoshino tried this with Shika but he simple fell asleep on me so, to replace the deterrent of working with me, she made the poor boy join her one her morning runs if he’d been naughty. Exercise, to punish Shikamaru- I cried with laughter-!)

So, after all was said and done, I didn’t get to open until it was almost March!

It wasn’t too close to Ichiraku’s, being in the middle of the main Market (twice as expensive, but worth it), and nestled in between my favourite tea and spice-shop and a stall that sold savoury buns to eat on the go (the pork always smelled divine).

The stall was wonderful though, when it was finally ready. It was quite large, around 8 square meters, with two ovens installed at the back and a massive fridge cabinet. I had splurged on an ice-cream machine as well (how the hell they had that but not a Waffle Pan, I’d never know) and the front counter had a curved glass screen so people could watch me cook.

Like with Ichiraku’s, I had banners blocking out the worse of the breeze out front but, unlike the hanging cloth that Teuchi favoured, I pinned mine up, like outside the old café’s from before. They were navy blue, with thin white pin-stripes and red ribbons hanging along the edge. It was very Sailor-Moon-esque but I love it.

I called the place “Nekki’s” (the name given to me by Noko) and the logo printed on all the bags, the napkins and the sign outside was of a little scarlet cat, curled around a yellow rose.

Call me sentimental, but it felt right.
Opening day was a new level of chaotic, the stall rammed full of my fellow shop-owners (Squeeeeee, I was a shop owner!!) come to scope out the new edition to the neighbourhood and curious customers. Thankfully, loads of my regulars popped their heads in and promised to support both this place and my old Fridge back with Teuchi. Tou-san had dropped in for brunch before he was due back at the mission desk (Hitoshi had disappeared again, I don’t even know where that cat was going these days) but I was so happy that he could be there. Genma, along with Raidou and Iwashi (who stubbornly ate next-door’s pork buns in the corner), took a two hour ‘lunch break’ to sample the entire menu and, whilst his little display definitely made people more eager to try stuff, he was also a pain in the neck, asking me to make so many different things for one order. Talk about chucking me in the deep end.

In other news, I had successfully stopped Raidou’s brain and got Genma to call me ‘imouto’ (YESSS!) when I named the biggest options of the Churro boxes and soft pretzels ‘Platoon(s)’ (as in “Would you like that in small, medium or Platoon?”), after their Elite Guard formation. They were so cute, blushing like they were 16 again, waaaaa-

Shisui and Ensui had also been camped outside my place at 7am when I came to open up and had yet to leave. (I could have sworn the Uchiha had training today but I didn’t bring it up, aside from sending him a knowing smirk, to which he responded with innocently fluttering those annoying lashes of his.) Ensui was sat on the steps outside, enjoying the warm spring breeze and nursing a waffle with matcha ice-cream. Back inside the stand, Shisui was bouncing around, talking to everyone about how young I was and how I’d gotten so far, blah blah blah- so embarrassing!

Mikoto had also popped in to see how I was doing around 11 o’ clock and, seeing my harried face (I was only 11, jeeze) had never left, calmly slipping behind the counter to restock the napkins and re-organise the ingredient trays, taking orders and handing out sugared pretzel samples to tide the crowd over.

What an angel!

So yeah, opening day had been crazy and it had only calmed down slightly in the past 3 months. I had been floating ever since, if you ignored the stress of opening my own business, and then, predictably, came crashing back down to earth.

On the last Saturday in June, in a lull in the rush, I popped my head out for a bite of lunch and found Sasuke wandering around the Market place.

“Sasuke!” I called, lifted one arm to wave the almost four-year-old over when his head jerked towards me.

“Hi, Kiharu,” The little tyke grumbled, knowing that I started wailing like my dad if he tried to add a suffix to my name. If he wasn’t going to call me ‘nee-‘, there was no way he was going be adding anything else to it. He dragged his feet over to me, looking the picture of disgruntlement, and I felt a stab of pity. Sasuke, I had found, was more energetic the more you knew him. When I’d been around when we were younger, Mikoto’s youngest had always been a bit quieter. As the years passed, he slowly opened up, even if he was obsessed with ninja and didn’t really like much other than tomatoes.

It hurt to see him so upset.

Itachi was out of the village on an escort mission and Sasuke was feeling more and more left out. Poor kid, I couldn’t even remember where Itachi had gone this time, everything was so busy nowadays. I knew that Shisui was trying to help him, teaching him how to throw kunai and stuff, but
he was gone more and more now as well. Sasuke adored Shisui though – which I thought was hilarious, whenever he shot the older boy down with all the ruthlessness of a sniper whenever his cousin thought he could claim to be stronger than Itachi.

I was expecting Shisui to get into the Bingo book any day now, even if he was only 12.

So, I ushered the younger Uchiha into my stall, getting him to help make Waffles for the rest of the afternoon. By the end of the day, when Mikoto came looking for him, he’d finally let out a tiny smile and I felt a bit better too.

It was a week later that Hitoshi came to get me, as I was closing up for the day, to take me to the hospital.

When I saw Mikoto in the corridor, a sleeping Sasuke on her hip, I paled and broke into a run, grasping her hand as I skid to a stop.

“Hime!” I fretted, “what’s happened?” taking in the tear tracks on Sasuke’s little cheeks, I paled even further. I didn’t remember anything bad happening at this time, was this something new or had been left out of the anime/manga? Who was-

“Itachi-” The Uchiha Matriarch gulped, “-was on a mission to escort the Daimyo to Konoha-”

Oh, shit.

“-the rest of the genin team was killed-” My knees turned to water and I wondered absently if the ceiling was getting lower or if that was just me.

“-activated his Sharingan-”

“-Shisui tagged along with the ANBU back up-”

“Don’t stop thinking about tomorrow
Don’t stop, it’ll soon be here,
It’ll be here, better than before;
Yesterday’s gone, yesterday’s gone.
Oooh, don’t ya look back…”

A/N- I ALTERED THE CHAPTER. I’m sorry if any of you were insulted by my obvious lack of
knowledge about Japanese customs but I read your comments and tried to fix things as best as I could! Sorry again but I don’t really know anything about Japanese culture, except what I’ve picked up from Google, manga/anime and writing this fic x

Chapter End Notes

A/N- Yo! New chapter, people! As to how I write this stuff so fast? It's a skill honed from years of leaving essays too late, the ability to binge-write 5 thousand words in a few hours (or 9k+, as in this case). Useful, but my mum wouldn't be impressed with it's origins. Good thing this stuff is anonymous! This chapter is humongous and it was actually two separate chapters before I just merged the two Word docs. I felt like I wanted the whole issue over and done with in one chapter, even if it may have been more dramatic to split them after the scene with Ino and leave you in suspense a touch longer. But I've got something special planned for 18 and 19 ;) Anyway, you're all gems for being so supportive, so enjoy! X
The World turned

Chapter Summary

The passage of time was a funny old thing.
...there's not really much else to say. Except, to express that, sometimes, we want it to just...not.

...or to turn back.

Chapter Notes

warning; mentions bloodshed of...ahem...different kinds

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Itachi was going to be fine.

Well, physically.

He had passed out on way back to the village, exhausted from activating his Sharingan, but was let out of the Hospital within an hour of my arrival. The majority of his injuries, superficial wounds from kunai and some exploding tags, were overshadowed by the tragic fate of his teammates.

They’d both died.

I wasn’t sure if the butterfly effect could be so serious, if my treatment of Itachi had somehow affected his life so he was maybe a foot in another direction or whatever and, somehow, they’d both been killed.

I couldn’t really theorise on it, not being allowed to be told anything about a mission. The only reason I knew so much? Mikoto and my previous knowledge, the sketchy outline of Itachi’s earlier life.

He was completely silent – which, when you got to know him, was completely different from his usual quietness – and merely accepted his families concern with very little reaction.

I could see the careful look in Shisui’s eye a mile away. But, I doubt the others did.

“I’m glad you’re all healed up, Itachi,” I murmured patting his hand and purposely not saying that he was ‘fine’. He wasn’t, and I wasn’t going to even hint at him being otherwise. Itachi was a very sensitive soul, poetic in a way, and I could see how he’d been hurt. His eyes were almost bruised, like a terrible wound carefully tucked away, and seeing it made me swallow hard.

It felt like a pact, stood in between the two boys who would plot to save their clan. Shisui’s hand was like a vice around mine and Itachi’s trembled minutely, so slight I could only tell with his palm
pressed to mine.

He didn’t let go until the nurse came in to discharge him.

He was ordered to rest and train for the next week, which I figured meant that they didn’t know what to do with him, now that he didn’t have a team. I had a feeling Fugaku would have him training his Sharingan furiously the entire time.

In normal circumstances, Genma told me, the genin would be drafted into the Genin Corps but, obviously, they weren’t going to do that to a prodigy like Itachi.

So, he was, kind of, left hanging for a bit.

Shisui had started spending even more time with his younger cousin. They’d go off into the woods for hours and come back, scruffy like they’d been fighting and smelling of grilled fish. My knowledge, whilst blurring slowly over the years, was still sound and I never bothered them about what they got up to or talked about. I knew well enough. Not just from the anime, but because I knew them. Whilst Shisui and I had been around the Head family for a long time, we’d never discussed our views on...ahem...lifestyle, ever.

I’d not even spoken to Shisui about it.

So, when the two boys would go off for hours, I knew they were bonding on a different level. Before, Shisui and Itachi had just been cousins, training and chatting with the easy familiarity of knowing someone from forever. Now? They were talking like ninja, sounding out their views and building a comradeship that would be one of the strongest, in my opinion, ever formed between two shinobi.

The complete trust Shisui had placed on Itachi’s shoulders in the anime/manga, not just with his eye and gifting him the Mangekyou, but knowing without doubt that Itachi could follow through with their ideals, was incredible.

And the faith and dependence that Itachi had to Shisui’s final words, even years later? It had made me cry when I watched it.

So, yeah, the boys went off. And, when they were done, they came to Nekki’s.

Itachi, still a firm devotee of dango, still seemed to enjoy my creations (and I’d never give up on convincing him but, with his recent difficulties, I’d decided to try a more long-term approach) so I had made it abundantly clear that he was always welcome to drop by. Shisui was already as much a fixture at the stall as the very walls.

A week after he’d been discharged, I was left wondering if Itachi had turned my offer down in his own way. Shisui came over still but I could tell when he’d just been with Itachi; he always looked so pensive, if warm, when he’d spent time with the boy he considered his younger brother.

But then, low and behold, three weeks later and on a Tuesday morning, Itachi came into Nekki’s before I’d even opened. And without Shisui.

“Itachi?” I asked in surprise from where I was wiping down the glass screen on the counter. “I’m not open yet, what’s up?”

He looked a bit struck when he realised why there weren’t any customers so, before he could disappear into thin air, I beamed and told him I’d start the tea.
We’d not even really spoken, simply sipping our tea as the younger boy picked up a broom and started helping me without even asking. Sometimes, I talked about what was the newest thing on the menu and, sometimes, Itachi would quietly tell me what Sasuke had been up to recently.

It was a nice, peaceful moment and, since that first time, we repeated our little ritual once a fortnight or so. On top of that, he would occasionally come in with Shisui and, from the smell of campfire, I knew they’d come from their little training sessions.

The two prodigies weren’t the only Uchiha I was worried about, though. Sasuke, maybe spurred on by his brother’s activated Sharingan and increasing skills, had taken to begging the two – as in, Shisui and Itachi – for training. Fugaku was certainly cranking up the pressure. Misguided arsehole. And whilst I knew that Sasuke had been considered a bit of a genius himself, I could tell that the void between he and his brother was gradually depressing him. Mikoto, in response, made much more of an effort to make her youngest feel better, whether that was taking him along on her tea-visits to my stall or showing him her old katana’s. Nevertheless, Mikoto’s interest in introducing Kenjutsu to her second son made it seem like she was taking a considerable hand in Sasuke’s training.

I was pretty sure that was more than she’d done in canon.

The vibe I’d gotten from canon! Mikoto was that of a concerned mother, yes, but one who didn’t really interfere in her husband’s decisions.

This Mikoto was strikingly different.

I didn’t know – couldn’t say, I wasn’t some god looking down and comparing the two – but I thought that maybe it was because she had friends outside of the Clan. She was so much more comfortable walking around the village, no longer looking like the stares of the crowds burned like industrial lasers. Of course, she was a ninja and an Uchiha so it didn’t look that way but I’d gotten rather adept at reading ‘The Uchiha Mask’ – and, on top of that one, the ‘Matriarch Mask’ Mikoto used as Clan Head’s wife – and could see it as clearly as if she’d been as expressive as Naruto. I was proud of her.

And, speaking of the little orange-devil…I’d not seen hide or hair of him.

How?! In the manga/anime, they’d made it look like the little tyke was an explosive presence, a permanent fixture at the forefront of everyone’s minds. But this was…eerie. I’d heard people grumble about him and I knew a lot of people liked to complain about ‘that thing’, but I’d not seen a little blonde with whiskers anywhere.

Maybe it had just seemed that way because he was the protagonist? Either way I was getting concerned…At first, I’d just waved it of as living in the largest Hidden Village and not really getting out too much.

But then, the longer I spent in Ichiraku, I’d felt his absence like a great, fuck-off arrow was flashing next to me at the counter, screaming ‘HE’S NOT HERE’. And now, well into my first year as my own stall-owner, I was slowly feeling the creeping fingers of dread curl around my stomach.

Where was Naruto?

When Tou-san he promised he’d be better…he really meant it.
He’d been home for dinner every night this week, as he was now most days, and it felt surreal. I’d never had dinner with dad so often since I was a child, kaa-san and I cooking dinner for all of us until dad came in.

It made me both sad and happy, that those days seemed to return, if missing a member.

Then again, with how much Hitoshi decided to disappear nowadays, we were pretty much down to just the two of us.

At first, it had been a bit stilted, sitting around the table in silence. With only the click of chopsticks and our awkwardly loud swallowing, I’d almost wanted to excuse myself early. We’d had dinner before the change, of course, but…after what I’d said and the way he’d missed my petition…it felt a bit raw.

But dad was trying and that’s what really mattered.

So, I’d sit through those silent days and, eventually, conversation picked up.

Dad would ask me about how the stall was going – a sure-fire way to get me rambling on like a loon – and then sit back, watching me go off, with a contented smile stretching tanned cheeks. It was at this time, these moments of peace, when I noticed how much his heavy work load had aged him.

He was thinner – not scarily so, but enough that I noticed how his shirt skimmed where it had once clung. Whilst dad had always been deeply olive-toned, now his hands and face were even more so, leaning closer to a warm coffee-tone which was undoubtedly from so much exposure to the elements. His eyes seemed wiser and it wasn’t until I’d noticed his smooth cheeks that I realised I’d gotten used to the careless, 12 o’ clock shadow he’d been sporting. And now, that I had time to sit and cherish his face, I realised just how much a was growing to look like him.

We had the same nose, pointed and straight, and my jaw was more like his than it had been mum’s, even if Tou-san was more chiselled. Our hair was the same, even if dads was slightly sun-bleached on top. Besides the colour, our eyes were the same almond shape and I knew we had matching dimples if we grinned hard enough. I’d grown to look so much like him and not even realised until now.

Yes, He’d still been home before, but he’d always been half on a mission, at least mentally. It was like he couldn’t bear to stay in the village any longer than he had to and I knew I’d been a fool to think he could ever recover so quickly from mum.

And that was one of the biggest changes in dad. He was still bubbly and outrageous in equal parts to his maturity and over-protectiveness. He’d always been a social butterfly (people so loud and bright always tended to be) but since he’d pulled back on his missions, Tou-san had taken to people watching more and more. It wasn’t paranoia or anything but, rather, thoughtful and pensive. If I had to guess, I would say he was trying to memorise our lives, like he’d forgotten them once and never wanted to again.

There was nothing he looked at more than me, eyes dark and warm and sad. We’d be talking and I’d look up from my stir fry to see him staring desperately at my smile, my dimples, the way I crinkled my nose when a noodle splashed me. Sometimes, his eyes would close like he was memorising the noises, the sounds of our house around us and our voices as we talked and laughed, the sounds of my footsteps as I came up behind him.

It made my throat throb that he seemed to have missed this all so much. And so, because I could, I’d leave my chair and curl up next to him, tucking myself under his arm and breathing in the scent of
him. The warmth and the familiar weight of his arm made me feel like a I was six all over again, purring together as mum made tea.

We’d both close our eyes then, and just…treasure it.

Of course, Tou-san couldn’t just flip the switch. There were plenty of difficulties, too.

Dad had settled down to work in at the mission desk but I could sense a sort of restlessness in him. I knew he didn’t want to leave me like he had before, ever again, and it was all for my sake, so I didn’t mention it for now. I was thrilled that he was around more, working much more regular hours and there for the various birthdays and milestones.

I mean, Genma and everyone took loads of missions outside of the village but it was different for my dad. Not only did he have a child at home but, because of his tracking prowess, all his missions had been for a much longer term.

Guessing by patterns of appearance (I thought it was bad form for ninja that a little civilian Baker could suss this out just by paying attention), I’d say that Genma had around one mission a week and, most frequently, for around 6 days at a time, sometimes more and sometimes less. (It wasn’t actually that regular, but this was the kind of vibe/amount I guessed over the years I’d known him.) But Genma was in ANBU and I knew his pattern of work would be considered irregular.

In comparison, my dad had been taking one a month, with most being at least 2 weeks long, sometimes the entire 4. It sounded like a massive amount of missions were tailored for his skill-set but, when you thought about it, Konohagakure ninja worked for the entirety of Fire country and internationally. Dad could be tracking missing nin, bandits or kidnappers or anything! I wasn’t sure, he obviously couldn’t tell me, but I knew that he’d very rarely been in want of a job. But, even for a regular shinobi, I knew dad had been taking more missions than most.

Whether that was because he missed mum or loved being out there, I couldn’t tell.

Either way, after all, it had been taking him away from me.

And now he was home.

Maybe, when I was older, he’d take it back up again but, like with extreme or professional sport before, ninjas were replaced very quickly by the next generation. Whilst famous or extremely specialised shinobi could hold onto their importance for decades, like the Sannin or Sandaime, most of the regular ninja were retired by their 40’s or 50’s, either willingly or because their bodies were no longer suitable for active service. By the time I’d be 18, Dad would be hitting his mid 40’s; still pretty young for a ninja but he’d probably see a sharp dip in the long-term missions.

By then, I had a feeling there would be better trackers out there.

Dad was fantastic, and he and Hitoshi had a better mission record for long-range tracking than most Inuzuka, but he was only Chuunin level and I knew there would be some real powerhouses emerging in the next few years. So, maybe he’d try and get back out there when I was older, but I wasn’t sure he would be able to, at least not the level he’d been before.

Hitoshi had also taken to disappearing for a few days on end, never answering me when I asked what he was doing. When he started coming back with slashes in his fur and blood in his jaws, I glared at him as I dragged him to the hospital, wondering if he’d taken to exploring the Forest of Death in his boredom.

Stupid feline was probably trying to assert himself as Top Cat over those massive, fuck-off Tigers.
As for me?

In between convincing Ino to leave up on tormenting Shika too badly, making sure Shikamaru at least walked somewhere every day, and cooing over my adoring customer Chouji, not to mention fretting over Tou-san and the Uchiha-

All on top of my first year in business.

I was so going to go grey early.

I mean, sure I’d not lived long enough before to get that far, so surely that would be cause for celebration and, just before I’d died, grey/silver hair was a massive fashion trend I’d been crushing on.

Didn’t mean I wanted to do it!

Nekki’s had taken off like a shot and had yet to really slow down. I knew that business never ran smoothly (most of what I’d learnt had been lessons from watching my Dad before run his own business) so I couldn’t help but find myself waiting for the other shoe to drop.

And I was still waiting when autumn rolled in.

A new term at the Academy had begun and I found that my busy hours had shifted into the afternoons, once school had let out. The kids seemed to think it was awesome that ‘one of their own’ was a real-life business owner.

This, strangely enough, made me more popular than I’d ever been in my life.

When I’d spent time with the other children, when we were all younger, I’d always ended up incredibly frustrated with them and they’d always think I had my head shoved up my arse.

Of course, they didn’t use language like that – ahem, I wasn’t that shit of an influence – but the sentiment seemed pretty spot on.

Now I had my own place, my eye-rolls and higher IQ just made me ‘wicked’ and ‘so cool, senpai’.

I was pretty sure this was how Itachi felt.

Cheeky hint? It sucked balls.

The amount of academy brats who’d clamber into my stall was insane! Sure, business was booming and I cheerfully served every single brat like they were all Shikamaru, but I kind of felt like a spectacle to all the little baby ninja. Not to mention the fact that, as the entire school let out at the same time and they all made a bee-line for here, I ended up with a pack of brats all turning up at the once.

Of course, when he heard, Shisui just had to stop by and flex his ‘muscles’ (he was so scrawny, how the hell was he so formidable??) so the brats knew when to chill.

Unfortunately, like everything in my life, it worked the exact opposite.

The kids stared at the figure of Shunshin no Shisui, who was sat at my bar and absently twirling a kunai around his finger (blatantly ignoring my ‘No Weapons’ sign, the cheeky brat).

“Whoa~” They seemed to breathe as one.
“Shisui!” I growled, grabbing a basket of napkins just before it was knocked over. The idiot almost-14-year-old was surrounded in a bunch as academy kids, the oldest around 10 and the youngest at 7, as they all battled to grill him on life as a ninja. Asking him what rank he was and if he knew any cool jutsu-

Well, at least they didn’t seem to care about the huge Uchiha symbol stamped between his shoulder blades.

“Sorry, Ki-chan!” He grinned sheepishly, his hands scrubbing the back of his head. Oh, how the mighty had fallen, I thought, amused despite myself as a little girl asked him where his jewellery was from.

“Oh, everyone!” I cried, glad that, aside from Shisui and the students, the stall was currently empty. Then, channelling a bit of Yoshino, “You all need to calm down. I’ll have no rushing around under my roof, okay?!?”

The shinobi kids just blinked at me.

“Who’s ordering first?” I smiled, pleased at the silence, and flipped my spatula in the air before catching it with a flourish.

“…Senpai’s kinda scary,” Two tiny kunoichis-in-training whispered, stars in their eyes.

After that, the after-school kids were always asking when ‘Shisui-senpai’ was coming around. I knew I shouldn’t have let him talk about his missions!

It wasn’t all about me though, the past year had been pretty hectic for everyone else as well.

Then again, this was probably the pace my life was now moving at. How exhausting~

Despite the new tensions between the Uchiha because of what happened to Itachi, I felt like I was finally getting somewhere on that front. Mikoto was seen more and more around the village, either at Nekki’s or shopping with Sora-oba and the others. Shisui had always been one of the most tolerated Uchiha because he was so genuinely nice but now, with a small following of Academy students, he was greeted much more warmly. The market owners near Nekki’s seemed the most accepting, no doubt from watching all of us interact at my place. Whilst Itachi was still ‘controversial’, I felt hope stirring in my chest.

The other boys were growing up even more now, as well. I’d bumped into Iruka a few more times in recent months but I think he was ashamed of his behaviour when we’d met. Although I’d made it extremely clear on more than one occasion that I had forgiven him and all was forgotten, he still always looked vaguely embarrassed and red-faced around me.

Feeling guilty that he seemed so uncomfortable, I introduced him to Genma and the boys, resolving myself to ‘reconnecting’ with him when he’d graduated.

Maybe by then he’d give me a chance?

But then he looked so upset when our brief meetings ended, face burning and looking strangely frustrated. Ugh, Iruka! What did that boy want from me?? He looked so embarrassed when I did talk to him and put-out when I didn’t!

Izumo and Kotetsu, whilst happy to be introduced to the younger boy, were due for the next Chuunin exams. Despite that, they did promise to show Iruka some tips for kunai throwing (some weird ninja bonding experience, evidently) and that was that. The exams were being held in Hot
Water and I wondered if they made it through their first time in canon. I couldn’t really remember those more obscure details anymore.

But, for every moment I lost of my last life, I gained another memory in this one.

Ever since opening Nekki’s, I’d seen Chouji far more than I had previously. Whilst I’d babysat smol Ino-Shika-Cho a lot, it tended to be focusing more Ino and Shikamaru, with Chouji kind of tagging along for the ride. This was mainly because I was essentially Ino’s aneki and Yoshino had determined early on that, if anyone could elicit a reaction from her lazy son, it was me. (Excuse YOU, I was in no way obsessed with Nara!?)

Kaiya and Chouza had always trusted me with Chouji, never doubting for a second that I was a good sitter (cheaper and much more attentive that a genin team, considering I adored all three babies and was only paid in meals and favours) but I wasn’t as close to the Akimichi as I was to the others. That had changed over recent years, not just because I was relying more on Kaiya for advice and I’d impressed the Clan with my creations, but also because I’d realised how stupid I’d been, too absorbed in the Yamanaka and Nara to try as hard with the third member of the alliance.

I mistake I would never make again, I’ll tell ya!

Chouji was old enough now that he could wander a bit more by himself – tch, ninja, ridiculous – and I was flattered beyond belief that the little auburn-haired boy had made a bee-line for my stall.

It had just turned October when he first did it, a week after Shika and Ino had turned five and a fortnight before Shisui hit 14.

At five years old and almost to my waist, I’d grown used to seeing him wandering around with Shika, the two boys all but glued to the hip with the Nara’s bottlebrush pony stuck up beside Chouji’s orange mop. So, I was in no way prepared to look up from spinning pretzels to see a tuft of carrot hair peaking over the countertop, all by itself.

“Chouji?” I slowed my movements, leaning over to see the little boy shyly smile up at me. “What are you doing here, honey?”

Now, I knew that terms of endearment were pretty scarce around here, but I was raised European before so screw that. My best friend before had had the verbal tick of calling everyone ‘My Lover’, in the same way some people said ‘Dude’. Yikes, the awkward misunderstandings we got ourselves into with that!

The young Akimichi Heir didn’t answer right away, scuffing his sandals against the floor and peaking up at me.

“Kaa-san said I could come see you,” he mumbled, smiling hopefully and I melted like butter in the pan.

I ended up sitting him on a stool by the bar, showing him how to twist Pretzels and using skewers to dip fruit into the different sauces when we got hungry. It was a pretty slow day, a Thursday afternoon when people were just trying to get their work done before Friday and the weekend. That morning had been rammed, everyone cramming in for an extra-special late-week breakfast, and I found the quieter time with Chouji a relief. Towards 3pm, the customers picked up again and I was thankful that Chouji was such a good kid; he simply sat in his chair, smiling and waving at the various customers who coo-ed at the picture the pair of us made.

If it had been any other kid, I would never have let them behind the counter. Shika would’ve
contaminated the surfaces by falling asleep on them (waving that damned ponytail everywhere) and I didn’t think Ino could behave long enough – whether my attention was on the customers or cooking –, just to give two examples. Chouji I’d plonked beside the ice-cream machine, with nothing in reach put a plate of Churros with banana slices and a child-friendly cup of juice. I’d learnt to keep things for kids on hand (the kids came ’round so much, it made sense to have things stocked – more than one mother had been thankful I kept a stash of baby wipes!).

Some mothers had even been directed in here from the Market Place! Comments like ‘Kiharu in Nekki’s has lots of little kids visiting- ask her if she has any such and such!’

So, ever since that day in October, I’d been blessed with the company of the little Akimichi every week or so.

By now, I had quite the little rotation of visits from my various loved ones.

*It was, really, very adorable.*

And, speaking of blessings…

When Ensui turned 20, I rocked up to his apartment (he’d moved out when he was 19; the whole thing had been such a hush hush operation – I was pretty sure this was out of fear of Yoshino, hilariously – I’d barely been aware it had happened before he was all moved in. As much knowledge as I had, house shopping I did not know about. And from before, my taste had been skewed from Student accommodation so I was not the person to talk to. And why would he ask a pre-teen anyway??).

*Anyway*, I went to Ensui’s apartment for his birthday (a Sunday, so I was free), strolling in like I owned the place (his fault for making the oversight of giving Shisui and I keys, foolish Nara) and announcing to the Chuunin curled up in bed-

“I’m here! Happy Birthday, you’re welcome!”

Ensui groggily turned over and squinted at me, deeply unimpressed. Despite his sleepy act, I had little doubt he’d known who was coming in by the time I reached for the front-door handle.

“And that’s your gift, hmmm?” He stretched lazily, duvet falling off the bed and baring his naked chest, “Just being here?” I rolled my eyes, dumping my bag on the floor and slumping onto the mattress beside him, unphased by the skin on show. I’d seen much more before.

“Can I get a refund?”

“Shush, you’ll regret saying that in a moment.” I poked his ribs, ignoring the thin, white kunai scars that littered his torso.

“Oh?”

“Yeah, ‘Oh’, I was going to suggest a Spa day, but if you’d rather I leave-”

A hand on my arm stopped me from getting up, from where I’d startled to shuffle off the bed.

“Don’t be so damn troublesome, what did you have planned, then?”

Beaming, I flung my bag onto the bed and upended it with little ceremony. Out poured some mud-masks I’d picked up from the Onsen (you could get them at reception, the same ones they used if you asked for a mud treatment in the annexed Spa), the rest of the hair mask left over from my last
sleepover with Hana, and a bunch of shitty food.

“Ta-dah!”

Turning back to Ensui, I poked his cheek with a finger, “and whilst I’m thinking about skincare, you should take off your makeup every night.” Wagging the same finger in his face, I gestured to where his green eyeliner was smudged around his lids, “I don’t care how sleepy you are; You’re gonna get an infection if you’re not careful-!”

As I continued my rant, only gathering more steam as the older boy lay there like a dead fish, Ensui let out a low groan, rolling over. It was a real shame he forgot that I’d shoved him aside when I lay down next to him.

I grinned when his face hit the floor with a muted ‘thump’.

When Inoichi-oji turned 30 in January, not only did Tou-san look like he wanted to cry when he remembered that he was even older than his best friend (‘Kiharu! I don’t look like an old man, right??’ ‘…no?’ ‘…you hesitated-’) but Ino started calling him ‘oji-san’.

The look of conflicted delight that warred across his face was a real treat. ‘Was that aging or just adorable?’

Inoichi-oji seemed to think it was cute, slapping Tou-san on the back whilst he beamed down at his daughter. “Yes, Ino-chan! Seiichi is your oji-san. Don’t forget it~”

The winter itself had been dull and grey and long and grey. Whilst my waffle and warm brownie sales were on the up, I definitely noticed a drop in my sales. Whilst the first few quiet days had got me twitching, worried that something was happening and I’d been oblivious, I soon realised that was the issue.

Nothing was happening.

People, perhaps reflecting the miserable weather, were staying in and not really going out of their way for anything. The Market Street was emptier as the weeks passed, the days slipping past with all the speed of dripping cement and about as interesting. I had my faithful regulars of course, family members and friends and some faces that had gradually grown more and more familiar.

But it didn’t make me any less nervous.

I’d had a slow drop I profits and, even if I had my inheritance to ensure relative financial security, I naturally stressed the fuck out.

It wasn’t until the academy kids went back to school, for their final term in January, that my sales rose once more. They’d stopped dropping a few weeks into December, staying at a gentle trickle of people instead of the strong stream I was used to, but I still breathed a massive sigh of relief anyway.

I never realised how much I depended on the kids before then.

Over December they’d been on break and, whilst they obviously hadn’t left the village, most of them had no reason to walk through the Market Place if it wasn’t to/from the Academy.

So, when spring came and Nekki’s was booming once more, I told myself I’d have to do something the next year. A new dessert or maybe a ‘student discount’ or whatever! Either way, I couldn’t just
sit and wait for people to come to me. I had to go out and draw them in!

In the first week of March, I celebrated Nekki’s first anniversary, which was a fortnight before I turned 12.

The day itself was a repetition of the year previous; booming crowd, all my loved ones showered with freebies (aside from nee-chan, of course, *hehe*) and an incredible atmosphere.

What made it so special was what I was *wearing*!

For an early birthday present, Yuri-oba had made me a uniform~

Working with the navy/scarlet/white theme I’d chosen for the stall, I thought it looked brilliant.

It was functional and yet beautiful; a navy yukata with a red trim along all the edges, the sleeves falling to my elbows (no need to roll them up! *Yay!* and the hem falling to just below my knees. The material itself was patterned with little white flowers along the inside edge of the red and the look was completed with a white apron with the kitten/rose logo faithfully embroidered on the apron’s skirt. I wore it with my hair in a high ponytail (and, given to me by Ayame, a scarlet bandana) and matching red shoes.

Yuri-oba herself sewed it entirely by hand, which is why it wasn’t completed until well into my first year of business. Wanting to make an appropriate splash, forever a minx, the seamstress then waited until my first anniversary to give it to me. Which just happened to be just before my birthday.

I *adored* it.

And it made me feel proper, like a respectable young business owner. No more casual clothes, it was time to up the ante!

So, on Nekki’s first birthday, I was swooping around the stall dressed to match the decor!

Genma had wolf-whistled when he’d seen me, giving me a wink and a slow clap, and I laughed in return, teasingly twirling for him. I knew we were only having a bit of banter (payback for two months ago, when I’d innocently asked Genma – in earshot of some kunoichi, completely by accident, *of course* – why he was trying to look down some woman’s top, *when he wasn’t, ha ha!* as he told me I looked ‘nice, kiddo’ later. Naturally, that didn’t stop Shisui from looking like he wanted to shove nee-chan’s senbon down his throat. He was so cute when he got all puffed up~

Snickering at how silly everyone could be, I cheered my best friend up by loudly exclaiming that Genma had a good eye for beauty, winking outrageously at Raidou.

Shisui started snickering when the two choked on their Churros. Ahh, it felt like only yesterday I’d first tried to get them to hold hands!

The years felt like they were flying past and I didn’t know where they’d gone, in all honesty. Some things, like boobs and alcohol, I couldn’t wait to grow up for. *Other things*, I’d not missed so much-

Two weeks later my birthday party was in full swing, a chaotic congregation of parents and kiddies and a buffet table that was fairly groaning under the weight of my creations. Izumo and Kotetsu looked to be having a competition as to how much they could eat but, thankfully, they’d yet to decimate my birthday cake.

The ‘cake’ in question was actually a tower of macaroons (something I’d ‘created’ just two days previous and had yet to ‘release to the public’), made in flavours ranging from caramel to matcha to
strawberries and cream. The adults seemed to like the idea, picking off a single bite-sized treat with no mess, and it was definitely easier for the kids. And the adults who’d have to clean their sticky fingers and faces.

Well, unless your name was ‘Ino’ and you liked to cause trouble.

Watching Sora-oba wrestling a wet-wipe towards Ino’s face, I sent dad a smug look. The man, looking on with a horrified-but-absorbed expression (like a car crash you can’t take your eyes off – Hey, I’d died in one! I could joke about that all I wanted!) as Ino started screaming, met my eyes across the room.

_Aren’t you glad that I was so clever?_

I’d never seen him look so grateful, struck by the realisation of what he could have had to deal with. Tch, I’d definitely spoiled my parents.

But anyway, the party was going really well, Shisui was looking a bit sick from how much he’d eaten and I was on my 15th macaroon, when Hitoshi’s head swung in my direction.

His nostrils flared and he padded over, looking at me like I was an incompetent slug. Oh wait! His face was just stuck like that~

“Cub,” he rolled his eyes (I still didn’t know how he could do that, being a fricking cat and all), “Get a plaster on it.”

I blinked down at him, uncomprehending.

“Er, what?” I shared a confused look with Shisui, glancing around the kitchen (empty, except for the three of us, because most people didn’t camp out with the food. We weren’t most people. We were pigs.) for a clue as to what the fuck he was taking about. “Have you been drinking from nee-chan’s cup again?” I’d not failed to notice Genma spiking his own drink. Tch, I’d been a student- I could sense alcohol a mile off!

I’d had to forcibly remind myself that 12 was too young to go on a bender when I realised. Hitoshi sent me an unimpressed look, ‘Oh you’re so funny – _not_!’, but, when he took another breath to undoubtedly berate me, he froze before his eyes dropped once more to my torso.

“Cub, you’re bleeding even more now,” He leaned forward, sniffing at my tummy and my eyes blew wide as Shisui dropped his plate.

“You’re bleeding?!”

_Oh my fucking god-

“GET OFF! Get off! Stupid cat!” I shoved the panther’s massive head back from where he was snuffling around my _hips_

Shisui grabbed my shoulders, dark eyes sketching all over my figure like he was cataloguing possible wounds.

“Are you injured? Are you _sick_?” He glanced around the kitchen before grabbing a tea towel and snapping at Hitoshi to show him where the bleeding was.

Naturally, the shouting hadn’t gone unnoticed.
Dad came through the door, Genma and Inoichi-oji hot on his heels, to see two massive idiots yelling at each other (Shisui was yelling, Hitoshi was growling) about first aid as I backed myself into a corner, frantically hissing for them to please please shut up-

“What the hell is going on here?” Tou-san frowned fiercely, every inch of him in full-on ‘Papa Mode’, “Kiharu, you’re bleeding?”

And that was the last straw.

“OBA-SAN!” I roared, marching through the crowd of annoying and stupid males and making a beeline for Sora, who was happily relaxing on one of the sofas, cup of tea in hand and looking in the direction of the Kitchen with an amused look on her face. I couldn’t believe none of them had clicked with what was happening. They were all idiots.

“Yes, Ki-chan?” she laughed.

“Please,” I whined, speaking in a rush, “just get them off my back for 10 minutes and I’ll watch Ino on Saturday night so you can go to that new restaurant!” Sora-oba narrowed her eyes, pulling herself up and leaned closer.

“What’s wrong Ki-chan?” She glanced over to where the men were coming out of the kitchen, first-aid box now clasped in her husband’s arms as they all headed over to us. “I thought they were just teasing? What’s happened?”

“Well, though?” I shifted to push her closer to Inoichi, unapologetically using her for a meatshield as I inched towards the stairs, “Please?!”

When she nodded, still looking confused and concerned, I dashed up the stairs like the hounds of hell were chasing me. Or, rather, Shisui and Hitoshi.

I sprinted into my room, slamming the door behind me and locking it with a firm ‘click’.

Holy shit, I can’t believe that just happened!!!

Sliding down the door, I gave myself 5 minutes to freak out. That was on a new level of humiliating and I prayed Sora-oba would manage to keep them from coming up to find me. Well, as soon as they told her what was happening, she’d definitely figure it out.

If I hadn’t already been through this shit, we could’ve had a catastrophe on our hands, as in; ‘Kiharu, are you bleeding?’ ‘Waaa, I’m bleeding?’ ‘Let’s get the first aid kit!’.

Fuck. No.

If I’d been a boy before, my first period would probably have scarred me for life.

As it was, my 5 minutes lamenting over such public embarrassment were over and I pulled myself up, grabbing some things and slowly unlocking the door, popping my head around the corner to make sure no one had slipped through Sora-oba’s net.

Seeing the coast was clear, I made a mad dash for the bathroom – just in case.

I’d kept hold of Kaa-san’s toiletries like her face wipes, expensive moisturisers etc. and I praised my foresight when, rummaging in the medicine cabinet, I found pads.

Thankfully, despite the panic sparked downstairs, I hadn’t made a massive mess of myself. Jeeze,
Hitoshi! I got that you could track a patch of blood a mile off, but did you really have to make it sound like I was haemorrhaging??

When I’d got myself sorted, I slunk back downstairs to find Yoshino stood over my little group of would-be first-aiders with a frightening expression on her face. Praise Kami-sama, no wonder no one had bothered me! I didn’t doubt that she was reminding them that, aside from Shisui, they were all fully grown and supposed to be adults. Her victims were all sat around the Livingroom looking properly shamefaced and I begged Jashin-sama that we could all pretend the last 15 minutes didn’t exist. Pausing on the stairs for a second to listen to the sounds coming from the kitchen, I breathed sigh of relief that everyone else had continued like normal, laughing and talking and ‘oblivious’ to my embarrassment.

When I came ’round the corner, all of us had matching red faces. Shisui and Tou-san looked especially mortified, not able to even meet my eyes (not that I’d be looking anywhere but at my own feet for a while longer). Genma looked like he’d rather be trussed-up like a turkey in Kumo and Inoichi-oji had a glazed look in his eye, undoubtedly freaking out over when he’d have to go through this again with Ino.

It was silent for a moment before I coughed awkwardly.

“…Let’s just pretendthisneverhappened,okay?”

Four heads were nodding furiously before I’d even finished and we got out of there like the room was on fire.

…………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

When the weather started heating up again, I cut down on the pretzels and puddings and ramped up the ice cream and ‘fridge’ desserts.

All for a very good reason, of course.

My cousin’s Japanese boyfriend before had described the market festivals that went down quite often, events where traders and merchants could show off their wares. I presumed it was a bit like the Festival after Minato’s inauguration. And actually, I was right because that festival had been the Market Festival.

Festivals were a bit different here.

I knew there was one on the anniversary of Kyuubi every year but I’d never been; our family, along with Inoichi, Sora and Ino, preferred to stay in and have a very small party, mainly remembering the lives lost that night. It wasn’t a tragic event (it almost felt like it, the first few years) but it was very chill. We had dinner, taking it in turns to host it at our two houses, and then talked for the rest of the evening. Laughing, telling stories…it felt like family. And it made the passage of time feel even more real; every year, Ino was bigger and our games and stories were always changing. However, it always made me sad – guilty, even though it wasn’t my fault – that, even though Tou-san asked every year, Natsuko-oba and Inokumo-oji never came. I’d barely even seen them recently. It wasn’t hard to lose contact with people in a village this large, the largest, but I knew that Noko’s mother rarely left their home and Inokumo had been throwing himself into long term missions.

It made me so sad.

But…anyway, with the Kyuubi Festival, I couldn’t really bring myself to want to go; it just made me think of all the hatred and blame placed on poor Naruto.
And as for Market festivals? They held them every five years.

I wasn’t sure if it was just something that was decided because Konoha was a Hidden Village (security reasons...?) or because of something else, maybe to do with the lack of trust between countries. Maybe it was because it took so much longer to travel around here, no cars or trucks or whatever? I didn’t know, people seemed confused when I questioned it. I mean, they’d never known it any different, so I guess my questions were weird and out-of-the-blue.

But, for whatever reason, this was going to be my first Market Festival. Or, at least, my first as a business owner myself.

My…debut…if you will.

And I wanted to go in with a bang!

I wracked my brains for days, thinking what I could make. I’d already exhausted all the recipes I did know and I was now resorting to foodie trends I remembered from social media. Remembering how they looked and then, through pure trial and error, trying to recreate them.

Which is how I got here.

I should probably just say ‘fuck it’ and announce Ensui as my personal craftsman, at this point.

“What are you on about, Kiharu? Cold? Why the hell do you want the pan cold?”

Running my hands through my hair, I groaned up at the ceiling in frustration, tugging on my ponytail.

“It just needs to be, okay? It won’t work otherwise.”

The older body looked just as frustrated as I felt and wanted to smack him for asking so many confounded questions!

“But it’s a pan?”

We’d been hashing out this new idea for a good hour now (not too long but normally Ensui and I shared brainwaves so this was weird) and I was getting a bit skittish with the amount of probing questions the Nara was asking. He tended to trust my judgement implicitly but, occasionally, he liked to pick my brains; he really didn’t get where all these new ideas could come from. How I could have thought this shit up? And I understood, I really did. I mean, I technically didn’t. This stuff wasn’t mine.

And sometimes he seemed to pick up on that, on some level. He didn’t think I’d stolen it or anything but…he seemed to understand that my mind worked differently to everyone else’s.

I mean, this world used to only really have ‘prodigies’ of the ninja arts.

“Fine! Fine! I’ll get it sorted, it’ll be cold! You don’t have to explain yourself-” Ensui flung his hands up in the air, “Happy?”

Folding my arms, I nodded. “Very.”

Despite my ice cream maker (which I temporarily moved back to our house), I was determined to go down this route instead. Ensui had made it sound like something really out there, when it really wasn’t, but I figured his curiosity must build up in waves that occasionally overflowed. Regardless, I
wanted to try this. And rolled ice-cream was a massive hit.

The idea that you could pick your favourite dessert and have it made into your cold and creamy treat, right in front of you, was really popular! Like with my pretzel-making, kids would drag their parents over to watch and then beg to try one.

Ah, gotta love the kids.

My pilot run with the idea went down a treat (wink, wink- okay, I’ll stop), so I figured the Festival next week, the first week of June, would be a super good time to incorporate it properly.

And I was right.

The weather proved to be swelteringly hot, so much so I could feel sweat running down my back and dampening my bandana. It was actually rather disgusting; if I’d been swimming with Hana in the Naka or sunbathing with Sora-oba, then it would be amazing.

Stood behind a stall, working hard and trying to keep the place hygienic with all the bugs?

Not fun.

Whilst the decorative tapestry/bunting blocked out the worse of the blinding sunlight, the crush of the crowd made the day all the hotter. I was wearing my uniform and deeply regretting it because I’m a massive idiot.

Navy blue? I must’ve been suicidal.

The Festival was incredible though, the surrounding decorations burning all the shades of the sun under the cloudless sky. Everyone had set up on the outsides of their shops, – if they had them – so that no one was hidden behind another and all the other stalls were pop up ones that filled the streets to bursting.

Merchants had come streaming into the village and all the food stalls made the very air dance with spices. I was transported back to the day Minato became Hokage.

It felt like yesterday, as I looked around from behind my own counter, as much as a life time ago.

There were so many different stalls! Whilst the food section was extensive, I’d seen Yoshino haggling so furiously with the silk merchants over their prices per yard that she drew over five different stands into the argument (Ha-ha! Classic). Next door, the jewellery stands twinkled in the sunshine.

And, most excitingly?

Sora-oba was selling flowers!

I wasn’t sure what had prompted the Yamanaka Flower shop in canon but, a month or so ago, Inoichi-oji and Sora-oba had announced that they wanted to start a business in their free time, inspired by the wonderful work I’d done with Nekki’s. I’d squealed like the 12-year-old I was, jumping up and down with Ino (she didn’t really get what was happening but was happy to be swung around all the same).

The last month was spent using Inoichi’s international contacts (mainly in places like Tea and Suna) to get various shipments organised in time for the Market Festival. They already owned a few properties outside of the Compound (most donated by deceased Yamanaka that had been willed back
to the Clan for use at their disposal) that the rest of the Clan had encouraged them to use when they were ready to open the official shop.

Now, stood behind a pop-up stall directly opposite my own, I beamed and waved at my Aunt she gleefully organised the masses of foliage.

Those, I tell ya, were some impressive contacts that Inoichi-oji had.

Great bushes of flowers had arrived two weeks previous, ready for planting on the Compound. And now, great bunches of them gathered like foam on a bubble bath around my Aunt’s figure.

“I think…your Kaa-san’s gone a bit overboard, imouto.” I ripped my eyes off the veritable cloud of flowers, turning to look at Ino, who was resting on my popped hip.

“I love it!” Ino claimed loyally and I rolled my eyes. Anything outrageously OTT always had the Heiress’s stamp of approval, it seemed.

“Go on and find the boys, Ino,” I lowered her back to the ground, “I’ve got to set up as well, okay?” ignoring her disappointed glower, I pressed a brief kiss to her forehead before turning to tap my cheek, pouting until Ino smacked a messy kiss there in return. “Now, off you go,” and she was off like a shot, heading like a heat-seeking missile to where I could see a tiny bottlebrush ponytail slumped under a tree beside ginger-hair.

“Sorry about that!” I cried turning to my first customer, smiling at the ‘KAWAII’ expression plastered on her teenage face. “What combination would you like?”

Despite our disagreement, Ensui had come through for me yet again and I had a frozen pan set up, the cord trailing back into Nekki’s.

I spent the morning pouring the ice-cream mixture onto the slab, adding the various flavourings – anything from simple fresh fruit to chocolate/syrups to chunks of my other desserts – and then slicing and mixing them together as they gradually froze. Once they had formed a thin layer over the tray, I took my spatula and carefully rolled them up into individual curls, popping them inside little cardboard pots with ‘Nekki’s’ and the logo stamped on the side.

In other news, Ino had behaved for weeks after a particularly bad tantrum had her helping me make them for 4 days straight.

By the time the sun was directly overhead and the crowds were at their thickest, I think I appreciated the ice-cream just as much as my over-heating customers.

Imagine slaving over a roasting hot waffle or crepe pan? At least I could get a nice chill from the ice-cream tray!

The crowds were vast and unrelenting, even more overwhelming that my opening day last year. But I’d gradually become more accustomed to the rush and knew that, so long as I kept a cool head and did some serious crowd control, I’d be fine. So, I didn’t panic, even as the crowd grew and grew.

But the heat was unrelenting and so was the crowd and by 2pm I was drained. I’d had an absolutely fantastic day already, my cheeks were screaming from the wide, delighted grin I’d been Sporting for hours and I was buzzing at how popular my stall was – there’d barely been a dip in sales all day!

But I was tired and hungry-

And then Mikoto appeared at my elbow like angel.
The crowds seemed surprised, seeing the Uchiha Matriarch – all kitted out in a beautiful yukata – start helping me out like it was the most natural thing in the world.

And for us? It was.

Mikoto had been dropping around *Nekki’s* ever since it had opened, always willing to spend time with me, help me go shopping or just popping in for a chat and a cup of tea across the counter. But, she’d slowly started coming more and more in the recent months, helping serve behind the counter or to simply get Sasuke out of the house.

After three weeks…I, kinda, started showing her how to make stuff.

So, when she smiled and reached for the two spatulas, telling me to go and grab a cold drink, I handed them over without a moment’s thought. After a second, I reached to undo my apron before moving to tie it around Mikoto instead. Hey, my yukata was gross already! The least I could do was protect Mikoto’s beautiful outfit!

The crowd murmured, some shocked and others smiling, as the Lady Uchiha warmly served them and basically smashed their preconceptions to smithereens.

If my eyes watered a bit, I could easily claim it was from the glaring sunlight.

Gazing over the crowd, I pinpointed a tall, dark head and raised my arm to wave at Fugaku, a slightly-smiling Itachi at his shoulder with an excited Sasuke grasping his brother’s hand.

His expression was unreadable as he stared back, but I thought I caught a slight softening of his eyes when they moved to rest on his wife.

When he looked back to me, the nod he gave was barely more than a jerk of his chin.

Ay-Okay, then. Phew.

The rest of the day passed quickly and Mikoto never let up, acting kindly to every single person who came to the stall. Even when we had people complaining about the wait and the slow service (each order was made from scratch, *duh*), Mikoto and I were able to smooth the situations over with our logic and friendly smiles. Around three o’clock, the smol Ino-Shika-Cho trio had trotted over for free ice-cream (Banoffee for Ino, matcha waffle-chunks for Shika and Chocolate Torte for Chouji) and the bystanders were enchanted when I gathered the three precious babies into a little group hug of love.

Score~

When the sun had begun to set, the crowds having filtered away as evening drew in, the Lady Uchiha was still beside me, helping me close up shop (we waved off the Yamanaka’s as they had plenty of their own tidying to do) and then walking me back to the house.

As she squeezed my hands goodbye and gave me one last smile, I turned to watch her leave.

And a seed was planted in my mind.

……………………………………………………………………………

After the Market Festival, I took some time off to chill.

Not a lot, that would be counterproductive after my boom in sales since the Festival (YAS), but a
couple of individual ‘holidays’ to enjoy the amazing weather.

The day Kiba turned 5 (and a tiny Akamaru turned 1 – *so fucking cuteeeeee*), Hana and I took them down to the Naka to play. We went to those pebbly shallows (whenever I mention the Naka, that’s generally where I meant) and tried to stay out of the line of fire when Kiba, predictably, went berserk.

*And you wonder why I rarely spent time with the boy?*

Akamaru was worth it though.

We weren’t so stupid as to leave a toddler in the water by himself, staying close enough that we’d be there in an instant if things went tits up, but we took the chance to get chatting.

In the heat of the moment, and struck by the realisation that Hana could get shafted even worse than I had, I told her what happened on my birthday. It was humiliating but, for some reason, the thought struck me that I should warn Hana. For whenever she was old enough, of course.

I had little doubt that Tsume could handle everything flawlessly but… I’d not considered the embarrassing idea that Hitoshi would sense what was happening before I did. I’d struggled with one summon; Hana had *three* excitable puppies and Kiba as a demonic little brother.

So here we were, sunbathing by the Naka, and the Inuzuka Heiress was laughing her ass off at my misfortune. She was so loud that *Kiba* looked interested!

Rolling my eyes, considering I wanted to tell her for *her* benefit, she quickly sobered when I pointed out that she lived in a Compound where *everyone* had a heightened sense of smell. And sure, there were special techniques for kunoichi to mask the scent/stop their periods, but Hana wouldn’t be able to anticipate her *first* period until it happened.

So, ha! Laugh it up, it’ll be you soon enough, Hana!

We’d been there for a good few hours when it all went to hell.

It had gotten later than I realised, and it wasn’t until Hana suggested we catch some fish for dinner that I remembered I was supposed to meet Tou-san. Not wanting to end the day so quickly, especially as Hana had gotten her mother’s permission to keep Kiba out later (ninja, I tell ya), I decided that it would be easiest to summon Hitoshi. Dad would be on patrol until late by now, so Hitoshi would be the only way to reach him. Leave it to the panther to let him know what had happened – and apologise.

But, instead of getting the usual sassy response before the smoke had even cleared-

“Hitoshi,” I whispered in horror. “…What the *fuck*.”

The normally sleek and graceful panther was a mess, breathing heavily with his ink fur soaked in blood. I’d seen him look rough before but this was completely different and I didn’t even know where to start…! His skin was battered, singed in places and the foam on his jaws was tinted red. Whether it was his or not, I couldn’t tell. Horrified, I placed my palm on his face, only to jerk it back when he let out a low whine.

My palm glistened red, fingers dirty from soot. I’d *never* heard Hitoshi make a noise like that.

With a squeak, Hana grabbed her brother into her arms, turning his head away from the violent scene. The poor tyke looked so terrified he didn’t even protest.
“Hana,” I whispered. “Get Kiba and Akamaru out of here…get your mum…and don’t tell anyone else, except if you see my uncle or dad.” I turned to look at her and nodded back towards the village, “I’ll try and get him to cover; get Kuromaru to track us.”

She nodded, staggering back a few steps as her eyes flickered over our slumped forms, before turning and sprinting off, Kiba and Akamaru tucked to her chest. Watching as she disappeared between the trees, I swallowed, feeling vaguely guilty for pulling her into this. For involving Kiba and Akamaru in this.

Whatever ‘this’ was.

Turning back to my summon, I wrapped my arms around his thick neck, pulling it off the ground and into my lap.

His eyes finally opened, pupils dilated like a slash of ink, as the cat let out a choked growl in pain.

“Sorry, sorry,” I chanted, trying to slip an arm under his shoulders. Maybe if I could leverage him up? “Please, ‘Toshi,” I whimpered, eyes burning as I tried not to cry, casting hasty glances around the darkening area. The afternoon was fading fast and the last thing I wanted was to be stuck on the riverside, with a seriously injured friend, as night fell.

“Please, we have to get to cover- please, try-” I tugged on his ribcage, desperate to try and get him up again, but he only growled deep in his throat and lay there, unmoving.

“Toshi, I’m begging you-”

The forest around us was so, so quiet as I breathed in the scent of burned fur. I’d been wrong, thinking Hitoshi was challenging the animals in the Forest of Death, looking for a fight in the wilds around the village.

Looking at the man-made wounds on his body, he hadn’t been fighting something but someone.

“-someone did this to you, ‘Toshi…and I just interrupted them before they could finish the job.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N- Question: How do you write 16 months into 10k words? Fuelled by your last Easter egg and when you're meant to be packing. Well, guys, all I can say is...this is a fucking rollercoaster. I can't even read fanfic right now as it reminds me of this and I want to know what happens - its my fucking story....! lol cry.

Anyway! Thanks for the bloody brilliant support and comments, I took some ideas you gave me and ran with them as much as possible. Hope you all like, much love <3

P.S- If any of you didn't like the first period bit then answer this? if I can't write about a natural bodily process that all young girls experience, how can I in 'good' conscience post lemon later?????
Deep

Chapter Summary

Darkness is deep, when you think about it. When you can’t see a single thing around you, is the world too far way or just not there anymore? And that's scary.

Sometimes, the dark can be comforting too.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It had gone very dark.

The night had swallowed the bank where we lay, the sky fading into a deep blue and the shadows growing all around us. Where once had been a lush meadow lined with trees and fading on one side into pebbled shallows of the river, there was now an exposed clearing (like we were being served on a platter) and the branches turned into snarling hands in the corners of my eyes.

I was sat upon sharp pebbles, the icy water lapping at my ankles and Toshi’s head in my lap.

As much as I’d tried, Toshi couldn’t move. And, as much as I talked and pleaded, he’d not been able to stay conscious either.

The worst bit? My clothes were wet, and not from the river. I’d ripped off my T-shirt, left in only a little yellow camisole, and pressed it against the biggest slash but he was still bleeding. Even the water was turning red.

“Toshi…” I murmured desperately, shaking fingers smoothing down the fur around his eyes and touching his nose, making sure I could still feel the shallow breaths. “Hang in there, you asshole.”

It was silent all around.

“I’m…only going to say this once…you’d better be listening, or you’ll miss out.” I warned, like I didn’t feel like I was waiting for his heart to stop. “I…love you, okay.”

The only reply I got was the painful rasp of his breathing. I listened to it, hyperaware of the seconds ticking. Hana had only been gone for a few minutes and it felt like years.

It was certainly plenty of time to reflect on mistakes made.

Not telling dad where we’d gone, not demanding to know where Hitoshi had been disappearing off to. I especially wished he’d taught me how to send him back to the Summon Realm. Maybe then, we could have bought ourselves more time, more security. But we’d been careless, not bothering.

“You’re not going back there anyway, what’s the point?”

Maybe I could have just simply reverse summoned the panther, sent him somewhere no one could get him, so I could run back to the village. But if I did that, there’d be no one there to help him. Would he even have had enough chakra, enough life energy, to be summoned to the hospital by
then? It was too late now anyway.

Hindsight could go fuck itself.

“…cub,” Toshi breathed against my fingers.

My hands fisted against his fur and I clenched my jaw hard, teeth grinding in protest.

“Toshi…who did this?” I ground out. I needed to know. If they came after us, I could at least leave a clue on my body. Danzo? Orochimaru? Fuck, Kumo?

The panther shuddered, breathing heavy and I leaned over him, my ear all but pressed to his muzzle.

“Ever since Kumo, I’ve…been patrolling,” he wheezed slowly, breathing with effort. When he swallowed, I rubbed the velvet of his ears between my fingers, wanting to soothe him. “Trying to pick…up any intruders…so, I followed him…”

Dread curled like a living thing in my stomach and my eyes pressed closed. Fuck, I knew what was coming.

“There was a man…he went to the Naka Shrine-”

“Oh. My. Fucking. God,” I moaned. Hitoshi, you absolute fucking idiot – Oh, great – He was going to come for us, we were beyond dead.

“…he moved through me-”

Hitoshi had been fighting fucking Tobi.

“…just…red eyes…”

It was then that a twig snapped, somewhere in the woods around us.

I hunched over Hitoshi’s form, eyes desperately scanning the trees and with one hand clamped over my mouth. Now was not the time to start gasping, as much as my throat ached to.

Toshi was a dead-weight, heavier than most grown men, in my lap. I couldn’t have moved to protect us if I’d tried.

Fuck this shit.

A tiny figure peaked out from the bushes, a small shadow of a toddler.

I slumped like a marionette with its strings cut, relieved. I was conflicted; torn between extreme relief that it wasn’t Obito, come to finish off the job, and horror for the innocent child that had stumbled across us. What if they got caught in the cross fire, if Tobi did show up?

“…Hey there,” I whispered breathlessly, trying not to scare them. From this distance and in the low light, it probably looked like Toshi was sleeping in my lap.

The shadow fidgeted.

“I’m Kiharu, what’s your name?”

The child shuffled closer and I caught a flash of blonde.
“…’aruto.”

_Fuck. Shit. Fuck._

“That’s a cool name.” I swallowed thickly. If I broke down, we were all dead. “Why are you out here, hmm?”

A tiny face appeared, Minato’s son shuffling closer curiously. Blonde hair, almost unidentifiable in the low light, framed a nervous expression. Familiar wide, blue eyes eyed me so cautiously it hurt and birthmarks like whiskers stained his cheeks, his childishly round face pulling his little mouth down in a pout.

There was something heartbreakingly solemn about him. Especially considering whose child he was…

“Ano…why ‘re you?”

“Ahh,” I patted Hitoshi’s head, hand immediately moving back to feel his breathing rush out. “My friend isn’t feeling well, so we’re waiting for my oji-san.” The little boy, slowly stepping closer, eyed the massive panther warily. “His name’s Hitoshi.”

“…wh-”

A ‘whooshing’ rush of air in the treetops had me lunging forwards and grabbing the little boy, manhandling him behind me. Naruto didn’t come quietly, and he was as slippery as a street rat, but the sudden noise had spiked my adrenaline and I hid him quickly anyway.

“Shhhhhhh!” I whispered urgently, scanning the treetops. “Someone’s coming-”

Naruto fell silent, body quivering like a frightened animal.

Chouza burst through the trees, looking extremely alert.

“Oh, thank Kami,” I cried. The Akimichi Clan Head looked truly frightening, a thunderous expression on his usually content face but, instead of feeling intimidated, I just felt an overwhelming sense of security.

Chouza would die before anything harmed us now.

“Little Hime, what happened?” he strode over, armour clanging in the silence of the forest. “Hana-chan bumped into me just inside the Village but she couldn’t tell us much, other than that Hitoshi was badly wounded and you need help.”

“Chouza-oji,” I took a shaky breath, one hand still clamped on Naruto’s T-shirt. “Hitoshi was attacked and I, when I summoned him, I accidently interrupted…I…”

Chouza knelt to look me in the face, hands moving to swing the panther into his arms like he weighed no more than I did. His eyes immediately latched onto the blood soaking my lower half.

“I thought they’d come after him…to finish,” I flexed my legs, staggering upright. My muscles were cramping, from the cold water and the weight of Hitoshi’s shoulders. Urgh. “I thought we were going to die, oji-san.”

I gulped again, meeting concerned black eyes. Naruto shuffled behind me and I turned immediately, guilty that he’d heard that such horrible words from my lips. The Uzumaki looked shaken, wide eyes
staring up at Chouza’s impressive figure and I automatically reached, as if he were Chouji, to lift him up onto my hip.

His little body went tense as stone, fists resting unsurely on my chest. I ignored how my mind whispered that he was unused to being held. Now was not the time for guilt trips.

“Sorry, Naruto,” I whispered.

“Oh Hime...” Chouza mumbled, looking knowingly at my clammy face. “Let’s go.”

Peering into darkness of the woods, I cast a frantic eye around. Chouza, two steps ahead, gestured for us to follow him and I immediately trotted after him, sticking as close as possible. He couldn’t carry the both of us as well as 170 pounds of panther, so we were stuck on the forest floor, moving at a snail’s pace through the undergrowth and foliage.

I twitched at every rustle, feeling like eyes were burning into the back of my skull. I could almost already see how he’d materialise behind the Akimichi. We’d be dead before I could scream.

The walk was silent and vigilant. I felt a lot like a deer, picking my way through the woods and wary of my hunter.

Chouza was in full-on shinobi mode, like how I imagine he’d be on missions, been in the War, and Naruto may as well have been a mannequin. He felt tiny in my arms, cold in a thin T-shirt and shorts. And, to think he was a jinchuriki. So much power trapped in his tiny body…

Breathing deeply through my nose, I tried to be brave.

I didn’t know if I could face Minato in the afterlife (if either of us ever made it there) if I got his son murdered. He’d not even had a chance to really live, yet.

He was just a child, a simple, innocent, child. Minato’s son. I’d be brave for him.

And surely…surely, I could be brave without having to hurt people, without having to become something I wasn’t.

We were almost to the village, tall buildings peeking through the treetops, when I sensed someone moving above me.

“Chou-” I gasped, not even trying to be discreet- what was the point?

“I know, Kiharu-chan.” His voice was sure, gait unfafltering. “It’s just the ANBU guard I went out with, looking for you. They’re just escorting us.”

The thought did not comfort me. Was it really ANBU, I couldn’t help but wonder, or Danzo?

We’d barely made it through the gates, the Chuunin on duty staring between Chouza’s load and the two of us behind him in horror, before two ANBU appeared in front of us in the street. A man and a woman, a Bear and some kind of bird, respectively.

“Dazai-san, you are requested to report to Hokage-sama, immediately.” Raven (I decided) moved to my side, completely ignoring the little boy in my arms.

“What?!” I gaped, appalled. “What about Hitoshi? I need to go with him!” Chouza grimaced, Bear at his shoulder, and Hitoshi limp in his massive arms. He looked dead and the image made me furious.

“Bear-san will escort Akimichi-sama and the animal to the hospital,” the woman’s voice was
apathetic and I was sickened. Conditioning my *arse*, did they not have a heart? I opened my mouth to protest but was cut off.

“Please do not resist.”

Chouza was already moving away and, with a final grimace and apologetic look, the older man turned and leapt onto the nearest roof, shadowed by Bear.

I swallowed my goodbye. Why did it feel like I’d never see him again?

“Please take my hand, Hokage-sama is waiting.”

It was so urgent we couldn’t walk?

Gripping Naruto like a vice, I slapped my palm against hers. Fuck, I wished I could slap her instead. I didn’t care if she was ANBU, if this was her just doing her job. Didn’t mean she wasn’t keeping me from my *dying panther*.

Then the world fell away and my stomach turned inside out.

“Kiharu-chan, thank you for meeting with me,” An old voice welcomed me warmly, as if I hadn’t just been court-marshalled here. The smoke drifted away and I found myself looking around the once-familiar Office.

It was exactly the same, if you ignored the lack of potted plants along the window sill, the new portrait on the wall and the man waiting for us.

Seeing the Sandaime, instead of Minato, behind the desk made my chest ache. This was my first time back here in 5 years and I wasn’t here for a laugh and to deliver dessert. And I never again would be. At least, not for that particular blonde.

The old ninja looked surprised by my passenger (I didn’t know if this was for show or genuine, considering he had eyes everywhere), slowly taking the pipe from his mouth. “And Naruto-kun?”

“Sandaime-sama,” I murmured, bouncing Naruto up on my hip when he slipped a bit.

“Jiji?” the little boy called, sounding incredibly confused. Poor kid, I didn’t blame him. He wiggled a bit, leaning forwards and almost unbalancing me, so I lowered him to the floor, watching as he immediately made his way around the desk. Sarutobi smiled down at him easily but left him to peek about, turning back to where I stood tensely in the middle of the room.

My insides felt ugly and I hated what today had done to Toshi, to me…I didn’t feel safe. What was the point of walls and locks if your enemy could fade through them? My mouth twisted.

Hitoshi was fighting for his life and I’d been called here to waste time watching the Sandaime put on a show of grand-fatherliness.

…I’ll admit I had *some issues* with the old shinobi.

“Kiharu-chan, what happened?” and suddenly all the kindness melted from him, leaving a face as shrewd as any Elder. “Tell me everything, please.”

The comparison did not bring me comfort.

Trying not to squirm, I took a fortifying breath. “Today was Inuzuka Kiba’s birthday, so, his sister, Hana, and I took him to swim in the Naka-”
The office was silent as I spoke, Sarutobi smoking mutely. Only a few minutes into my account, Naruto – exhausted, whether from the adrenaline earlier or from the lateness of the hour – had made his way to the sofa, curling up and falling asleep quickly, all with a childish ease that spoke of familiarity.

“Hitoshi told me he moved through him, like he was a ghost…” I swallowed hard, my mouth lathery and dry, not just from talking. “I think…If I hadn’t summoned him, the man would’ve killed him.”

Half way through my explanation, Sarutobi had relit his pipe, puffing out great clouds of smoke – that had made my eyes water – and looking deeply pensive out of the windows.

Night had fallen completely, leaving the sky pitch black and the village lit up with lamps below us. The overhead lights reflected the office back at us and I stared blankly at my reflection.

I looked like a ghost myself, skin chalky and eyes hollowed.

…I see.” He sighed, sounding so exhausted I felt a bit sympathetic, slightly loosening the knot of anger in my chest. He was such an old man, it was a tragedy that he’d been forced back into Office. “Thank you, Kiharu-chan. And thank you,” he gestured to the sofa, at the sleeping Uzumaki, “For bringing Naruto with you as well.”

I nodded, unable to help the soft expression that slipped onto my face as I looked over at the little boy, snuggled into the worn sofa cushions. “Of course, Sandaime-sama,”

I paused. Should I? Fuck it, I’d already had one close call today, may as well go for two.

“He almost reminds me of…Minato.”

The office froze.

Sarutobi was watching me carefully, the surprise expertly tucked away in his eyes. Unfortunately for him, I was an expert at reading the Uchiha and could see it quite clearly. Did he not know that I had been close to his predecessor? Up in the rafters, I imagined that the hidden ANBU were also stiff with shock, maybe that I was so close to the truth, maybe because they themselves had never made the connection.

The thought almost made me snort but my heart just wasn’t in it.

“Indeed?” The Kage quirked an eyebrow and I just nodded silently, forcing a wistful smile to my lips.

“Hmmm…that is an interesting observation.” I wasn’t sure if I was imagining it but I thought he was telling me to drop it. I grasped it as the possible lifeline it was, dipping my head in a shallow nod. “Off you go to the Hospital, Kiharu-chan. I’m sure you’re eager to check on your companion.”

Relieved, I quickly bowed and rushed out, only throwing one more glance at Naruto’s sleeping face as I went.

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I stared down at the starched white sheets blindly.
Who knew they had life support for animals?

Hitoshi had been here for 3 hours now and he’d already been resuscitated twice.

His wounds had been bad, the nurse had told me, a little hesitant to list everything off to a 12-year-old. Not only did he have grievous burns and slashes littering his body, but the internal injuries had been extensive too.

…Internal bleeding, concussion, cracked ribs, cracked skull, bruised stomach…

Tobi had been playing with him.

I knew that Tobi in the anime/manga had enjoyed making fun of people, letting them pass through him as they fought to land a single hit, but…The ‘dead’ Uchiha could have easily finished him off, ghosted through any defence and ended it with a single swipe. But he hadn’t. He’d let the fight draw out, giving Hitoshi the false impression he’d stood a chance, like a cat with a mouse.

Ironic, considering his victim’s species, I thought darkly.

And then, before he could end it, I’d summoned him away in a puff of smoke. Did he care? Was he angry? Would he come looking, to finish what he’d started?

Why…why had he done it?

I’d thought about it for hours and just, ugh, I didn’t understand. This wasn’t canon, I didn’t know what this was. So where did we stand now? This could change nothing or everything, but which way would it go?

The only reason I could think for him to visit the Shrine (it was too soon to be for Itachi, I reasoned with myself) would be…well, because that was where the Clan would plot the coup, right?

But then, why fight like that if caught? Why not flee?

Hitoshi was straight from surgery, a quick operation (there were no other animal patients in this wing of the hospital right now) that had been over before I’d even been dismissed from the Tower. They’d healed his ribs as much as possible, as with most of his injuries.

And yet, he didn’t wake.

I didn’t think animals could go comatose, in all honesty, but apparently here they could. Even if he’d only just come out of surgery, I’d been allowed into the room. He was my summon and, because of the particular strength of our bond, my presence could do very little harm in his current condition. It might even help him, somewhat.

I hoped.

The room was silent, the corridor empty. The room he’d been placed in was very similar to the utilitarian ones for the actual shinobi forces. A cot with pull up sides and plain white sheets. A curtain around the bed for privacy and a single window. A tall lamp stood in one corner, in case the main lights were too much.

Well, humans got a bedside table, at least.

When I’d come in, I’d made a beeline for the window. I’d yanked it open, pushing the hinges to the limit. The cool air had rushed in and, after a while, the rain started hitting the sill as well. The room
smelled stale, like illness and antiseptic, and I knew Hitoshi would hate it. As for the chill? Hitoshi would have insisted anyway. I’d also pulled the privacy curtain around, hating the prickly feeling of the Nurses’ sympathetic looks as they went past. And as for the ANBU guard posted outside? After hearing about Tobi’s *Kamui*, I didn’t doubt the Sandaime had sent a Hyuuga. So, with the room fixed, and when I’d dragged the only chair over to rest beside his pillow, I fell into the seat and stared.

Hitoshi was slumped on his side, legs falling limply with a single foreleg bandaged around the IV drip. I almost fooled myself thinking that he was asleep except, this was *Hitoshi*, and he’d never sleep in such an uncouth manner. Ever.

Slowly, slowly, I shifted his paws and turned his head, organising his tail to curl around his front and hyperaware of where all his injuries were located.

*There*, I sat back. That was much more how he’d like it. Much more elegant.

I burst into tears.

Tobi had been *here*, in the village, almost two years before the canon! Massacre. I couldn’t remember if he’d come before or if something new had drawn him here. Hadn’t Itachi followed him to the Naka Shrine at some point? Was that how they met, how Itachi had known him to ask for training? Maybe, maybe not. Madara could just have been worried about the likelihood of the coup happening, what with my interference.

Either way, he’d be led directly to me.

If he came after Hitoshi? There I’d be. If he came to investigate the Uchiha’s relationship with Konoha? Bam, me again.

*Shit.*

Is this what an existential crisis felt like or was this just straight up fear?

Dad was still on patrol, I suddenly remembered. Had someone gone to tell him or was he clueless, going about his shift with fondly rolling eyes when he thought about how I’d stood him up? Chouza, I knew from a message he’d left with the Hospital receptionist, had gone to let Inoichi and Shikaku know, and would probably be here already.

They weren’t allowed through, I knew.

*They’re probably really worried, I reminded myself. They don’t know what’s happened, even with Chouza’s information. If you’re in trouble, hurt, if someone’s…died.*

I didn’t want to go. To leave. It felt like, if I took my eyes off him for second, ‘Toshi’d disappear through *Kamui*.

I went out anyway. I wasn’t- I couldn’t bare scaring everyone any more than I undoubtedly had. Images of an upset Ino haunted me, even as I rose. Even though I knew she’d be in bed now, anyway.

Pushing through the door, ignoring the ANBU stood guard, I slowly walked down the corridor. Why were hospitals always white? My mum *before* had joked it was so people couldn’t argue about the décor. I mean, if there was nothing there, no one could be blamed for having horrible taste. In all seriousness, I knew that it was supposed to be soothing, inoffensive.
It just made me feel drained.

At the end of the corridor, two double push-doors mocked my resolve. Swallowing hard, I soldiered on, pushing through into the main waiting room.

“Kiharu!” Everyone looked up at the sound of the door opening, expressions a range of worried and expectant. Upon seeing my small figure stood unsurely in the doorway, my immediate family shot to their feet. And, in seconds I saw what was wrong with the room.

Dad was still on patrol.

Oh. My eyes prickled, lips parting in surprise. He was going to be devastated.

In my moment of distraction, my loved ones had descended.

But the first to reach me was, as always, my best friend. Shisui slammed into me, expression twisted and eyes red with the Sharingan. He must be really out of it, if he activated the first stage unintentionally. Despite his evident worry, Shisui arms were nothing but gentle as they wrapped around me.

“Ki,” he breathed into my hair, half a head taller. “Wha-what happened?” he asked softly, voice cracking half way. Nose buried in his neck, my arms slowly came up to clutch at his tee-shirt.

Hands were petting my hair and voices murmured all around me.

I felt like I was 8 again, in the Hospital thinking Genma-nee was going to die. Shisui had held me then, too, and afterwards at Nee-chan’s apartment. And, soon as I’d seen him here, an idea sparked in my mind. It was dangerous and I’d be walking extremely close to the line I swore I’d never cross…But Shisui was always there and I trusted him more than myself. And, especially about this, if I couldn’t tell Shisui, I couldn’t tell anyone. “I…can I talk to you in a bit?” I murmured as quietly as possible, barely moving my mouth. “…Alone?”

His head barely twitched in a nod. A ‘yes’, thank god.

“Nekki-chan?” Sora-oba stroked my hair back from my forehead and I forced myself to stop hiding my face in Shisui’s top, turning to look up at her. Her face was stressed and a wash of guilt flooded my body.

I should have come out here sooner…

“Hitoshi was a-attacked,” I hiccupped, glad that my tears had stopped. I was a child, yes, but I hated crying. It was good for you, the release of emotions, and therapeutic, but right now it just made me feel weak. “He’s out of surgery, they did all they could but, because of his he-ad trauma, if he doesn’t wake up in the next few h-hours, he’ll have slipped into a coma.”

There were no gasps or cries, nothing but sharp breaths and sad eyes. And relief. In everyone’s eyes, from Shikaku to Sora-oba. They were relieved, that we were all alive, that it wasn’t me. That I was the one telling them. I wanted to be angry but I knew it wasn’t anyone’s fault, or even a real fault, if they were closer to me than my grumpy shadow.

I wished Hana was here, so I could cry like a little girl and apologise and ask her to plan our next sleepover, talk to me about useless things, anything but today.

I wished Ensui was here, not in stupid Wind. I craved his calm and composed presence like a glass of water, refreshing and vital. He was my rock as much as Shisui, although more from hashing out ideas and discussing things. Like a conscience, the voice of logic I could always trust.
Shisui was a presence I needed. If Shisui was there, things were okay. And it wasn’t just proof that he was still alive, still around, so the fight wasn’t over.

(I kind of thought, on some level, I was the same for him. A safe harbour outside of his Clan, a civilian who’d never go on a dangerous village or turn nuke. It almost sounded mundane, like I was a girl kept tucked away from the world, but it was anything but. I was working and contributing to our lifestyle as well, just how I wanted it; without having to take a life or the risk of death.

Or so I’d thought, I sighed internally.)

But worse of all? I really, really, wanted my parents.

Both of them.

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After reassuring everyone that I was in one piece, I’d eventually convinced them all to go back home. It was almost midnight and they had to get up in the morning, not to mention all the kids left back at the Compounds with hastily ‘commissioned’ Clan members. My Aunt and Uncle had been the most reluctant, gathering me into a hug between them, and I’d thanked whoever was listening for giving me such a loving network of people.

Shisui had stayed too.

The Nurses had been furious when I’d pulled him through the doors with little ceremony, chattering on about ‘family only’ until I’d snarled that Shisui was either coming through the door or I’d pull him through the window.

I must’ve looked sort of crazy, my hair a mess and eyes swollen red. Not to forget I was still wearing nothing but my ratty little strap-top and bloodied shorts.

After that, they’d backed off pretty quick, compromising that he had to stay in the corridor with the ANBU.

I’d agreed, taking what I could get.

Thankfully, the room was pretty small, so I’d simply pulled back the curtain, sitting down half-way between the bed and the doorway. Shisui had disappeared for a few minutes and then come back with a chair, plonking it down in the middle of the entryway and sitting. I mean, technically, he wasn’t in the room.

I sincerely doubted anything less an order from the Hokage himself, delivered in person and from a distance of two feet, could get that boy to move.

I loved that precious boy, I really did.

We’d not even really spoken, besides when I’d quietly told him the events of the day. That had been two hours ago.

And then dad came in like a hurricane.

“Kiharu!” He called, not even breaking stride to let Shisui move out of the doorway, simply planting on hand on the back of the chair and jumping them both.

It was only at the sight of Hitoshi, his companion of almost two decades, that he froze.
“Hitoshi…Kami-sama,” he breathed, dark eyes skimming over the wounded feline.

“If,” I swallowed, unable to look away from Tou-san’s face, “If he doesn’t wake up in the next hour…”

“A coma.” Dad finished for me, sighing deeply and closing his eyes for a moment. Pinching the bridge of his nose, he scrubbed his hands over his face and sighed again. “Come ‘ere,” he beckoned, stretching out a hand and pulling me from the seat, slipping to take my place and pulling me into his lap.

“Now, tell me everything, Nekki-chan.”

Soothed by the strong body beneath me, I retold the story for what felt like the hundredth time that day. Dad was silent, completely focused on my words and with an intense look of concentration on his tired face. He didn’t say anything for a long time, simply thinking, and I let him. My hand, the one not cradled between his massive ones, was absent-mindedly fingering the shorter hairs at the base of his neck, my unfocused eyes locked on Hitoshi.

“…Stupid cat.” He mumbled eventually.

A smile quirked my lips and I gave a strange, breathy little laugh, “That’s one of the first things I said, too.” And he was a really stupid cat, so prideful and smug, thinking he could take on whoever. His dark eyes flickered over my face quickly, a tiny frown creating a crinkle between his brows.

“You’ve not eaten yet, have you?”

“Not since lunch,” I admitted. I’d not had a chance, what with what happened, and the Nurses had only offered tea. My stomach was twisting too much, in all honesty.

“I’ll run and grab us something, okay,” he smiled, somehow manoeuvring us so that he was stood up and I’d shifted seamlessly into his seat. “You too, Shisui?” he asked out of the blue, not even bothering to raise his voice. I jerked in my seat, almost forgetting that Shisui was there. The older boy was stood upright, chair gone, with a startled expression on his face. Some part of my mind realised that he’d gone further down the corridor to give us some privacy – but not technically left, like I’d asked – and felt warm.

“No, Seiichi-san!” Shisui, for an Uchiha, looked appalled. “You should stay here; I’ll go grab some food for you both.”

Before dad could open his mouth to argue that, as family, he could freely come and go, Shisui was gone, as if he’d never been there in the first place.

“Hmmm, that boy.” Dad sounded almost fond, the closest thing to approval he’d ever felt towards any of the boys I knew. It’s a shame for Tou-san that most of my friends were that particular gender and I was, tragically for his nerves, straight. Sorry, dad, you’ll definitely have to get used to having a guy around, one day.

I was glad for the brief interaction, though. Dad had been thinking of something else for a moment, as had I.

Shisui ended up having to Shunshin through the window I’d thoughtfully left open, arms filled with Ichiraku take-away.

“Teuchi is one of the few owners still open this late,” he explained when I shot him a look. “And, anyway, when I said who they were for, he said they were free.” Never mind the fact that Ichiraku
doesn’t usually do take-away either.

Unfortunately, the distractions ran out and the time slipped by.

At 4 o’clock in the morning, Hitoshi passed the Nurses’ marker and slipped into an official coma. For summons, it either didn’t happen at all or it did, and seriously.

I was devastated, stricken by the uncertainty of what was going to happen. Not to mention…I’d left out one very important detail in all my accounts. And I was certain that withholding such information from the Hokage would be charged as treason.

“...just…red eyes...”

No one but a cat in a coma and I knew about the Tobi’s Sharingan.

After my brief meeting with Naruto, when I’d undoubtedly scarred him for life, I couldn’t help but look for him everywhere.

But, where was he?

It was startling, meeting someone you’d been keeping an eye out for years, only for them to fade back into obscurity. Not only was it eerie, but if felt…deliberate.

What the hell was I missing?

It had been a week since Tobi and a lot had happened. Tou-san had told me that they’d increased the patrols along the Village borders – information I was certain I was not allowed to know – in an attempt to catch the man Hitoshi had been scenting for months. But all trails, scent or otherwise, led nowhere. And the scene itself? It had been just outside of the Shrine, as Hitoshi claimed, but, aside from the summon’s blood and some destruction from the fight, there was no evidence of an intruder. Just as I knew there wouldn’t be.

Bastard Kamui.

At the insistence of…everyone…I’d been taking some time off. I was glad, in a way, as I was then able to sit by Hitoshi for a while and still have time to do my daily baking quota. I hadn’t even realised how worked up I’d gotten over the past few months until I’d slept ‘til noon and Shisui had dragged me out to a field, plonking himself down on the grass and pulling me after him. In a role reversal of his first hangover, the older boy had drawn my head into his lap and told me to relax.

When his hands started brushing over my temples, I melted like hot fudge.

Despite the hard callouses already forming on his hands, Shisui’s touch was incredibly gentle. He’d pulled my hair out of its customary tail, laying the waist-long hair out on the grass, and had started rubbing his fingers through my scalp in little circular motions.

Within seconds I was half asleep and purring like mad.

We must’ve sat there for hours, with the curly-haired boy moving slowly between my scalp, temples and the back of my neck. At some point, I’d started humming under my breath, Arietty’s song* (one of the few things I ever learnt on the piano), and Shisui had picked it up in minutes. So, there we lay, humming together all afternoon.
“I need to go back to the hospital,” I’d whispered, breaking the hours-long silence, at least in terms of conversation.

“Okay,” Shisui agreed easily. “I’ll walk you.”

I’d only just sat up, Shisui stretching out his legs behind me, when the boy started laughing.

“What?”

He’d chuckled, pointing with the hand he wasn’t leaning back on. “I, err, ruined your hair.” I’d reached up to feel it, my searching hands encountering the tangled bush on top of my head, and let out my first laugh in days.

“Ahhhh, I’ll sort it out later.” I smiled, pulling a band off my wrist and yanking my hair back into a tight tail to conceal the frizz.

The next morning, my head clear like it hadn’t been in a long time, I Made A Decision. Well, I’d made it a month ago and only now gotten ‘round to acting on it.

Nekki’s had been running on half hours, Mikoto taking over for the past few days whilst I got myself sorted, and the place was really busy when I popped in at lunch.

“Kiharu!” Mikoto cried when she saw me (after I’d dealt with the handful of concerned customers who’d heard what had happened – or the half-truth released to the public, that my summon had been mauled – and rushed to ask if I was alright). “What are you doing here, I thought you were with Hitoshi?”

My mouth tugged up in a smile as I set my basket down on the countertop. Normally, this contained lunch for Tou-san and me, maybe some things I’d picked up as I passed through the market, for our Hospital vigils. But today, I’d come straight from Yuri-oba’s and now, I pulled out the bundle of white fabric.

Passing it over to the Uchiha Matriarch, knowing full well I was being a cheeky little minx, I winked.

“All employees must wear the uniform, even Chefs and business partners.”

The older woman looked, for the first time since I’d known her, truly astonished.

“What?”

I basked in her expression a moment longer, enjoying how the stand had gone totally silent with people sticking their heads in to see what the commotion was. In a few minutes, the entire Market would be buzzing about this.

“Oh, of course,” I pretended not to understand, patting down my non-existent pockets before flashing her the key I’d been holding the entire time. “Here is your set of keys! Can’t own half a stall you can’t get into!”

Holding an apron that matched my own (Oh, how Yuri-oba and I had cackled) in one hand and the keys I’d thrown in the other, Mikoto met my eyes firmly.

To a bystander, it would look like we’d frozen for a moment.

In Mikoto’s eyes, I saw the shock, yes. Hesitance and a touch of fear, like I would dare joke and be
so cruel. But, more importantly, I saw the joy.

I’d made this extremely public, ensuring that no one could say I’d been forced to surrender half of my business to a Clan (let alone, the Uchiha) and that I was proud of this. I’d known, without her ever having to explicitly say it, that Mikoto loved Nekki’s just as much as I did. I’d seen the pure happiness in her face when she helped me out, whether on a normal working day or at the Market Festival. Seen the happiness when I’d started to show her the recipes, trusting her with my one-of-a-kind and original creations.

And in my eyes, I made sure all she saw was my own excitement and burning determination.

Unbeknownst to me, that was the moment Mikoto realised what Shisui meant, all those time’s he’d insisted I had an intellect akin to Itachi. Because, in that second of silent communication, she saw that I’d known. And that I’d done all this on purpose, that everything I’d done had been part of something much bigger. I’d seen the Uchiha and I was trying to do something, in the only way I really could.

With a smile, one so broad and open that I think some of the customers went a bit blind, Mikoto tied the apron around her waist, tucking the keys into her sleeve.

Turning to leave and thoroughly enjoying the expressions on everyone’s faces, I temporarily forgot where it was I was headed. “I’ll get Yuri-o-ba on your uniform as soon as possible, Hime!”

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On Thursday, I planned to speak to Shisui but, like with everything, the Universe worked against me.

The recently-minted Jonin was sent on a two-week-long mission to Hot Water. (He’d tested and passed just before the Festival, the promotion very discrete – subtle – because of his age, and I’d given Shisui a small guitar, based off my sister’s Ukulele, I’d commissioned off Ensui – much to his everlasting aggravation.)

Shit.

Paranoid, stressed, and a fucking tonne of other crap emotions, I’d immediately changed directions when I’d heard the news. I would have gone straight to the hospital, but the Head Medic at reception had threatened cutting down on my visitation rights if I didn’t spend more time away. Apparently sleeping in a chair and visiting for 12 hours a day is wrong when the person you’ve known since you were a baby is in a fucking coma. So, I was forced to think again.

It was a Thursday which meant Ino and the boys should be at the playground.

I needed cuddles, okay?

I busted through the village, cutting directly from where I’d been informed at the Uchiha Compound to the central play area, where I knew that Ino always insisted on going because that’s ‘where everyone is playing’.

Heaven forbid that girl runs out of victims – ahem – playmates.

My eyes were already scanning the flocks of children, enjoying the August weather, when I heard my imouto’s dulcet shrieks. Dear lord, not already. I wanted comfort, not a tension headache.

Marching over to where I could see Ino fighting with a bunch of girls her age, I clearly heard Chouji
gasp when he saw me, scrambling up with Shikamaru (I was, strangely enough, one of the only things the boy would move quickly for) in the corner of my eye. Aww shit, they’d not seen me since I’d quickly reassured them that both Toshi and I were alive. I’d been on the way back to the Hospital, though…

“Ino-chan!” I called, lunging forward to grab the back of her dress as she threw herself at a brunette. Or, rather, she tried to. The other girl was already taking advantage of how Ino had frozen in surprise, reaching forward to slap her.

“Excuse you,” I swung Ino into my arms and safely out of hitting (giving or receiving) distance. “What is going on here?” I turned to cock a brow at my little sister, ignoring her demands as to when I got here and how dare I not ‘visit properly’. “In a moment, Ino! First,” I frowned, “Tell me what you lot were fighting about.”

“Ami was being mean!” Ino burst out, swinging a bit in my arms from how furiously she was gesturing.

“Oh?” I peered down at the girl in question.

The little brunette, probably the same age as the Rookie 9, glared up at me, her expression sullen. “It’s not my fault she wouldn’t shut up about her stupid flowers or her stupid sister.” And there, she’d sent Ino off on one again.

Feeling my eye twitch, I pressed my free hand to it. Urgh, I couldn’t deal with this right now.

“You shouldn’t insult someone’s passion or their loved ones.” I pointed out, trying to be fair. Then, turning to Ino, I wrinkled my nose. “And violence is never the best option, Ino-chan, Ami-san.”

The girl in question pouted, trying to pull out the puppy eyes, but I ignored them. “But, nee-chan, I want to be a kunoichi!”

I expertly ignored how ‘Ami’ was now gaping up at me, aghast that she’d called me stupid to my face, and blinked hard for a moment.

When my eyes opened again, I glanced around. Ami had run off, her face red in embarrassment and I reluctantly gave up on getting the two to apologise. Shikamaru, looking annoyed but intrigued, was stood just behind me with a concerned Chouji.

“Come on, you three,” I jerked my head in the direction of back up the hill, leading the two boys (Ino still on my hip) up to a free spot of grass. “You shouldn’t fight, Ino,” I told her as I walked up the slope, squinting as the sun hit me in the eyes.

“Whyyyyy?” The little blonde whined in annoyance, leaning her head into the curve of my neck.

“You know you shouldn’t fight, Ino.” I repeated, lowering myself to rest at the base of a nearby tree, lowering myself down and landing with a thump on the grass, Ino shifting to sit in my lap.

“After all, when you’re a ninja one day, Ino-imouto, you’ll have a responsibility to use your skills wisely, for the betterment of everyone under your protection,” I poked her tummy, feeling Shika slump against me on my left and Chouji settled down on my right. I tagged on some patriotism, lest a ninja overheard, “-and Konoha itself. Just as I feed people at Nekki’s, making them happy and bringing in business to our village, I have the responsibility not to poison them!” I winked at the end, trying to lighten the mood a bit, and the three cracked smiles.

“Okay?” I asked, carefully making sure I’d not confused them and that they’d taken it in. Respect
was a key facet of success, after all. It was important they got that.

Receiving varied ‘yeah’s, I rolled my eyes, leaning my head back to see the leaves stirring above me.

“Enough with the heavy, I get it, I get it!” I pulled a silly smile and Ino and Chouji giggled, Shika’s smile drawing into a grin.

“So, what have you been up to whilst I was busy?”

“Shika-kun has been extra lazy recently!” Ino immediately tattled, making the boy in question groan in aggravation.

“Is that true, Chouji?” I turned to wink at him and he clasped a small hand over his own smile. Chouji was a brilliant person to laugh with, he had such a sweet sense of humour.

“Well, Shikamaru has started learning Shogi from Shikaku-oji,” His mouth pulled into a mischievous smile as Shikamaru let out puff of air, slumped so far down that he was practically lying on the moss.

“…troublesome,” the Nara Heir rolled his eyes and I pouted. No fun.

Huh. Maybe Ino and Yoshino were rubbing off on me.

“Well, Shogi is good practice for being a ninja so…” I poked Ino’s cheek (so soft) “Are you complaining that Shika has already started training?”

Ino’s eyes blew wide, throwing herself out of my arms and moving to stand above her lazy friend. I could help but notice that Shika looked like prey at the feet of the enraged hunter – err – Ino… hehe. The Yamanaka Heiress was already on a roll, scolding the other boy about not telling her that he was training – ‘-we promised we’d start together Shika-kun-!’ – and I decided to leave her to it.

Shikamaru had to gain a tolerance for these kind of things, it was a part of growing up! I mean, I couldn’t derail Ino every time.

It was funnier this way, anyway.

“How are you doing Chouji, hmm?” I left them to it, bumping sides with the little ginger boy next to me.

“Hmm,” He smiled, shrugging a bit, fingers brushing through the grass around us. “How’s Hitoshi?” His face tilted up to look at me, gauging my reaction. Kids could be so sensitive… “Tou-san said he’s been sleeping for ages.”

Oh.

My lips pulled into a sad smile, twitching wirily. “Ah, yeah. He was hurt, Chouji, so he needs to sleep to get better.” I turned and pulled him into my lap. There was no such thing as babying him, I mentally declared, when it was in the name of comfort. “He’ll be sleeping for a bit. He’ll wake up when he’s ready.”

“Oh,” the boy in my lap mumbled, eyes fixed on how Shika was now trying to roll down the hill and away from the advancing – and still scolding – Ino. “I’m sorry…”

Giving him a little squeeze, I tucked his head under my chin.

“Thanks, Chouji.”
“Ohayo, Teuchi-san!” I called casually, stepping into Ichiraku Ramen and smiling warmly at Ayame in greeting, before making my way to my usual stool.

When I had a pork ramen in front of me, I licked my lips and started in on the plan. Sure, it was a hastily made one at 2am, when my mind wouldn’t stop whirring, but, a plan was a plan. Never know if you don’t try, and all that.

“Teuchi, I get loads of kids at the stall around this time…don’t you?”

The ramen chef cheerfully tossed some spring onions into the pan, humming along, before he waved me off. “Nah, Kiharu-chan, I usually get a dinner rush. School kids want sweets-” he smiled at me, “-not ramen, when they come out of school.”

“Ahh, I understand.” I nodded, thinking furiously. Now what? “So Ayame and I are the only kiddies you get to spoil? Shame!”

The older man laughed, serving up the order and sliding it down the countertop towards them. It landed perfectly, not a drop spilt and I gave him a cheeky clap for it.

“As it is, Kiharu-chan, the two of you are all the cheek I need!”

I laughed again in delight, especially when Ayame nudged me with her elbow on her way past, but, internally, I was scowling.

I’d asked Iruka (saying a little boy had forgotten his change at Nekki’s and all I knew was that he was an orphan) but he’d just scowled, shaking his head, and I hoped he wasn’t lying just because he had a Kyuubi-shaped grudge.

Then, I’d taken an hour to wander in the direction I thought his apartment might be in (it was a tall building, I remembered, but most apartment blocks looked the same) but, I’d barely taken a step – in the direction of, what I later learned, was the Red-Light District (oops) – before a lady, who I’d seen in the Market, was rushing over and telling me to be more careful where I wandered. She’d sent me back the way I came, watching me leave with concerned eyes, and I’d not been able to go that way again. After all, you couldn’t claim ignorance twice.

Minato’s son was turning out to be as slippery as an eel.

When I entered the hospital room, I didn’t even bother turning on the light switch, already having memorised the scene that awaited me.

“Hey, ‘Toshi,” I greeted the still room. “I brought dinner this time-” I moved towards my usual chair, pulling my bento box from the basket. There wasn’t any noise, other than plastic creaking as I popped the lid and dug my chopsticks from my pocket. It was strangely soothing, eating in the slowly darkening-room.

“-It’s tuna steak and I’m going to eat all of it right in front of you.”


“I know it’s your guilty pleasure,” I mumbled around a mouthful.
It was delicious, cooked perfectly (Tou-san had some surprising skills) but I could barely swallow.

**Beep. Beep. Beep.**

“You’ve been sleeping for three weeks, you lazy idiot.” I gave up on my dinner, setting the box aside and stretching forwards to run my hands down Toshi’s spine, sighing tiredly. “Think it’s ‘bout time you got off your arse.”

The machine was the only response.

The room was pitch-black, hours since I’d arrived, and I was exploring the pads of the panther’s front paw, when someone cleared their throat from the doorway.

The light from the hall shone into the room, lighting up Toshi’s prone form and my slumped figure.

“Shisui, you’re back,” I sighed in relief, resting my head on Toshi’s shoulder.

“Yeah,” he stepped into the room, red eyes glowing Sharingan as he located the lamp switch in the pitch-black. “Just got back a few hours ago— the light clicked on and the room was suddenly lit with gentle yellow light. “-and thought you’d be here.”

The both of us looked exhausted, Shisui’s now-black eyes making him look even more washed out. It wasn’t fair, I mentally sighed, we were only children. We shouldn’t have to deal with this sort of thing.

“Kiharu…” the older boy started, looking apprehensive. “You said, that night, that you wanted to talk…” he nodded to Hitoshi.

“I-I,” I swallowed, sitting up. I guess this was happening now then. I swallowed hard. Right. “Close the door.”

When I turned back from locking the window shut, I gestured for Shisui to come closer, pulling the curtain around the bed so no one could look in and see us.

“Do you know of any techniques where someone can erase their entire presence, their body?” We sat under the window, shoulder to shoulder.

The Uchiha looked thoughtful for a moment, before a frustrated expression crossed his face. “No, I don’t, sorry.”

Licking my lips, this was the really dangerous bit.

“I-is there anyone around? ANBU or…anyone?” Shisui concentrated for a second, undoubtedly reaching out his senses, before confirming that there was not. His eyes looked tense, waiting for the hammer to fall when he saw how stressed I was.

“Hitoshi..” I breathed into his ear, barely making a noise. “- said the man had red eyes.”

Shisui froze.

“The…Sharingan?”

Lips pressed tightly together, I gave a slow nod.

“…but who?” he hissed, face pressed close to mine. “And that doesn’t explain the special jutsu! I looked *everywhere* in the Clan Library but none of it is the same-”
“Shisui.” I interrupted, grabbing his hands when he made to get up. “Shisui.”

“Don’t you get it?” I stabbed a finger at Hitoshi’s prone form above us. “Hitoshi was searching for intruders so he didn’t recognise the scent! We’d been coming to the Compound for five years. If ‘Toshi thought it was an intruder then that means someone outside of the village has the Sharingan.”

Shisui gaped, throat swallowing convulsively and eyes dancing as he frantically thought.

“Oh shit.”

“And, I don’t know everything about your Clan, but you said your Mangekyou has special abilities, which differ to each individual, so—”

“-that ability must be their Mangekyou.” The older boy finished. “Fuck, Kiharu have you told anyone?”

Mouth flapping for a moment, I just decided to come clean. I was already telling him about Tobi, I may as well do this.

“I-I wanted to talk to you first. I didn’t want anyone blaming the Uchiha of Konoha for this, things are bad enough and I’ve been trying—”

“Kiharu,” Shisui breathed, eyes wide and looking like he’d just had an epiphany. “Mikoto-sama and helping Itachi, being friendly with the Police- you—”

“It doesn’t matter right now!” I hissed, not wanted to get side tracked. “But what now? There’s someone outside of the village trying to discredit your Clan!”

Shisui shot me a sharp look, voice severe. “What makes you say that?”

“Shisui,” I sighed, resting my head back against the wall and feeling exhausted all of a sudden. “Think of all the blame and resentment people are showing towards the Uchiha- they say a Sharingan could wield Kyuubi.”

“That’s dangerous talk, Kiharu—”

“And what will the Uchiha do if they think that they’re being smothered and controlled by the Village, hmm?” I continued on mercilessly. He had to see. He had to.

Shisui looked visibly annoyed, gesturing as he tried to see what I was getting at. “They’d-they’d… Oh.” he sat back, looking stunned.

“A coup.”

“Yeah,” I slipped a hand into his. “A coup.”

We sat in silence for a moment, trying to desperately sort through our thoughts. I knew I’d just blown through Shisui’s pre-existing fears about his Clan Elders stirring, upscaling the whole thing to a whole new level. Shisui was probably having an existential crisis around about now. And me?

I was wondering what the fuck we did now.

“Come on.” Shisui abruptly stood up.

“Where are we going?” I asked warily, slowly reaching up to take the hand offered.
When I was stood next to him, Shisui rested his hands on my shoulders, making me look at him straight on.

It struck me then that he was a Jonin of Konoha, with his own title in the ranks, and an already fearsome reputation. Absentmindedly, I wondered where that cute little boy with the angel curls had gone.

But he was still here, just older now, I guessed. He was still Shisui.

“You trusted me with this, Kiharu-chan.” I opened my mouth to interrupt, that I trusted Shisui with everything, but a squeeze of my arms stopped me. “Now, I need you to trust me, okay? We only have the little things that Hitoshi was able to tell you as evidence. But, Ki-chan, this is huge.”

He slowly led me to the door, listening for a moment to make sure no one was still around.

“Shisui,” I whispered into his shoulder, suddenly feeling the two-year age-gap. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m...we’re going to take this to the Hokage himself.”

*Arriety’s song; I’d recommend the harp cover on YouTube. It’s beautiful and makes me think of Kiharu lazing in the fields on warm days. Or when she taught her Tou-san how to waltz. Or- it’s actually just great for this fic, in general.

Also, comment to let me know if you want me to tell you what songs I listen to when I write certain scenes...I think they really help with the vibe <3

Chapter End Notes

A/N- Hey, you all seemed pretty riled up last chapter. I wonder why, hmm? *jk* I hope this is okay, I’ve gotten a bit too used to writing adorbs fluff so tension and ‘fast’ dialogue are quite tricky. Hmm, hopefully this is okay. Anyway, thanks for reading! X

P.S- is anyone else have nightmares about Kiharu with Danzo’s seal on her tongue....?

EDIT- I know there’s a way to add links in here and I’ve done it before but I’m lazy and it’s annoying so just copy and paste the link below into the search bar if you want to see Mikoto and Shisui’s earrings (requested by some commenters) and I hope you like them!
This is a Very Bad Idea…I thought to myself, being all-but dragged through the corridors by Shisui.

The Hospital was mercifully quiet, only a few Nurses on hand in this ward, as Shisui and I ran through the halls. That was another eerie thing about Infirmaries; they were either filled with agonised moans or disturbingly quiet. The tomb imagery was…not great. We saw very few people, running like we were being chased, and I was incredibly grateful. If there were more staff on the floor or my best friend was setting a less demanding pace? We’d have been screwed.

Nurses are fucking scary, okay?

“Shisui,” I panted, trying to keep up, “Shisui! Wait a moment!”

“What, Ki-chan?” he tossed over his shoulder, sounding impatient, and I gritted my teeth. Tch. We couldn't just rush and blurt everything out, dammit! If he went to Sarutobi - Would anything change or would Shisui die, only two years younger?!

We were in the last stairwell, halfway down the steps, when I finally lost my temper and ripped my arm from his grip.
“Shisui, just wait a moment, okay?!” From two steps above, I was taller and I took the chance to look down on him.

“What?” His jaw clenched, arms flying as he gestured furiously towards the exit before, catching the look on my face, he crossed them defensively. I felt a headache form. Stubborn! Shisui was impossible.

But, Stubborn! Kiharu won any day.

“Listen, we can’t just stroll up to the Hokage!” I started, ignoring Shisui’s harried expression, “What do you think he’ll do if-” I cut myself off, shooting a suspicious look up the stairwell, before continuing in a low hiss, “-if he thinks a Clan is planning something?”

“But, Kiharu, that’s the point! Hokage-sama will have a plan, okay?”

Sometimes I forgot that, just because I’d dodged the fuck out of the conditioning and propaganda, others hadn’t…like Shisui. Silly boy trusted fucking Danzo.

“You know that chances are this is gonna get blamed on your Clan!” I growled back. “So, can we just talk about this, for a moment?”

Shisui, looking more frustrated and angry than I’d seen in years, shook his head in a vicious movement and started towards the next flight of stairs. The naked grief on his face was frightening and I wondered if the ramifications of Kamui had finally started to sink in. He looked like I did when I realised Tobi could just creep in and slit throats, disappearing into nothing.

Dashing forward, I grabbed his arm and he froze, muscle twitching beneath my hand. I was absently grateful that he’d learned to control the impulse to flip me years ago. The first time had not been fun.

“Don’t you trust me when I say-”

“Shisui!” I reared back as if slapped but didn’t loosen my grip. Like hell was I letting him go. “Of course, I do! I told you, didn’t I?! It’s other people I don’t trust as much!”

The stairwell was very quiet for a moment and I listen keenly, for any sounds of eavesdroppers – Shisui would tell me anyway, but still – and to the angry sounds of our breathing. When the older boy made no move to leave again, I continued.

“We live in a ninja village, Shisui. A military leadership is not gonna take even the possibility of a coup lightly. Sandaime-sama might be an advocator for peace, but not everyone in power is, okay?” I took a step closer, still leaning over the bannister to reach him. Once he looked up at me, I continued, tone regretful. “I…I think we need to be really careful is all. Who knows what the fall out could be?”

The fight left the older boy, arms falling to hang limp as he slumped to sit on the first step and out of my reach.

“…sorry.” He whispered and, he sounded so sad, I felt all my anger start to drain away. Shisui…I’m sorry this is happening. You’re only 14…we’re both children, but, I wanted to spare you – from all of this.

Still feeling a bit hesitant after the rare show of genuine anger, I slowly made my way down the steps, turning the corner to stand beside his slumped form. When Shisui turned and tilted his head to
lean on my legs, he continued.

“Okay, okay, so we’re more careful. I still think we should go to Hokage-sama, though.” He sighed heavily and I remembered he must be exhausted, straight back from a mission. “I’m a Shinobi of Konoha, Kiharu. I am loyal to my Kage and I can’t keep something like this from him.”

“I understand.” My voice sounded terribly young, high and echoing against the empty walls.

“So, if we put this off, what do you suggest we do first?”

My mouth opened but no sound came out. Who could we go to? In my books, Hokage-sama was out (may as well go up to Danzo and stick out my tongue for the seal – if he didn’t kill me on sight). If I went to Ino-Shika-Chou, I wasn’t sure if they’d defend the Uchiha and then they’d go to the Hokage…if Inoichi-Oji didn’t try and Mind Walk me through the exact memories, first. Uncle or no, he was still the Head of T&I and he’d think it was a way of protecting me, ensuring no one could doubt my testimony.

Now, that could never happen.

Fugaku would…I didn’t know. I just, I couldn’t read him like I could the others. Over the years, I’d only really spent a few minutes at a time with the man. Obviously, I was considered below his radar (he’d regret that one day, I’d make sure) and I’d picked up on few things about him, like that he liked his tea scolding hot and he asked Itachi about his training every day. But politics? I hadn't a clue. What if he actually wanted the Coup? For all I knew, the man was feeling just as resentful as any of the other advocates in the Clan. We could risk it, I supposed, and appeal to him. If we presented it as proof that it was no one’s fault but Tobi’s…But, I couldn’t anticipate his reaction and that was even more dangerous. Either way, I felt that he would tell the Elders, who’d then pull some shit inside the Clan and probably go ahead with the Coup out of spite.

The only one I could think of-

“Mikoto-hime.” I blurted. Shisui’s head snapped up to meet my eyes and I swallowed hard at the helplessness I saw there.

“We can’t go to Fugaku-sama…he’s probably one of the Elders invested in the idea of a coup. But, Mikoto…she loves the Village and would do anything for her sons…”

This time it was I who leaned down and offered a hand. Shisui took it without hesitation, pulling himself up and looking down at me. He gave my hand a gentle, comforting squeeze before he let go and I tried to return his shaky smile.

“You’re sure Mikoto-sama is the one?” Dark eyes searched my face and, seeming to find something there, grew fiercely determined.

“If we can trust anyone, it’s her.”

The older boy sucked in a slow, fortifying breath. "Okay...okay, so, we're doing this."

A bang sounded above us as someone entered the stairwell a few floors up and, by wordless agreement, we turned and dashed down the remaining steps.

The only sounds were the echoing of our footsteps and those of the person above us. I knew it was probably just some nurse but, well, my imagination had always been overactive.

Mental imagines of eavesdropping shinobi and/or ROOT (they'd just Shunshin and kill us- or rather,
me. Shisui would definitely duck, hopefully, get us out of there, hopefully, catch the agent and then bring them to Sarutobi, out Danzo and the- nope, getting too far.

"Shisui," I whispered and the older boy immediately reached back for my hand, clenching it tightly in his larger one.

"Shhh, it's okay, Ki-chan, just a Medic-nin."

The reception desk had two drained-looking nurses behind it and they looked up when we walked past. Not in the mood for pleasantries, we completely ignored them, rushing out into the street.

The night was coal black.

"Shoot," I mumbled, "It’s really late….it must be nearly midnight."

Shisui chuffed a little laugh, still looking tense around his eyes but slowly relaxing. “It’s closer to 2 am, actually, Ki-chan. You always lose track of time in the Hospital.”

The street lights were on but the night was still unnerving, like the whole world was holding its breath, paused in that strangely muted stillness reserved for extremely late nights or early mornings. Not even the wind was rustling. We were stood near an orange street lamp and the coloured light cast strange shadows over Shisui’s face, hiding his eyes and making the stressed line of his shoulders all the more severe.

“It’s really late,” I whispered again, just to break the stillness, maybe pull Shisui from his thoughts. Even happy soul’s like his got heavy sometimes.

“Come on, let’s go back to mine…will you stay over? I just…after that, I don’t really want to be home alone, you know?”

Shisui’s face finally broke into a smile and I internally sighed in relief, falling into step beside the older boy as he started in the direction of mine.

“Seiichi-san not home tonight, hmm?”

Huffing out a breath, I turned my head to look at the bottomless sky. “Nah, he’s on border patrol again, said he’ll be back in the morning.”

………………………………………………………………..

“Nekki!” Warm laughter bubbled behind me, achingly familiar, and my old nickname rang in the summer breeze. "Nekki, come on, it's time to go!"

...Kaa-san...

The meadow was beautiful, filled with a cloud of wild flowers and long, yellowed grass brushing my fingertips. The sun filtered through the leafy canopy and lazy clouds in golden beams, making the clearing dozily whimsical and the surrounding trees strangely mysterious.

Absently, my fingers tickled as they brushed through the long grass and I rubbed them together, bemusedly looking down at them.

"Ah-k-!

They were covered in blood.

"Ah-k-!

I gasped, throwing my hands out in front of me and staring at the red that dripped between
my fingers. "What-?!"

Staggering back another step, I bumped into something hard."Kiharu-chan, there you are!" A deeper voice laughed behind me and I spun around, almost falling over my own feet. The meadow tipped and twisted like the ground wasn't even really there and-

"Mi-Minato..." My face felt numb, lips fumbling over the fondly-remembered name. "Yo-the blood," Warm hands wrapped around mine, heedless of the crimson smearing everywhere, dripping down our arms and staining sleeves.

"Oh, don't worry about that, Kiharu-chan," He smiled, face bright and sapphire eyes fond, "...that's just what happens when you kill people."

I threw myself upright, gulping on air and trying desperately to stay quiet.

The living room was dark, no lights and no signs of life. As my eyes adjusted, breathing deeply to try and slow my racing heart, I peered around the still room. The entire house was silent, broken only by the ticking of the kitchen clock and Shisui's gentle snores beside me.

Our sandals were piled by the door, my coat thrown over the back of the sofa, and Shisui's Katana lovingly rested on top of the coffee table.

A dream, I reminded myself, one hand pressed to my speeding heart. Just a stupid dream.

But..what if it was real, one day? I'd done nothing to save Minato and Kushina, Kaa-san and Noko and so many others, what would happen tomorrow or with the Hokage? Would I be the one, this time, to see Shisui die in the Naka or would Danzo just kill us both, straight off?

A hand, calloused from weapons and slightly sweaty, wrapped around my shaking wrist. A glance to check, but Shisui's eyes were still closed, his breathing still deep. Dammit, he looked so young, even younger than 14 and I felt so very small.

With a heavy swallow, I tried to go back to sleep anyway.

(Shisui, woken by my first jolt, fell back asleep shortly after)

My pillow was soft and smelled like toffee and fresh grass and I sighed, burrowing closer and nuzzling my nose into it.

I was exhausted, Shisui and I having come in late, wet from the light shower that had started to fall halfway back to mine and dizzy with nerves for the next morning. We'd ended up staying up even later, fluttering around the living room (me) and fussing over weapons (Shisui) as we tried to calm ourselves down.

The temptation to run over to Ensui's flat and tell him everything, just so he could roll his eyes at us and make everything better with his cool, logical drawl had been almost overwhelming.

But, Shisui and I were in this alone, for the time being.

Hopefully, we'd have another person to depend on tomorrow and, hopefully, we could figure out what to do. There would be no more running to Ensui for a while now, at least not about this. Shisui
and I...we were responsible. I mean, Shisui had always been responsible, he was an Elite ninja! He hadn't received those promotions, at so young an age, just because he was good with the weapons and fighting side of things. And I? I'd been running my own business for years, in some form or another. I'd previously struggled to share my burdens.

But this was different. Shisui wasn't following orders or a mission directive and I wasn't baking for orders or stumbling along, trying to passively shift Canon...the ball was truly in our court, here. And that was terrifying.

So, we'd been up half the night trying to hash out a plan and I'd been so stressed recently, falling asleep was more like falling unconscious. Shisui had apologised again for his words but I simply told him I was feeling the pressure too. The fear had slowly left our systems and, over a cup of tea, we'd started to feel the pull of sleep. But, since when was my bed this comfortable?

When the arm around my shoulders hugged me closer, I couldn't help but smile, thoughtlessly burrowing further into the warmth.

Unfortunately, I was jerked from my very warm and cosy sleep when my ‘pillow’ was rudely grabbed from under me.


When I angrily pried my sleepy eyes open, I was greeted to the sight of an empty living room.

“Urgh,” I groaned, scrubbing my hands – marked in weird red lines from being squashed under Shisui’s torso – over my face and wondering why everyone was so dramatic.

My bare feet padded on the cold wooden floors as I stalked into the kitchen. Hands found hips when I saw Shisui – adorably sleep-rumpled with a bewildered look on his face and a bit of dried drool on his chin (I bet he slobbered on me. Again.) – sat stiffly in a chair.

Which was turned around to face the kitchen counter, where my Tou-san, casually nursing a cup of tea, was glowering resentfully.

Well, so much for him liking Shisui.

“Well, good morning, Neko-tou.” I smiled sweetly, channelling ‘little girl’ as much as possible. It worked perfectly when dad’s eyes softened as he turned to look at me.

“Good morning, hime!” Wow, what a perfectly innocent smile, dad!

When I turned to greet Shisui, as if nothing was wrong, I could almost feel dad’s gaze burning over my head and into my best friend.

Poor boy, this was the consequence of being best friends with a girl whose father is all but allergic to boys being near her. Or smiling at her, come to think of it. Looking back, I remembered that one boy who’d been ‘too touchy’ when I passed him his change...

“Late night, Ki-chan?” dad asked casually, turning to pour me some tea. I noticed that Shisui didn’t have one – this was getting ridiculous – and got a cup from the cupboard for him. When my dad didn’t make a move to fill it, I leaned over and grabbed mine before placing it in front of the Uchiha. My lips pressed together to hide my amused smile at Tou-san’s sigh of frustration behind me.

Kami-sama, we were children. All three of us, apparently.
“Yeah, we got lost track of time in the Hospital and it was really late, so we came back here.”

“Why, Nekki-chan?” Dad cracked, frowning – pouting – in aggravation. “Why were you *sleeping* on top of a boy?”

Sigh. I was only 12, for crying out loud. And Shisui was. Right. There.

Besides, today was not the day for this crap…!

“First of all,” I calmly ticked off my fingers, leaning back against the table. “It wasn’t any boy, Dad, it was Shisui. So, it’s different and what are you even talking about?! I once put him to bed, drunk, after Ensui’s party, in between Hitoshi and I!” I ignored the low growl radiating from his chest. “We came in late from the hospital and were talking on the sofa and then, *obviously*, fell asleep!”

I stood back up, walking over to the cupboard and pulling out a packet of flavoured rice-cakes, staring with narrow eyes as my dad slowly deflated. “Secondly,” I continued to mercilessly tear apart his argument, “Just, really, Tou-san? Are you annoyed I was out so late?”

Tou-san looked to the side, like some moody teenager, and I rolled my eyes, like the ceiling could answer me. What was he even thinking?

“Anyway, we’ve got to get going soon…we need to talk to Mikoto-hime about something important, so I’ll see you later.”

With a frustrated sigh, dad slouched like a deflating balloon and stalked to the fridge, looking greatly offended. What a ridiculous man. It’s not really my fault if I just yanked the higher-ground out from under him. It’s his for making it so damn easy!

“And you,” I leaned down to help the older boy up, cocking an eyebrow when he staggered a bit. “What the hell was that? If someone grabs you, fight back! And, next time,” I ignored how Shisui paled and mouthed ‘next time’ in horror, “-land on your feet!”

Rolling eyes, Shisui puffed out his cheeks as he followed me back into the living room. “Hey, my legs were dead, okay? You’re heavy-”

He cut off when the sofa pillow was lobbed at his face.

“*Excuse you, I’m a delicate flower!*”

Ignoring how Shisui was whining over how mean I was in the mornings, I pulled my coat on, casually cast aside the previous night, before jerking a thumb towards the door. “And, just for that, you’re not getting any of my breakfast – we’re leaving *now.*”

With a low groan, Shisui reached down to grab his sword from the low table and smoothly slid it back into its holster before blindly reaching up, plucking his sandals from the air. I’d unapologetically aimed for his head.

“Bye Tou-san!” I called without ceremony, slamming the door after us as we left.

“It’s almost 7 o’ clock, if we hurry we’ll have plenty of time to tell her the basics before *Nekki’s* opens.” I thought out loud as we started down the street, trying to pretend all of that didn’t just happen. Why did dad have to be so weird in front of my friends?! Was it like an instinctive parental thing? Even if Shisui had witnessed (and caused) a lot of embarrassing things over the years *cough* period *cough*, it didn't make them any less awful.
“Don't you want to wait 'til we have more time? I mean, surely it can wait for this evening instead of rushing?” Shisui shoved his hands in his pockets, eyeing me out the corner of his eye. *Hmm, he was the one desperate to run to Sarutobi last night,* I internally grumbled, uncharitable as fuck.

“We could but admitting my theories out loud - It made it feel so much more real, Shisui,” I rubbed my arms before tucking a hand into the older boy’s elbow. He flinched minutely at my cold fingers but didn’t even try to move away. “I guess I need the reassurance, as soon as possible.”

The Jonin snorted a bit under his breath, a rueful smile twitching his lips. “Now, *that* I can’t argue with.”

“For once,” I teased up at him – damn 4-inch height gap –, unable to resist.

“For once,” Shisui agreed with a tiny, little grin.

We got to Nekki’s just after 7, the Market only just starting to stir to life. Shopkeepers were bringing out their wares or doing some last-minute cleaning, some of them calling out a greeting when they saw me.

I could only pray my smile didn’t look as stressed as it felt.

As we walked into my stall, I couldn’t help but pause on the step, admiring the pretty picture Mikoto made in her apron. Her uniform wouldn’t be ready for a while yet but the pale blue yukata she wore instead was still lovely. She was humming happily, cleaning down the surfaces before we opened in a bit, and the smile slipped from my lips. Shisui and I would be ruining moods left, right and centre, it seemed.

“Kiharu, Shisui, good morning.” Mikoto looked up when we entered, a gentle – if, understandably, confused – smile on her face. “I thought you weren’t coming in today, Kiharu-chan?”

Shisui sighed heavily, obviously feeling as depressed at what awaited us as I did. Stepping to the far wall, he started pulling the metal cage (that we pulled down every night to protect the stall) along the front of the shop, closing the catch with a resounded *snap*. I walked further into the stall, twisting my fingers together and wondering why I felt like Shisui and I were about to admit to breaking her favourite lamp or something – although, this was a *great* deal more serious. Moving passed Mikoto, I reached to turn off the loud mixer, flicking the switch on the ice-cream machine as I went. Didn’t want to have to raise our voices over the machines, after all.

Abruptly, I longed to just be coming in for another working day, filled with smiling customers and delighted children. I wanted to tease nee-chan and Raidou over lunch, charging Genma full price whilst Raidou was showered with freebies. I wanted to deal with those overzealous academy children, moving flawlessly around Mikoto like a well-oiled machine as we dealt with the flood of orders.

*I really* hated Tobi.

I can’t believe I read so much Fanfiction about that arsehole.

“Change of plans I’m afraid, Hime…,” I smiled shakily and the older woman frowned, straightening from where she had paused as she wiped down the counter-tops. “We need to talk to you,” I shared a glance with Shisui, who nodded at me seriously, “Right now.”

“And about what, exactly?”

I leapt a foot into the air.
“Akane-sama!” I whirled around, spluttering, “What are you doing here? I-er-that is-” I threw Shisui a desperate look but the older boy merely blinked, turning towards to the elder woman and trying for a smile. It wasn’t anywhere near as bright as usual, but it was a better attempt than I could go for right now.

“Sorry, Akane-sama, but we need to talk to Mikoto-sama for a bit.”

That’s not what I meant.

“Oh?” One regal brow rose before I rushed in again.

“I meant what are you doing in the storeroom, Akane-sama if you don’t mind my asking?”

Akane didn’t look too impressed, crossing her arms and cupping her chin with her hand. I could see there was no way we were getting her out of here, short getting Shisui to throw her. Even then…

This was decidedly not part of the plan.

But…I trusted Akane-sama. She’d never given me any reason to doubt her and I’d noticed she garnered considerable respect inside the Clan. I mean, even Mikoto called her ‘-sama’ and she was the Clan’s Matriarch. I looked over at Shisui…well? I tried to ask him, blue staring into black. His eyes closed for a moment before he let out a long sigh. When he raised his head again, he sent me another searching look before slowly nodding.

“I…are you absolutely certain, the both of you?”

“I,” Shisui glanced at my pale face, “…Yes, Mikoto-sama.”

Mikoto was leaning against the counter-top, an untouched cup of tea beside her (I’d made it when Shisui started talking about Kamui, needing to do something with my hands and unable to just stand there, thinking about the effortless damage Tobi could wreak) and a pinched look on her face.

Her eyes were guarded when she looked up at us and I internally mourned the way the light had faded from her lovely face.

“Why tell me?”

“Please, Mikoto-hime…” I took a step forward, desperately grasping her warm hands between my own, relieved when she didn’t pull away. “You’re the only one…we don’t know how anyone else would react. I,” I swallowed. Fuck, it was all coming out now, wasn’t it? “I didn’t want anyone to blame the Uchiha, I-we couldn’t be sure how the Hokage or Elders might react. And if we went to the Clan directly…” I trailed off, giving a helpless little shrug.

“You believe the Elders would cause even more damage,” Akane spoke up from where she sat beside Shisui. Her own cup of tea was gracefully cradled between her ageing palms and I marvelled at her composure.

Fucking wish I knew how to do that.

“Yes, Akane-sama…it’s just that we don’t know who can be trusted, in the Clan or the village.”

Shisui inhaled sharply.

“I’ll take it you are unaware that I am an Elder, in that case?”
What?

My eyes widened but I stopped myself from reacting further. Heart falling, I bit the inside of my cheek.

“And…what will you do, now you know?”

Black eyes, that glittered like onyx in a beautifully aged face, stared at me for a long moment.

Was I the only one sweating?

“A long time ago, I believed in the idea of a Coup,” the older woman started, her voice strangely loud in the silent shop. Mikoto was frozen, face pale, and Shisui slowly walked to stand beside me, deceptively casual.

“The Uchiha, one of the two Founding Clans, had been sidelined for too long. I was there when this village was built, even if only as a child. It was wrong, that Konoha would turn on us so. And then, the idea of a coup, to right the distribution of power, was introduced. The idea has often been turned over in our Clan, brought up every few years, but it was only in the aftermath of the Nine-Tails that discussions turned serious.”

Mikoto looked like a ghost, eyes filled with regret and grief, and I wondered if I was imagining the barely-there shiver that had wracked her frame.

“I…was not particularly concerned. The idea seemed justified but, as the resentment grew, the means to go about it grew increasingly…unappealing. I was a medic-nin, I made a vow to heal, even if I knew how to fight and kill. Even after I retired,” a hand came up to rub at the stump where her arm ended half-way up her forearm, “I did not relinquish those values. But, I still said nothing.

“And then, one day, Shisui brought a young civilian girl, a non-Uchiha, to me for healing,” her face finally, finally warmed and I let out a breath I didn’t know I’d been holding. “You held no fear or resentment towards me, only gratefulness, and you and Shisui laughed the entire time you were there. It made me wonder if it wasn’t also our fault that our Clan was viewed so poorly. We had pulled back, hidden away behind walls and masks. But, I wondered if you were just a child, innocent of such things.

“And then you came to me, with your ninja father and a Nara. And, again, they held only good-will to me for my services. And I saw you in the Compound, every week, bringing cakes and asking for nothing in return. A smile was enough, it seemed.” Her expression softened into a loving smile and I wanted to cry.

I’d thought when she said that she was one of the Uchiha Elders, that this was it. The moment I was betrayed by the ninja culture, when one wrong move ruined everything.

But this was Akane. The woman who healed me with a roll of her eyes, looking as regal as any Queen, and was always having tea with Yuri-oba and helped me pick out dresses.

A tear dropped, anyway.

And a wrinkled thumb wiped it away. Akane smiled down at me, loving as any grandmother, and I couldn’t contain the little, choked laugh of relief that bubbled in my chest.

“And then, it started outside of the Compound as well. Market Stall owners smiled at me, open and friendly. When you asked for my help, I met Yuri and, suddenly, every shop owner knew my name and welcomed me without reserve. And I don’t want that to ever go away again, Kiharu-chan.”
Taking my hand in hers, she looked between a shakily-smiling Mikoto and a relieved Shisui.

“What do we do?”

We opened Nekki’s half an hour behind schedule, apologising profusely to the waiting regulars (the ones who’d bothered to hang around) citing that one of the ice-cream tubs had spilt everywhere.

I mean, I’d turned off the machine when we came in so we were missing the mango flavour.

As business started up, I tried to focus on the task at hand, even though I was feeling like I could finally breathe again.

This is it, I told myself. You’re not alone anymore. Shisui, Mikoto and Akane-sama know. We’ll all do something.

At that moment, Itachi came in with a happily bouncing Sasuke, an hour into service. Mikoto’s youngest was a little ray of sunshine, grinning at his ‘nii-san’ and mother as he rattled on about the training Itachi had helped him with that morning. Although, when I asked Sasuke what he wanted, he scrunched up his nose in disgust.

“I don’t like sweet things, huh!”

If anyone else…*shakes fist threateningly*…but Sasuke, at this age, was a precious kitten. And from a girl who was half-raised like a panther cub?

“Sas-kun, how about I make you something extra special, hmm?”

Ignoring his dubious expression, I waved him over to one of the stools to wait.

Luckily, I still had some stuff in here for lunches (or dinners, if I ended up staying late when I did my baking quota), so I took a few moments to whip something together on the back hob. I used a small saucepan, grateful that the scent wasn’t really disturbing the sweeter smells from the counter. Some spices later, a few herbs and liberal use of a grater, and then I was setting my creation down in front of a wide-eyed Sasuke.

“Ta-dah!”

The youngest Uchiha brother hesitantly ripped a piece off, popping it into his little baby mouth. The look of shock on his cute cherub face almost made me start squealing. At least the little tyke had cheered me up.

“Tomatoe?!”

Beaming down at the little boy, perched on one of my few stools and feet swinging almost two feet from the ground, I resisted the urge to scoop him up for a squeeze. “Yeah, Sas-kun! It’s a tomatoe sauce, herb and melted cheese pretzel!”

As his younger brother started digging in furiously, I shared a laughing glance with Itachi (his eyes were achingly warm when rested on his brother) and Mikoto, from behind the counter.

-“even if I have to fight, I’ll do this. As a mother, it is my duty to protect the futures of my sons.”-

The Uchiha Matriarch smiled in welcome at a new customer but I was distracted again. Mikoto…she had such hidden strength, I’d never even realised in the manga/anime. She was so smart and strong, I
couldn’t believe she had the patience and grace to fade behind her husband, as I’d always thought she did and, even now, seen her do when the situation called for it.

It was Mikoto who surprised me the most.

After the initial shock had worn off, the sweet and gentle mother that I had come to adore like an older sister/Aunt transformed into the Uchiha Matriarch. The woman who demanded the respect of an entire Clan of prideful dojutsu-users, who dealt with scorn and simpering on a daily basis without batting an eyelash. Her expression grew sterner, movements surer and her eyes glinted with resolve. In response, Shisui and Akane-sama had straightened as well, and I’d wondered if I’d be asked to leave.

This was Clan business, after all, surely I would not be welcome? When I suggested it, Akane-sama clamped her hand on my arm before I could move and told me I was foolish to think I didn't deserve to be part of this. I was the one who’d heard about the Sharingan from Hitoshi, the one who had put the clues together and had told them all. Who else would they confide in?

Then, we held what was essentially a Council of War.

“What do we do?”

The question hung in the air, like a threat. A crossroads. Do we do this ourselves or do we go to the Hokage?

“Nothing.” Mikoto’s voice cut through, keen eyes staring back when I turned to her. “We do nothing. For Now.”

Akane reclined back against the counter again, expression shrewd, but Shisui couldn’t let something like that slide. Face shifting closer to ‘panic’, the older boy spoke up, sounding lost.

“But, Mikoto-sama, how will that fix anything? Ignoring the issue?”

“For now, Shisui. Or, at least, we make it look like we’re doing nothing. Our Clan is in a very precarious position, at the moment. One step too far one way and the Village will take action against us. And one step in the other direction will see us at the whim of the outside player. We need to change the Clan, first.” As her plans picked up speed, Mikoto began to pace slightly.

I’d never seen her so…empowered.

“The two of you will go to the Hokage tomorrow. I know you have training today Shisui and I know how strict you are with your regime so, if you miss it, people might wonder if something’s happened or where you were instead. Go in the daytime, tell him you were talking over what happened that night and Kiharu didn’t realise that the red eyes could be the Sharingan as, as you said, Kiharu-chan, Hitoshi didn’t recognise the scent after visiting the Compound for years. Say you thought it was a foreign assailant, there are plenty of red eyes out there in the world. Shisui,” she dipped her chin at the slowly nodding Jonin, “you recognised that the technique must have been from his Mangekyou, as space-time jutsus without hand seals, summoning’s or seals are very-nearly impossible otherwise.”

– Okay, I might have expanded slightly on Hitoshi’s words but…I had to. This could not be brushed off–

“When you go to Hokage-sama, make it clear that this is an issue inside the Clan, the theft of our Dojutsu, and that, as such, is classified as internal Clan Politics. Tell him that I am the one handling it.”
Her soft hands – that had wielded Katanas as skilfully as her calligraphy brush or a piping bag, that were soft even when she worked so hard, that were mother’s hands as much as Shinobi’s – came down to rest on our shoulders and she finally smiled, even if it was only a tiny one.

“Akane-sama and I will start shifting things inside the Clan, sounding out who would stand against us. Fugaku…” The torn look in her eyes made something in my chest ache. To not even be certain in your other half… I knew that Mikoto and Fugaku had had a political marriage, but I could also see the genuine affection that had grown between the two. It wasn’t a fairy-tale, whirlwind romance but, especially in a Clan, they had both been luckier than most. And I could see how much it shook Mikoto, not knowing if the man she had shared her life with was going to be stood on the other side.

“I’ll discuss this with Fugaku, see if I can sound out where he stands amongst the Elders…Akane-sama will be our eyes and ears inside the Council. The Elders will not discuss such things so openly with me, I have become too ‘entangled’ with the Village for that, but they will speak freely to one of their own.

Don’t look so frightened, you two. The four of us will work something out.”

“A platoon of Churros, kiddo.” A lazy drawl had me snapping back to reality.

Jerking violently in surprise, I spilt chocolate sauce all over my hands – had I been doing the orders on fricking autopilot? – and I gasped at the hot chocolate on my skin. “Ow! Ow!” I flapped my hand, grabbing a dishcloth from the sink and frantically wiping at the spill.

“Shit, sorry, kid-!” Genma-nee panicked behind me and, when I finally got the sauce off and ran my hand under the water, I held up my bright-red hand with a deadpan expression.

Cringing slightly, Genma shifted the senbon around his mouth like a cigarette. “Ah, sorry about that, kid…”

Sniffing with dignity, I moved to clean up the rest of the mess, keeping my eyes cast downwards.

“Just for that, you don’t get anything bigger than a small.” A tiny smile quirked my lips when he let out a pained moan and I turned to look for Raidou-

“Err, where’s nii-san?”

Recovering quickly, Genma rested his crossed forearms on the counter as I started in on his order. “Mission.” He grunted shortly. Oh. Well-

“Do you miss him?” I didn’t even have the heart today to tease.

Genma squinted at me suspiciously, ignoring how Mikoto was blitzing through the orders whilst we had an impromptu heart-to-heart. Sorry, Mikoto…the older woman was going to get a huge lunch break. “You didn’t even bother to say that suggestively.” His voice was a strange mix of concerned and incredulous and I smiled ruefully, despite myself. “What’s wrong, squirt?” and I swallowed hard. It wasn’t the truth but I couldn’t tell my own older brother what was really going on.

Oh, nothing much, you know, just trying to save the Uchiha from itself whilst worrying that Tobi will kill Hitoshi and me in our sleep and Danzo will destroy everything and anyone I love. How are you?

So, I twisted it a little.

“…Hitoshi.”

And it wasn’t a lie. Not only did that one-word cover how this great, big clusterfuck came about – or
rather, came to light – but I was still bleeding inside from what had happened. It felt like I was missing something, a limb, too used to the warmth of my summon against my hip. It felt wrong, walking around and knowing he wasn’t just chilling in a patch of sunlight or half-a-step behind me and I hadn’t felt this…lonely…since, well, since Noko died.

My bed was too cold these days.

A muttered curse and then, when I passed over Genma-nee’s order, I found my hand gripped firmly, pulling me around the edge of the counter and into a hug that smelled of fern-leaves and polished metal. Genma held me tightly for a long moment, before gruffly releasing me and gently pushing me back to my station. “It’s okay kiddo, that cat’s too proud to go like that. He’ll wake up and be complaining like usual before you know it.”

“Yeah,” I sniffed a bit, starting on the matcha-waffle order Mikoto slid to me with a knowing smile and I smiled back, just a bit. “Yeah…thanks, nee-chan…”

Seeing the queue start to grow as the lunch rush began, I made an effort to brighten my features. Pausing to warmly greet a few recognisable regulars, I turned back to my orders and started making two orders of crepes simultaneously. When they were well on their way, I yanked a sly grin across my lips and I turned to eye the Tokubetsu Jonin as he started in on his snack.

“…but, honestly, was that a sigh of longing I heard for Raidou-nii?”

“Brat.”

We closed a bit earlier than usual that day, Mikoto citing a headache- I couldn’t blame her - and I was pale enough recently that people didn’t even have to ask. When the older woman left, leaving with a determined nod and eyes that practically glowed with the strength of her resolve, I wondered if she planned to confront her husband immediately.

Poor Mikoto…please don’t break her heart, Fugaku. Think of your sons. The determination in her eyes earlier…even if it breaks her heart, she’ll take you down if she has to, for the sake of her children. Just…be the better man I know you could be, think of family before your stupid pride or pointless grudges.

I was halfway home when I passed Yuri-oba’s shop and stopped, still feeling pensive.

Akane-sama valued her time with Yuri-oba over the decades-old resentment of her Clan. Maybe…there is hope for us all, yet.

Today had been a day of revelations...Shisui, Akane's change in attitude towards the village, Mikoto's resolve to go head-to-head with her Clan...even if that meant opposing Fugaku.

"...One more question, Kiharu...how did you know about the Mangekyou? Information on such a form of our dojutsu is something the Clan does not discuss openly. So, how?"

It was silent for a moment.

"...I kind of guessed."

Seeing the unspoken demand for an explanation, I gestured helplessly.
"...Last summer, Shisui was showing me his Sharingan and mentioned that it was different from everyone else..." Mikoto glanced at a sheepishly blushing Shisui out of the corner of her eye and I hurriedly continued. "He didn't really say anything else but it made me curious! I thought, you see, that everyone's Sharingan was the same. But then, I remembered a history book in the library, one of the old ones about Hashirama and the founding of Konoha, that mentioned that Madara had an advanced form after his brother, Izuna, died, which was super powerful and they called it 'Mangekyou'...I, er, I already knew that Itachi," I smiled awkwardly, cautiously taking in the expectant looks trained on me. "activated his on the same mission he lost his teammates and that sometimes, when he's angry or upset or worried, Shisui accidently activates his."

Shrugging helplessly, I tried to piece together the evidence in a way that made me look innocent. I'd not really thought too far ahead, the idea that I may be asked how I knew only really hitting me early this morning. Furiously thinking back to any and every clue dropped, I tried to jumble my way through. I mean, I couldn't just say 'Hey! I remember all this from my previous life!'

Shit, I really should have planned this speech beforehand. Was this even making sense?

"So, I thought 'What if the eyes activate under emotional duress? But, Shisui said that he activated his Sharingan when he was even younger, but the way he said it made it sound like his special technique came later. Shisui already had the Sharingan before that...bad...mission and now his eyes are special, so is he the same as Madara, who's eyes were special after his brother died?"

"Can the Sharingan develop more?"

"And, I think the Clan would have boasted or reacted more if Shisui had the same skills as Madara and Shisui himself, as an Uchiha who must know what Madara's special eyes could do, still said his were totally different. Last night, when I told all this to Shisui, he called it 'Mangekyou' as well, he didn't correct my assumption, and the rest of his reaction confirmed it."

Shisui was bright red at this point, firmly looking away from his Elders and I grimaced at him apologetically. I hoped he wouldn't get into trouble...In all honesty, Shisui was really good at keeping secrets if he had to, he was a ninja after all, but, well, when you grow so close to someone, you really relax and things inevitably slip. I was Shisui's best friend and he was mine, we'd both told each other things no one else knows.

"Now, I'd been thinking about the man who attacked Hitoshi...why was he at the Naka Shrine, why didn't he just run when he realised he'd been found? I don't know why and neither, probably, does Toshi. But the Shrine. It's Uchiha territory, as far as I'm aware, and there's not a lot of reasons for a Shinobi to go there. So, either he was an enemy of the Uchiha, looking for something or going to do something, or he was an Uchiha. And that's when I realised I needed to talk to Shisui.

"So," I realised I'd probably rambled on way too much, so tried to wrap it up. Shit, had that even made any sense? "When I realised that Shisui – a Jonin and an Uchiha – didn't recognise the Ghost-ability, I knew that the Sharingan that attacked Hitoshi must've been special. If he didn't recognise the jutsu/ability, then the man either has a completely new technique or a mysterious Mangekyou, thus proving that each one is different."

The stall was silent for a long moment.

"Clever." Mikoto murmured under her breath, eyes boring into mine. Akane-sama looked fascinated by my apparent deductive abilities (gods, I was such a fake) and Shisui was staring like I had three heads.

"So very clever, Kiharu."
Shouting kids a couple of streets over roused me from my thoughts and I blinked hard, still frozen outside of the dress shop. Breathing deeply, I moved on, passing by Yuri-oba's.

They'd seemed to accept my logical, if rambling, approach easily enough, knowing how 'advanced' I was for my age. I knew that most people who knew me had come to view me as a little, civilian Itachi, whether consciously or subconsciously, and I'd kinda been relying on that. If I'd been dumb-as-shit, they would've been so much more suspicious. As it was, they all trusted me and would vouch for me to anyone else.

I could only hope I'd sufficiently covered my bases.

The evening was setting in, sunset painting the sky pink under a huge, threatening cloud that was rolling in from the West. Absently, I wondered if it would storm tonight, something blown over from Whirlpool country's monsoon season. The air felt tingly, like rain and thunder and lightning and I didn't want to go home.

Hitoshi, for all he was proud and strong and a fierce warrior, hated thunderstorms.

When I was younger and a storm would start up, Hitoshi would be the one flinching at every lightning strike and every crack of thunder. He was always so defensive about it, denying it contemptuously, saying that it was just because his ears were so sensitive. But then, the sky would light up again and I'd see the panicked flare of his pupils.

We'd cuddle like kittens under a duvet too small for the both of us.

Even if he was asleep, maybe I should go to him, anyway. I mean, what if he woke up during it?

Glancing over at the sky again, bruising lavenders and purples as the sun dipped low, I turned around in the street, one foot swinging from an aborted step forward.

Ichiraku's for dinner and then Hospital, it was.

And, that night, the sky howled.

Heavy winds shook the trees and the Village was drenched from the downpour within a minute of the clouds breaking. Lightning flashed a scarce minute before thunder broke, the heart of the storm almost directly overhead, and lit up Hitoshi's room in sharp cracks of light. And so it continued until the early morning.

Despite the Hospital’s policy on visiting hours, I stayed the entire night.

The next morning, I felt drained, like I had a bad cold coming on, and was just about ready to call out the window “NOT TODAY”, for any and everyone to here.

The nurse who came in to check ‘Toshi’s vitals took one look at my huddled figure, curled up in my usual chair like a very angry and purposeful hobo, and rolled her eyes. I stuck my tongue out behind her back.

Teenagers! Think they know everything!

Okay, so I was being a brat. I was allowed to be.

Luckily, the bathroom was just a few corridors away and I took the opportunity to freshen up,
washing my face and straightening yesterday’s clothes. In the unflattering white lights, I looked like I was a patient here. My hair was a rats nest, unbrushed and tangled from two days neglect, so I just decided to screw it and threw it up in a ballerina bun. My simple blue yukata was a bit rumpled and my face was peaky.

Wow. I definitely looked fit for an important audience with the Sandaime.

Leaving the toilet, I made my way back to Hitoshi’s room, grabbing my coat off the back of my chair and smoothing my hand through his inky fur a final time.

“Here’s hoping I’ll be back soon, ‘Toshi,” I mumbled into his fur, pressing one last kiss to his forehead before I leaned back. Hitoshi didn’t move a muscle, only the almost-silent rasp of his breath, the slight movement of his chest and the beep of the machine letting me know he was still with me.

I sucked in a slow, calming breath and closed my eyes for a moment.

If I pretended really hard, I could imagine that everything was seconds away from fixing itself. Hitoshi would wake up and Danzo would hand himself over. Done. The end. Tobi would die in a ditch somewhere of very slow and terrible hypothermia…and then his corpse would spontaneously burst into flames, hurting him in the afterlife somehow, where Rin was painfully castrating him forever and ever!

My eyes opened and the machine continued to beep, Hitoshi’s eyes stayed closed and I was due to meet Shisui in 5.

A cheap street vendor just outside the hospital provided me with a matching shitty breakfast (weird-looking pork buns) but I was so hungry I scarfed them down anyway.

Shisui, meeting me at the end of the street and looking annoyingly fresh-as-a-daisy, took one look at me and blanched.

His arms opened quickly and he pulled me into a hug, ignoring how I grumbled angrily and stabbed his ribs with my fingers. “Good morning!” he beamed as if he could force the bad mood away. As if he wasn’t shaking inside as well. “Ready? Remember what Mikoto said? I’ll talk the most, then, hopefully, you won’t look as involved and get into trouble.” We garnered some weird looks from the passers-by, but most people waved the spectacle off. Shisui and I were just a bit notorious, especially when spotted together.

He then took advantage of the strong grip he had on my, slightly-shorter, body and Shunshined us inside the tower. Grrr, he does that on purpose!

“Gahk-!” I yelped, shoving myself back with a pout (scowl! It was a scowl), swatting at the older boy as he started apologising, the mischievous smile tugging on his lips giving the game away. “Don’t do that so suddenly! You know how much it makes me feel sick!”

An almost-silent laugh behind us reminded me we weren’t alone and I spun around with an embarrassed blush. The kunoichi leaning against the wall was tall, a lovely ebony-haired woman with ruby eyes and a secretive smile.

**Kurenai**!

“Sorry!” I smiled sheepishly, “We didn’t mean to disturb you-”

The genjutsu mistress smiled politely, although it became slightly forced when she caught sight of
Shisui’s Uchiha fan. “Yuuhi Kurenai.”

“Dazai Kiharu!”

“Kiharu, come one! Sorry, Yuuhi-san, but we have an appointment to keep!” Shisui’s hand latched onto my arm and, grinning sheepishly at the older woman, dragged me to the stairs. Barely managing to wave behind me at Team 8’s Future sensei, I thundered up the stairs after the older boy.

Sometimes, I think Shisui forgot that one, I couldn’t run like he could, and two, I wasn’t trained to move silently like shinobi were. Meaning? I sounded like a hippo coming up behind him.

So embarrassing in a building filled with ninja.

“Good morning, Tanaka-san! We need to see Hokage-sama as soon as possible, please.” Shisui smoothly cruised up to the secretary’s desk, looking unruffled and cheerful.

And I? I was stood a few feet back, hands on knees and wheezing like a 60-year-old obese man forced to run a mile. My face was scarlet and I felt sticky. Dammit, Shisui! I couldn’t fricking sprint up eight flights of stairs with such ease, like it was a peaceful summer’s stroll!

“Oh, Uchiha-san…Hokage-sama is in-between meetings at this time, so you’ll only have to wait a few minutes,” She cast a slightly dubious glance at my suffering form, “Please feel free to take a seat whilst you wait.”

Gulping a breath, I collapsed into the nearest chair and Shisui leaned against the wall next to me.

“Why…do you do…this to me?”

“Exercise is good for you Kiharu-chan-”

Evidently, my expression was a sufficient deterrent against continuing that sentence. We waited in silence for a few more minutes.

At this time, my breathing had finally returned to normal and the flush faded from my skin. The nerves, now I was no longer distracted (Shisui probably did this for that exact reason…brat), returned full-force and my fingers were shaking as I twiddled them.

Meeting the council for the Market stall was nothing to this.

I mean, I knew I wasn’t going to die or anything if the meeting had gone wrong, at least. Here? I wasn’t so sure. I’d been desperately lucky, for the most part, in my life here so far. Almost disturbingly so. And, whilst this might continue through this meeting, would this be the day fortune failed me?

“Hokage-sama will see you now.”

………………………………………………………………………………..

Pressed into a corner, the bed gave the illusion of safety.

_Breathe, Kiharu, breathe._

My knees were crushed against my ribs, forced into such an awkward position I could almost hear my joints creak in protest. My feet, freezing cold despite my boots, were pressed against the wall and my head was ducked into my chest. The dust, sparse but still there, made my eyes itch and I swallowed painfully around my rapid breaths.
I had seconds-
Let’s rewind an hour.

“Hokage-sama will see you now.”

Tanaka-san looked up from her desk, gesturing for us to move into Sarutobi’s office and I stood up with an audible gulp. Shisui looked unruffled, face serious but no outward signs of stress visible (at least to my untrained eye) and calmly walked to the large doors, opening one and going in first.

Sarutobi was sat behind the desk, looking for all the world as if he hadn’t moved since that night Hitoshi was hospitalised.

“Shisui-kun…and Kiharu-chan,” his gravelling voice greeted us, only the quirk of his brow hinting his curiosity as to what could bring the two of us here, together.

“We have something to talk to you about, Hokage-sama,” Shisui started, kneeling like he was giving a report. I bowed respectfully but then paused. Was I supposed to kneel too? Well…I wasn’t a shinobi…I straightened up. “Are we alone?”

Old and shrewd eyes narrowed minutely and, then, the walls briefly washed a faint yellow light. Security seals of some kind?

“Our privacy is guaranteed.” I wondered if that included ANBU and any ROOT plants. I could only pray.

“Mikoto-sama has sent us here to inform you that she is personally handling internal issues inside the Uchiha Clan. And I have come, with information from Kiharu-chan, to report an issue we may face outside of the village.”

“Go on, Shisui-kun.”

“A Sharingan, in the hands of a hostile shinobi.”

A heavy presence materialised and weighed down on my shoulders, forcing me to my knees with a choked gasp. Was that fucking Killing Intent?! Shisui didn’t even twitch…either he is stronger than that or…that was barely anything-

The impossible press disappeared and I choked on my breath, slowly rising to my feet, and Hiruzen sighed, looking out of his window. Had that been just a simple reflex or intentional?

If it was as if I hadn’t almost swallowed my own heart at the twinge of KI.

“You are certain?”

“Hai.” Shisui didn’t even blink.

“And your evidence?”

I swallowed hard, loud in the silent room and the Sandaime slowly turned to look at me.

Shit, shit, shit, okay.

“I…Shisui and I were in Hitoshi’s room and talking about what happened again, trying to think of
who it could have been. Shisui, he activated his Sharingan to look at Hitoshi’s medical record and I-I remembered! Hitoshi said, just before Naru-chan arrived, that the man had “eyes so red” but.”

Sarutobi’s own eyes narrowed.

“-but I didn’t really think anything of it! Naruto was already making noise in the bushes and I was distracted and…well, how many people in the world have red eyes? It wasn’t until Shisui’s Sharingan reminded me and I told him, that he figured out that the ghost-like ability and the red eyes must be connected.”

My babbling thankfully seemed to convince the old shinobi that I was genuine. He started setting up his pipe, puffing on it slowly in thought.

“…the Mangekyou, Shisui. You are reporting a Mangekyou outside of the village, not inside?”

Shisui opened his mouth to speak but I cut him off before he had the chance.

“Please, Sandai-me-sama – Hitoshi and I have been visiting the Compound for years and, because Hitoshi was searching for intruders, he obviously didn’t recognise the person. Also, as they attacked Hitoshi, who is a well-known summon throughout the village, they were evidently up to something. So, it cannot have been any current members of the Clan. Any Uchiha outside of the village is an enemy of Konoha and, therefore, not the fault of the Clan.”

The clock ticked above the door and Sarutobi said nothing.

I licked my lip, the slightly wet sound loud in the still room, and Sarutobi said nothing.

A thousand different scenarios of ROOT agents falling from the ceiling flashed through my head and Sarutobi said nothing.

“You were afraid for the Uchiha, Kiharu-chan, and it was you who placed the pieces of this mystery together.”

Shisui twitched, faintly but it was all but a confession. My eyes closed in defeat.

God of Shinobi, indeed.

And yet, I said nothing.

There was nothing to say. What could I possibly say? I don’t trust you, your Council, your old teammates, anybody. I don’t trust in your decisions and your judgement.

“Mikoto-sama tells me that she is taking the Clan into hand and that she considers this issue as part of Clan business, except for the possible theft of the Sharingan dojutsu by an unknown aggressor…”

Dark eyes turned, from where they had been boring like a drill into my forehead, to the kneeling Jonin to my left.

He smiled kindly in my direction. like he was genuinely pleased that I had come to confide in him, and one wrinkled hand smoothly gestured towards the door.

I wasn’t fooled for an instant, feeling the ‘noose’ loosen and slip from my neck.

“Thank you for your input, Kiharu-chan. Shisui-kun and I have something further to discuss, but please feel free to go about the rest of your day.”
Swallowing hard, I glanced over at Shisui’d still-kneeling form and his eyes flickered across to meet mine for an instant, onyx warm and relieved.

I wasn’t feeling quite so optimistic.

I left the tower in a dream-state, barely even noticing all the stairs this time. The village was busy, bustling with life and filled with noise and colour, but I manoeuvred my way through the rush without thought.

I was outside of Hitoshi’s room before my mind returned to me.

_He...he let me go. He let me live._

“Hitoshi…” I breathed, entering the hospital room and already peeling off my coat and moving to sling it across the chair. “It’s done now, cat. We’ve done all we can…”

Something was off, I noticed immediately, like a sixth sense twinging in the back of my head. Walking further inside, I closed the door behind me and cast my eyes around the room.

Something touched my boot…a tube?

“Toshi-”

Scrambling over to the bed, I frantically reached for his pulse with shaking hands, feeling my vision go slightly grey at the edges until I found the strong pulse thrumming away. But, then, wha-

Green eyes cracked open.

– _DUCK_ –

Something flew over my head, but I didn’t waste any time looking for what it was, ignoring the painful red line that burned like a firebrand across my throat.

_That should have slit me open-_—

Throwing myself forward, I hit the bed with all my weight, sending it crashing over and the alarms wailing, spilling Hitoshi and me out onto the floor.

Pressed into a corner, the overturned bed gave the illusion of safety.

_Breathe, Kiharu, breathe._

My knees were crushed against my ribs, forced into such an awkward position I could almost hear my joints creak in protest. My feet, freezing cold despite my boots, were pressed against the wall and my head was ducked into my chest. The dust, sparse but still there, made my eyes itch and I swallowed painfully around my rapid breaths.

I had seconds-

Shouting and running feet in the hallway, a chilling white mask in the corner of the room-

My fingers flashed through the signs, smooth with adrenaline and the frantic need to _survive_, and we were gone.
There was green everywhere, like some ancient rainforest.

The sky was a canopy of endless jade treetops, a celebration of colour and teeming with life. The earth beneath us was springy and warm, the soil a rich brown, and the air was humid as a sauna.

But I was distracted for only a moment-

“Toshi-“

Warm emerald eyes cracked open, exhausted but very much awake, and glinted back at me.

“..cub.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N- I had the chapter written out and ready by Friday but then some guest reviewers decided to tell me on here and on FFN (mainly there) that I was a "Shitty writer" who should "go fucking die" and it really pissed me off. Constructive criticism, that's fine! I have no beta, I'm popping out chapters all by myself so I need a second pair of eyes to spot stuff. But flamers, especially people who think it's okay to just tell someone to die? That's appalling. I don't normally rant guys, you know this, but there is nothing worse than encouraging someone to kill themselves. I have author friends on here who struggle with things like that and what if a single comment like that is enough to push them over the line? DON'T DO IT. You don't like this fic? just close the tab. You should Never, Ever tell someone they deserve to die. *frustrated sigh* Okay, I'm done.

I'm really sorry to everyone else who's been very supportive and loving and to those innocent readers who just came here for a story. I've deleted the comments, you guys didn't deserve to stumble across filth like that. Please enjoy this fricking-ass angsty chapter and I hope you have a nice week.

P.S- Happy 2-month anniversary of this fic, as of tomorrow! X TWO MONTHS NOT TWO YEARS HAHA
An Unwitting Catalyst

Chapter Summary

Ever try to work something out, get so frustrated your brain 'implodes' and you end up forgetting how to differentiate between 'where' and 'were'?
So, you walk away. Get a drink, go out for a bit, talk to someone.
And then, when you come back? BAM, it all clicks!

Crazy how removing yourself from a situation can, sometimes, be all the push needed to get the ball rolling.

(Kiharu was the catalyst no one realised they needed)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The mission desk was always so boring.

Yes, here’s your mission. No, I cannot reassign you on such short notice. No, we cannot accept this, all reports need to be legible. And. On. Time. (I’m looking at you, Hatake-)

It wasn’t just that the room was completely uninteresting to look at in the down times (it was) or that there was nothing worse than plonking yourself down on a chair, knowing full-well that you wouldn’t be moving for hours (there wasn’t). It wasn’t even that the other Chuunin (Magatsuchi) was a nervous mess that he couldn’t hold a conversation for his life (Seiichi would rather watch paint dry). It was the fact that you were giving missions to other people.

After committing himself to an inner-village role, talk about salt in the wound.

It was late in the morning, around 11 o’clock-ish and, staring blankly at the wall across from him, Seiichi wondered how many waffles Ki-chan had sold already.

Waaa- couldn’t she bring a special-delivery for her precious Neko-Tou?

No, the poor man internally grouched. And, even if she did, she’d charge extra. Charging! Her own Tou-san! She’s so mean that way~

Nekki’s had been doing really well in the second year of business and Seiichi always felt like he could burst with pride any time he caught sight of the logo. The stall itself, customers with the bags or tubs – hell, even litter. It was all proof that his little girl had done it, realised her dreams and gone out there and was succeeding. That’s all he’d ever wanted for her. Kiharu was so smart and popular, the enthusiastic parent gushed in his own mind, still daydreaming at the wall. She’s always been so precocious and clever and now the whole village knows too!

“-azi-san, Dazai-san-”

Coming back to himself, the brunette jerked upright, looking over at the ANBU perched on the open window-sill. “Yes?” one dark brow rose inquisitively, wondering what could have happened to warrant an ANBU. A tiny brown ponytail stuck out behind the mask and Seiichi frowned. That boy
needs less distinctive hair, they all do, when you think about it. What’s the point of a mask if the hair makes it obvious?...But, since when does Genma leave his post beside Hokage-sama to deliver messages?

“You’re requested by Hokage-sama immediately-”

The normal ANBU monotone was slightly shaky, like Genma was either furious or on the edge of tears, of all things. What the-?

“I believe it’s concerning your daughter.”

Seiichi’s vision tunneled.

Going into what used to be his summon’s hospital room was...upsetting.

Apparently, when he’d thrown himself out of his chair and towards Genm-ANBU Jackal and told him to take him to their Kage immediately, the Sandaime was already at the scene of the...crime.

An over-turned bed, a blood-covered kunai wedged deep into the plaster by the door, K-Kiharu’s coat tossed on the floor and a mess of medical machinery. The place looked like it had been seriously trashed and Seiichi tried not to remember all the crime scenes this resembled.

He failed.

“Can you think of anyone who would want to hurt your daughter, Seiichi-san? Seeing as your summon is also gone, we can assume the two absences are related.”

Drawing in a shaky breath, Seiichi crouched down on his haunches, gently picking up his daughter’s little red raincoat, as if it would crumble into ash if handled too harshly. It looked so small in his hands. “She’s just a little girl,” he growled out, jaw clenched. “A twelve-year-old who likes to bake…but...It was him.” Dark eyes closed, calloused thumbs brushing over the scarlet fabric, as the Chuunin tried not to think of how similar the colour was to blood. Like the blood on the wall, on the kunai, positively matched to his baby.

“It was the man who attacked Hitoshi, wasn’t it?”

The ANBU – a woman with dark purple hair – shifted slightly behind him.

“That is a possibility.”

Seiichi’s throat was swollen like he could barely breathe and his eyes burned behind firmly clamped lids. Oh god. Some mad-man had his daughter. Ki-chan.

It was at that point – when Seiichi was trying desperately not to break down – that the Hokage returned.

“Seiichi-san, I am terribly sorry that this has happened, within the safety of our own Village, and a full investigation has been launched immediately. However, there are some things we need to discuss.” The older shinobi, dressed in his usual robes, looked far older than his mid-sixties. Half-a-step behind him, Shisui looked like he was on the verge of being sick. Red eyes – not from the Sharingan – bore into his and Seiichi could see his own fury and despair reflected back at him.

It was very difficult to resent his daughter’s best friend when they were both raring for the same
Not to mention, we might never see Ki-chan again, a traitorous voice whispered in the back of his head, but Seiichi firmly ignored it. It had been that voice, pointing out everything wrong with Konoha after Aki died, encouraging him to take more and more missions to see the world, that had pulled him so far from Kiharu in the first place. He wasn’t going to give up on her this time.

“I have spoken to the medical staff who were on hand and no one but Kiharu has been in here this morning – aside from a single nurse, but that was before she came to see me.”

See the Hokage? Why was Kiharu meeting with the Sandaime?

Ignoring how Seiichi frowned in confusion, Sarutobi continued, picking his way across the room to stand by the window. “A Byakugan has already searched the surrounding vicinity for chakra signatures and has confirmed remnants in two corners of the room. The assailant Shunshin-ed away from behind the door but…the other chakra signature makes little sense. Whilst we can confirm that both appear to be some form of teleportation…Kiharu is a civilian, yes?”

“H-Hai, Hokage-sama.” Seiichi choked a little, throat rough and mouth as dry as sand.

“I see. We may have two aggressors, in that case. Shisui-kun-” The Sandaime turned sharply and the Uchiha jumped to attention, ripping his eyes from the raincoat still clutched in Seiichi’s fists.

“Hai, Hokage-sama?”

“Why was Kiharu so frightened.”

The room went still. The three ANBU guarding the exits and inspecting the scene froze and Seiichi scarcely breathed. The room was on lockdown, this floor of the Hospital closed-off. But still, Shisui hesitated.

“She…she figured out the Ghost-ability when we spoke but…she was terrified, Hokage-sama. She thought someone was doing things on purpose.” Emotions waged war in the young boy’s eyes but his face was perfectly calm. A true Uchiha, with an Uchiha’s poker-face. And yet, Seiichi noticed, he seemed to choose his words extremely carefully. What could you have possibly known, Ki-chan?

Seiichi knew his baby-girl was a genius. She’d been laughing at him since she could walk, always so curious and independent, and, despite her hatred of grammar, Seiichi had never once thought of her as anything less than his intellectual equal. In many ways, she was probably smarter than him. Genius babies were rare but not so rare that they were regarded strangely.

No, the strange thing about Kiharu was how much she saw.

It was one thing to be extremely developed and smart – it was another to identify how the Village worked, how shinobi worked, and then reject it. They’d never spoken about it, weren’t allowed to, but Seiichi – as a man who hated killing – recognised how Kiharu felt. She wasn’t just a pacifist (there’d been more than one or two around here) but she hated the entire way Konoha was run. She had very little respect for the Council, the Ninja-Elite, even the Hokage, except for acknowledging their ability to do her damage. Seiichi didn’t really understand (was there another way of running a village? Unless you wanted a harsher regime, like Kiri or Kumo, or very little shinobi, like in other civilian villages…) but he knew his daughter. Kiharu was intelligent, scarily perceptive and logical to-boot.

What had she noticed and figured worth the risk of telling others?
“On purpose?” The gravelly voice of his Kage ripped Seiichi back to the present.

Shisui looked like he wanted to shift, to move on, to run. Fingers flexed like he wanted to grasp his Katana and the curly-haired boy swallowed harshly. “Yeah, she-”

“Shisui…Hitoshi would’ve run if he could have. He may be prideful but he’s not stupid. He kne-knows better than to die on Tou-san or me.”

The Dazai’s living room was dark, lit only by a small lamp on the coffee table, and Shisui glanced up, hand pausing from where he was cleaning the blade. Kiharu was sat opposite him, messy waves pulled into a loose knot and small fingers clamped around her teacup. She looked…paranoid.

A small frown tugged at the older boy’s brow as he slowly lowered his Katana back onto the table. “What do you mean? That man wouldn’t have let him, right?”

Tongue peeking out to wet her lips, the blue-eyed girl glanced to the dark window, where the rain was still pouring. “I…I just…Why was he there?” a small hand scrubbed through her hair in frustration. “What…Hitoshi must’ve felt it was more important to detain the man than return for reinforcements. Neither the patrol or ANBU felt a chakra signature flare for help. Sure, ‘Toshi would give his life for the village but, with such a strong adversary, he’d have been well within reason to call for back-up. Something made him not want to risk losing him. So…what was it? I feel like the man was… up to something, meeting someone.”

“What.” Jaw dropping, the dark-haired boy stared across at his friend but she avoided his eyes, blue fixed on her now-cold tea.

“Think about it. There was nothing taken or left behind, nothing done and no one hurt, aside from ‘Toshi. What other reason could there be for that man to stay, even when he was discovered? That man…he must’ve been meeting someone.”

“She thought he was meeting someone, Hokage-sama. She wasn’t sure how…safe…she was, with such information and Hitoshi still unconscious.”

A nervous glance around had Seiichi tensing, automatically throwing out his senses for any intruders or eavesdroppers. As a tracker, the Big Cat Summoner had to be extremely good at detecting others without being noticed. It was a skill that had been refined for years and now, extending his own chakra, Seiichi was certain that there were no unwanted ears.

“I see…” the older man sighed, one wrinkled hand coming up to rub the bridge of his nose. “This does not leave this room. If any of you speak of it, I will have you arrested and sent to T&I before you can blink.”

At the thought of a traitor sent to Inoichi, Ki-chan’s beloved Uncle, Seiichi felt a spike of vicious satisfaction rip through his veins. Anyone involved would regret this.

“The investigation, under the disguise of a simple missing-persons, is now an S-Rank Secret. Kiharu, when she spoke to me earlier, made it quite clear that she is in possession of a considerable intellect, as well as the only witness of our mysterious intruder. We cannot afford to disregard her testimony, simply because of age or status.” Gesturing to the crime scene around them, the Sandaime put his back to the window.

“Evidently, her theories made her a threat. Someone was trying to cover their tracks…and we cannot allow them to succeed.”
Shisui had walked through the Yamanaka gates countless times before, laughing with K-Ki-chan or racing to find her. Either way, she was always there.

The compound looked grey without her.

It was a simple road of houses, a dead-end street with large flower-filled gardens and white fences. The first house on the street was a building site, currently being renovated for Sora-sama’s new Flower Shop and the final house, at the very centre of the cul-de-sac loop, was the Clan Head’s home.

Walking up the front porch steps, Shisui tried not remember the last time he’d been here, sat on these very stairs with Kiharu braiding daisies into his hair and giggling over tea and toast. The day had been sunny, just over two weeks ago, and he could almost see her out the corner of his eye. *Had the steps always been that aged and cold?*

The older boy just stood there for a while, trying to prepare himself. He’d…never had to do this before. Sora-sama was going to be devastated and Ino was going to cry. With a shaky sigh, one hand scrubbing across burning eyes, Shisui finally reached up to knock.

A tense two minutes later and Kiharu’s Aunt opened the door with a smile.

Which immediately dropped when she recognised the look on the dark-haired boy’s face, taking in the red-rimmed eyes and ghostly expression.

“No…no…Shisui-kun, tell me something hasn’t happened-” A graceful hand came up to cover Sora’s mouth as her face paled rapidly.

In times of peace…this stuff was even worse because, no matter what, you weren’t expecting it. This wasn’t a time of War, when anyone could die, any day. Kiharu wasn’t a shinobi on a mission-gone-wrong. She was a civilian, just some sweet, scarily-smart and intuitive Baker who’d looked straight into Shisui’s eyes – like she could see his soul – and then smiled and offered the most supportive friendship of his life. Kiharu knew things, things Shisui had never told anyone else, things Shisui hadn’t even said aloud. But, even when they had a row, Shisui had never, ever thought for a second that their friendship was finished. Kiharu had screamed at him, hit him, ignored him countless times (He’d given as good as he got) but they always came back to each other. She was good and pure and smiled like she knew every one of your thoughts and thought they were funny. She was supposed to be safe.

“Sora? What’s happened?” A man’s voice called from the kitchen, moving closer, and Shisui’s eyes closed in defeat. Trust today to be the day Inoichi-sama was home for lunch. Two birds with one stone, yes, but Kiharu’s Uncle was going to flip.

Not that Shisui hadn’t almost destroyed the corridor when he’d seen Hitoshi’s old room for the first time.

The tall blonde came around the corner, eyebrows flying up when he spotted Shisui in the open doorway and Kiharu conspicuously absent. This was probably the first time Shisui had come calling without Kiharu (or looking for her) and the thought made the Uchiha ache.

“Shisui-kun, what’s going on, hmm?” Pupil-less blue eyes flicked over to Sora and, catching a glimpse of his wife’s expression, the Head of T&I frowned, wrapping one arm around her shoulders and growing even more concerned when she moved further into his side.

Feeling wretched, Shisui couldn’t even bring himself to look up from the floor. *Kiharu…she told me*
she was scared, that there were people we couldn’t trust…is this my fault, insisting that we tell the Hokage? Were we discovered when we spoke to Mikoto-sama and Akane-sama or was it in the hospital? Am I such a bad friend and shinobi that I missed us being eavesdropped on?

“I’m very sorry Inoichi-sama, Sora-sama but, as of this morning, Kiharu and Hitoshi are missing.”

It was silent for a very long moment and Shisui wondered how many times he’d have to repeat it, to how many people. Would it feel real, then? Like Kiharu wasn’t going to come bumbling up from sunbathing by the Naka, rambling on about how Hana ambushed her as a game and they’d been playing all afternoon. Not that Kiharu played ninja. Not that the hospital room could be mistaken for anything other the crime scene it was. But, still.

“Missing.” Inoichi’s voice cracked like a whip, blue eyes like two chips of ice. It wasn’t a question but Shisui nodded anyway. “I’m going to speak to Sandaime-sama, Sora, and then go and check some things at the office. I’ll try not to be out too late.”

Sora was pale as death, eyes haunted, but she managed a nod for her husband, who then disappeared in a viciously signed Shunshin, fingers flexing like he wanted to break something – or someone.

Further in the house, in the kitchen, Ino was squealing happily for her parents, the clatter of toys on the table loud in the silence.

“I’m…I’m really sorry Sora-sama,” Shisui swallowed, risking a glance up to see the Yamanaka Matriarch with her arms folded, one hand rising to hide her eyes. The tear that dripped, despite her efforts, fell straight to the old wooden porch, absorbed into the sun-parched beams. “I…I have to go tell the others- Yuri-san and Mikoto-sama, Hana-chan- I’m really sorry.”

Gulping a breath, Sora turned her head for a moment to compose herself. When she finally turned back, tilting Shisui’s chin to meet her eyes before resting a strong hand on his shoulder, she looked determined, if harrowed. “I’ll tell Yoshino and Kaiya, don’t worry. And…I’m sorry too, Shisui-kun.”

With a nod of appreciation, Shisui took a step back, clearing his throat and turning away. My mouth…it won’t stop trembling. Looking back over his shoulder, he nodded firmly once more before Shunshin-ing away.

Still stood in the doorway, Sora sighed and rubbed her hands over her cheeks. Now, she breathed, she had to somehow tell Ino that her nee-chan wasn’t going to be visiting for a while.

Shisui, leaping across rooftops, made his way directly to the Seamstress's dress shop and had to pause on the roof.

This…was not getting any easier. But, hell, he’d asked the Hokage if he could be the one to break the news and, kami-sama, he’d do it.

It didn’t feel…right, letting some emotionless ANBU tell Kiharu’s various ‘family’ members about her potential kidnapping – kidnapping, oh god – and maybe Shisui was punishing himself a bit, almost hoping that someone would blame him and take a swing.

Kami knew he was blaming himself.

He was fourteen years old, a Jonin, and he’d failed his best friend.

The tiles were shiny and hot in the midday sun, streaming down to burn Shisui through his dark top and heating his black curls. The street below wasn’t too busy, just some people casually milling
about, and the Uchiha prayed that the dress shop wouldn’t be in a rush. He sincerely doubted that Yuri-san was going to take this well. And as for his Elder…Akane-sama was a terrifying woman, despite (or, rather, because of?) her missing lower arm and Shisui was almost anticipating how she’d rip people – monsters, they were monsters for taking her – to shreds over Kiharu-chan.

Tilting his head back and letting the warm sunlight wash over his face, Shisui took a moment to just breathe.

With a leap, he was on the ground, the bell jingling lightly as he pushed open the door. Walking into the cool shop, the older boy grimaced at the small crowd of customers milling about inside. Women, mainly around Mikoto-sama’s age, were gushing over fabric and shoes, running the two shop assistants – more friends of Kiharu – ragged and chattering like a group of colourful birds.

“Well, Shisui-kun, you seem to be out of your depth.” Akane-sama drawled behind him, taking in how the young teenager had frozen in the doorway. His indecision in the face of hordes of women shopping was almost palatable. He only really came in with Kiharu, when he could use her as a meatsheild. The Elder had a scroll of designs in her arms, one hip cocked and a knowing smile pulling on her thinning lips.

“You have no idea,” Shisui rubbed his face for, what felt like, the millionth time.

“Is Yuri-san around? I need to speak to the two of you, immediately.”

Narrowed black eyes scanned his face before Akane’s head tilted towards one of the two back workshops. “Yuri’s embroidering another wedding veil, we can talk back there.”

“Shisui-kun!” Yuri smiled, looking up when she heard the door open. The workshop was a well-lit room, with fresh spring-green wall-panels and four sturdy benches, two with built-in sewing machines and the others covered in designs. The walls were lined with well-organised shelves, boxes upon boxes of different threads and fabrics and, right in the middle, Yuri was perched in an armchair with her lap filled with lace. Coughing lightly, she reached out her hand for his, grasping them happily in hers. Akane-sama came around her relative, leaning on the tall back of Yuri’s chair and looking contemplative. “What a pleasant surprise! What brings you here today, especially without my Kiharu?”

This was just getting worse and worse, Shisui lamented. Dammit, none of this would have happened if he’d gone with Ki-chan, if the Hokage hadn’t had to speak to him-

“I’m sorry, Yuri-san, but this isn’t a social call.” Yuri’s face fell, hands limp in his, and Akane-sama straightened up. A horrible suspicion grew in the older Uchiha’s mind. Too much had been happening, yesterday’s revelations and now Shisui was coming here-

“Kiharu and Hitoshi, as of this morning, are considered to be missing persons.”

“Oh.” Yuri’s hands fell into her lap with a dull thump, expression numb. “Oh.”

Akane’s came around the side of the chair, arms immediately wrapping around the other woman, rocking her gently as she started to cry. Shisui turned away with a hard blink, feeling like some kind of intruder. Like he shouldn’t be witnessing this, two strong women hurting so much. He felt…old, like he wasn’t a kid but some veteran, missing limbs and deeply scarred and tired. Like how Uncle Kagami had used to look, back when Shisui was just a little kid.

Is this how you felt, Kagami-Oji? When you’d stare out the window like you were waiting for something?
Shisui didn’t really understand what he was meant to feel. He’d lost people, everyone around here had, but…Ki-chan was gone and it was his fault. And it ached, through his ribs and deep in his chest, like something eating him up from the inside. This was different from Akihiko*, they weren’t fighting right now, Kiharu wasn’t a shinobi or anything like that. Kiharu wasn’t dead – don’t think about that -, just missing. Right?

It was the uncertainty that hurt most.

…………………………………………………………..

The world was washed with green.

Trees, tall and leafy and filled with flowers – so unlike the lofty forests of Konoha – filled my vision as far as the eye could see. I couldn’t see any paths, any rivers or anything. The forest was seemingly endless, free of clearings or civilisation. But it breathed. The leaves rustled in warm breezes and strange insects chirped in an endless cascade, like whispering voices. Like fairies, my imagination wandered. I’d thought the place was filled with life, noises and colours and movement, but, the more I looked around, the more I realised I couldn’t see another living creature.

It was just…Hitoshi and me.

“…cub.” Hitoshi breathed, sprawled out on his side and eyes only just opened. He stood out here, inky velvet furs like a void, a living shadow, on the lush grass and twisted roots.

Pressing one hand to the dripping cut on my throat, I shuffled closer and, with my free hand, checked the predator over. His pulse was strong, thrumming hard against my fingers and I couldn’t see any damage done to him by the person who’d attacked me. Leaning back on my haunches, I decided that the cat was in pretty good shape and pulled out a handkerchief, tying it tightly – like some horrible ascot – over the laceration on my neck.

Then I leapt forward and bashed a fist into Hitoshi’s flank, revelling his shocked yelp.

“You IDIOT!” I snarled, furiously ignoring how wet my eyes were as I glared into wide green. “What kind of arrogant bastard goes patrolling BY THEMSELVES and then PICKS A FIGHT with a guy who can MOVE THROUGH THEM!?”

Hackles now rising and looking defensively affronted, Hitoshi pushed his forepaws under him and into a more upright position. “Excuse you, I was trying to do my duty and protect the Village- it has nothing to do with you-”

“Nothing to do with me?!” my mouth gaped, totally flabbergasted before I gathered steam again. “I was the one who saved your sorry behind! I SUMMONED you out of there! You owe me your LIFE!”

“I had it under control-”

“You were in a coma for almost a month-”

Jerking to a stop, the two of us eyed each other suspiciously. The forest was still, ‘invisible’ insects chirping and a lazy breeze stirring the grass and tugging at my ragged hair.

“A month?”

Eyes narrowed, I shifted to sit cross-legged, arms folded. “Yes. You had it handled?” Chuffing, the panther turned his face away, sitting a bit like that Sphinx thingy had before in Egpyt. “Let me
guess… ‘it has nothing to do with me?’, hmm?”

“Aren’t you a clever one?” Hitoshi drawled, still gazing between the trees and ignoring my growl of annoyance. It was awful enough when shinobi wouldn’t tell me things because it had nothing to do with me – even when it did – but when I was involved? In the middle of this shit-storm? Fuck that excuse!

“Well, then, stupid cat, who are you going to explain yourself to? Sandaime-sama?”

“Yes…your father as well.”

Leaning back on my palms, I rolled my eyes at the half-hearted responses. Typical cat. Almost dies in my arms, shoves me into a massive clusterfuck whilst sleeping for almost a month, then almost dies again, I almost die defending him, I get us the fuck outta there again, and then he snarks me!

“Well, how are we going to get back so you can do that, hmm? I’m not seeing a road sign to ‘Hidden Leaf’ anywhere.”

Seiichi had made a beeline for T&I, walking straight out of the Hospital and leaping onto the nearest roof.

He’d only spared a few moments, after the Sandaime had brought them up to speed on the entire situation, to beg to bring Inoichi in on the S-Rank, possibly Chouza and Shikaku. The Hokage had agreed, understanding that Seiichi – and, therefore, Kiharu – was extremely close to the Yamanaka. Not that Seiichi had thought he wouldn’t – after all, if a Kage couldn’t trust his Chief Interrogator, his Head of T&I, then what?

Slamming through the doors, ignoring the kunoichi at the front desk and striding through the familiar corridors, Seiichi held all his emotions behind a wall of iron. This building wasn’t the place for weakness, the prisoners and specialists could almost smell it on the wind.

The Chuunin had barely made it to the right door when it flew open, a strong hand reaching out to grab Seiichi’s flak jacket and pulled him inside before anyone saw him.

Guess my mask wasn’t as strong as I thought, the brunette sighed, eyes burning again as he leaned into the strong hug his ‘brother’ pulled him into.

“Seiichi, Shisui came and told us…how was it?” How bad was it? Is she still alive? Did she run or was she taken?

“Bad,” the older man admitted painfully, forehead rested on the Yamanaka’s slightly higher shoulder. “There was a kunai in the wall, Inoichi, thrown so hard it was half-way through the plaster. The blood…they identified it as hers.” A sharp breath was his only reply. Pulling back, Seiichi leaned over to lock the door.

“Is it secure in here?”

Inoichi led him to a chair, pulling his own from behind his desk and sitting beside him. “Yes, I’m the Head, so my office was specially built to be as infiltration-proof and confidential as possible. We’re safe to speak freely.”

Leaning elbows on knees, the Chuunin covered face in his hands. “It gets worse, Inoichi. Hokage-sama has given me permission to tell you, on the condition that you are made aware that this is an S-
Rank investigative mission, inside the Village.”

Blue eyes pierced brown, from where they peeked over Seiichi’s fingers. “Go on.”

“On the night she saved him, Hitoshi told Kiharu that the man who attacked him had red eyes and an ability to move through objects, a ‘Ghost’ ability. Kiharu…she did her own research and finally spoke to Shisui about it. They realised it must’ve been a Sharingan, with a special ability from something called the Mangekyou, like what Madara supposedly had. She…she thought he was meeting someone in the village, that it was the only explanation for his presence, she said. This morning, the two of them went to Hokage-sama and told him. Kiharu, she came back to the Hospital room and- well, she was attacked. Byakugan confirmed two chakra signatures, so they think there were two of them waiting. Kiharu…she obviously stumbled on something big…”

Inoichi let out a long sigh, tugging on his ponytail with a frustrated expression. “That sweet child, I swear, we’re lucky she’s civilian. Could you imagine what she’d have gotten up to as a shinobi?”

A croaky chuckle escaped Seiichi’s throat, a wry grin pulling on bloodless lips. “Huh, yeah, she’d either have all the villages living in peace by tea-time or a full-on international crisis. She’s…damn, Inoichi, I just can’t get over how smart she is. I mean, I’ve always known she was smart but she took those tiny clues and found something huge when none of the rest of us has caught a whiff of anything.”

Inoichi was silent for a long while, eye blues assessing, and Seiichi felt pale all over again. That expression…it wasn’t his blood-brother sat there, that was the Head of T&I.

“Oh Kami, what is it now? What do you know, Inoichi?”

The younger man stood up, biting his thumb to draw blood as he walked towards an unassuming filing cabinet, one of many identical ones tucked around the room, and smeared the crimson liquid across a ‘random’ spot. Pulling out a folder, the Yamanaka slowly came back over, retaking his seat with a cautious expression.

“Seiichi, you’ve let me in on a life-or-death secret just now, the same thing applies here.” When the brunette gave a serious nod, the blonde continued. “Sandaime-sama has given me permission to bring anyone I deem necessary into the secret. If this is in any way connected to what happened to Hitoshi and Kiharu, both or either event, then you have a right to be involved.

“This is a file, one that very few people know exist. A few years ago, Hatake Kakashi told the Hokage of a plan to assassinate him from within the village. Hatake-san had been the one approached for the task, part of a group of Shinobi reserved for the darkest Black Ops.”

“ROOT,” Seiichi breathed, eyes wide. ROOT was something of a living legend, ANBU so dark they couldn’t function as people anymore. Whilst highly effective, Seiichi had always found the idea repulsive, to groom people to live for nothing but the violence. The Dazai had wanted to be a Shinobi to protect the village and do what was right, not to bathe in the blood of his enemies.

“I thought they were gone, though—” Yondaime-sama had done it, Seiichi was pretty sure. He was just a Chuunin but, well, things were easy to pick up if you paid attention. Kiharu was kind of like her old man in that way. A sudden spike in new shinobi, too old for the academy or Corps and many of whom hadn’t been seen in years, suddenly moving into apartments. The awkward smiles and zero understanding of human interaction was a dead give away. In all honesty, it hadn’t been hard.

“No, Seiichi, Yondaime-sama tried but, in the aftermath of Kyuubi, some of the Elders insisted they be brought back in—” which explained why those incredibly stark figures had seemingly faded into
society because they hadn’t “and placed under the leadership of Danzo-sama.”

Seiichi blinked. Danzo, as in Shimura Danzo, the Sandaime’s old teammate?

“Tou-san…is the Civilian Council just for the civilians, like, the members are all civilians?”

Seiichi laughed, tossing an amused smile over the top of his newspaper at Ki-chan, who was flipping pancakes. Mmm, strawberry. His favourite. “Of course, Hime, otherwise that would defeat the point!”

“Then why was Mitokado Homura leading the board to hear my petition?”

The morning sunlight filtered through the thin paper and Seiichi had to tilt the sheets so he could read easier, absorbed in the reporter’s article on the summer’s up-and-coming Chuunin exams. Frowning in confusion, Seiichi glanced up distractedly. “Sorry-what?”

Kiharu patiently repeated herself, spatula held aloft and blue eyes careful. “Why was Mitokado Homura leading the Civilian Council?”

Seiichi clamped his eyes shut, internally flinching at the clarity of that memory. Kiharu…but-

Wasn’t Homura one of Danzo’s firm supporters, an old teammate? Was this…connected?

Something just didn’t feel right here.

“Do you think this is connected to Danzo-sama?” He voiced carefully. ‘Brother’ or no, this was dangerous territory.

“Perhaps…he has shown interest in taking the ‘welfare’ of Konoha into his own hands, if recent and past actions are taken into account. If he thought Kiharu was a security issue, he might have ‘apprehended’ her behind the Hokage’s back.”

“And the kunai in the wall? The blood?” Narrowed dark eyes pierced pupil-less turquoise.

With another frustrated noise, Inoichi rubbed his thumbs over the seam on the file. “That’s where this could get tricky. Kiharu has shown that she is reluctant to confide in us—” the blonde’s mouth twisted like he’d tasted something bitter and Seiichi could relate. She’d not told either of them. “-so she either knows something that Danzo doesn’t want to risk being exposed or he considers a serious threat. Or we’re missing something…perhaps that Danzo is already involved somehow.”

The office was silent for a long moment, the two men trying to wrap their heads around the massive situation a little civilian girl had unearthed.

“We need to go to the Hokage.”

The lunch rush had just ended and Mikoto took a moment to take a long drink of water.

The day was warm and filled with blinding sunlight. Inside of the stall, the shade felt stifling and humid, rather than a reprieve. The water was heavenly, so cold the older woman could feel it all the way down her throat, and she’d never realised how dry her mouth had become until that moment.

Another figure entered the stall and Mikoto automatically turned to greet them, setting aside her glass and gently smiling in welcome. Curls ducked inside and the Matriarch smiled slightly wider.

“Shisui-kun, good afternoon. Kiharu’s not in today, but what can I get you? Yondaime’s, again?”
The younger boy looked distressed, turning to survey the loitering customers before taking a deep breath and announcing loudly; “Sorry everyone, Nekki’s is going to be closing early today, in ten minutes or so, so please finish your meals and thank you for your consideration!”

It was a testament to how much of a fixture Shisui was at the stall that no one questioned him, only murmuring over what could have warranted such a thing. By the end of the day, everyone in the village would know that the little Baking girl from Market Street was missing, anyway.

“Shisui?” Mikoto assessed the Jonin and felt a curl of dread. This was eerily reminiscent of yesterday morning. Well, aside fro-

“No.” Mikoto’s eyes, pitch black and devoid of their usual light-heartedness, seemed to burn in her face. “Where’s Kiharu-chan, Shisui-kun?”

Dropping into a stool nearby, the one Kiharu always kept to the side for Chouji-chan, Shisui shrugged helplessly, mouth twisted like it wanted to tremble. “That’s the thing, Mikoto-sama, we don’t know. Kiharu…she and Hitoshi are missing.”

Customers started leaving, mumbling amongst themselves and throwing curious glances over at the Uchiha pair, who were frozen behind blank masks. When the stall was empty, Mikoto still did not speak but simply started packing everything away with clinical efficiency. Shisui rose and helped her, having spent so much time just chilling here – and also secretly snacking on ingredients but, with Ki-chan, was it really secret? – that he knew where everything was. When everything was in the fridge, freezer or cold-room, all the surfaces washed and all machines turned off at the plug, Mikoto tore off her apron. Her mouth was a straight line, face pale and, whilst she seemed to have an unforgivingly short leash on her emotions, her hands did not waver.

The walk towards the Compound was deceptively peaceful, a pretence for the onlookers, and Mikoto looked, for all the world, like she was calmly heading home at the usual time.

When the gates came into view, the Uchiha Lady turned to her companion, placing a cold hand on his shoulder. “Shisui-kun, please go find Itachi and Sasuke, they should be training together today. Tell them what’s happened but please keep them from the house for the afternoon.”

Swallowing hard, Shisui nodded. What did Mikoto have planned? “Hai, Mikoto-sama.”

“Thank you, Shisui-kun.”

And the Uchiha Matriarch continued up the road alone. Shisui stood for a moment longer, watching her smoothly stride through the Compound, all the power and control of a Kage, and wondered if she planned to linch Fugaku-sama. Then, without stirring a leaf, Shunshin no Shisui was gone.

The main house was deceptively quiet when Mikoto slid open the door, toeing off her sandals and slipping on her house-slippers. A glance into the Kitchen showed that the kettle was still steaming, as it usually was around this time, and she followed the quiet sounds of shuffling paper and the lingering scent of tea to her husband’s office.

This…was going to be difficult.

Tapping a single knuckle of the wooden frame, waiting for Fugaku’s grunt, the black-haired woman slid open the door, expression mild. Once she had closed the door after herself, she casually slipped over to kneel on the other side of the low desk.

Fugaku glanced up from his work, brush held aloft, and his eyebrow quirked almost imperceptively at his visitor. “Mikoto? I thought you were at that stall today?”
“Oh, we finished early.” Mikoto smiled, slowly reaching over to swipe her thumb – bleeding from a careful nick of her hairpin – across the privacy seal under the Clan Head’s desk. “Now, I have something important I need to discuss with you, Shujin.”

Mikoto rarely acted this way, Fugaku set down his brush carefully, feeling unexpectedly cautious. In fact, he could count the incidences on one hand. She normally was rather content to busy herself with running the Compound, looking after their sons, since she’d retired. Working at that bakery was new, yes, but it had been a long time in the coming. Mikoto had always enjoying cooking and, when that civilian child introduced her to new recipes, Fugaku had acknowledged that it was only a matter of time.

“Oh?”

A serene smile pulled at his wife’s lips and Fugaku felt a sharp spike of wariness. His own Mangekyou or no, Mikoto was vicious when she wanted to be.

“I was told something quite interesting today, Shujin.” Mikoto leaned over, pouring herself a cup of tea (an extra cup was always to hand, in case of visitors) and gracefully sipping at the warm, fragrant liquid. “The Elders seemed to be putting a lot more pressure on the idea of a coup, in recent years, haven’t they?”

There was really no reply for that.

“Fugaku, the man who attacked Hitoshi had a Sharingan that could allow him to travel through objects and attacks unaffected. This morning, Kiharu-chan and her summon, Hitoshi, were discovered missing.” Fugaku’s jaw clenched.

“What are you suggesting, Mikoto?” *Are you accusing our Clan?*

Leaning closer, Mikoto rested one pale hand on her husband’s. Whether it was a warning or a symbol of understanding, Fugaku could not tell.

“I’m saying that the Uchiha cannot be seen as responsible.”

“Are you supportive of the idea of the coup, Mikoto?”

Laughing gently, like her husband had made a silly little joke, the Uchiha Matriarch took another sip of tea. “No. I’m saying, if we catch whoever did this – because someone has obviously taken those two, wanting to cover their tracks – then the Uchiha will rejoin the Village. Ensuring that the Village is aware of our devotion and loyalty to Konohagakure will prove invaluable in mending the rift.”

Tilting her head, Mikoto’s eyes finally softened.

Fugaku was not comforted, acutely aware of how deadly his wife could be. Some people might have forgotten, just because she was a devoted mother, that Mikoto had been a fearsome Kenjutsu expert and an Elite Jonin. Fugaku was not so foolish.

“I have little interest in petty resentment, grudges that no one remembers the origins of. Nor do I hold stock in trivial rumours or silly gossip. I want our Clan to be stronger and this is the way. No coup, Fugaku, just strength and solidarity.

And I do not care if I have to take *action* against the nay-sayers. So, Shujin, are you with me or against me?”

………………………………………………………………
At the Akimichi Compound, three small children huddled together in a corner of the sofa.

They didn’t really understand what was going on.

Kaa-san had told Ino that her nee-chan wouldn’t be visiting for a while, which was awful! Nee-chan better not have forgot to come round – She was always making stuff and running around with that smiley boy and Ino hadn’t had a sleepover in ages! But, Kaa-san had been really upset, telling her to pack up her toys and get her shoes on. Leaving the house, Kaa-san stopped to talk to Tetsu-nii (he was so annoying) and then, they went to see Chouji’s Mama. Coming in the door, Chouji greeted her with a smile but Shikamaru was already there, sleeping already!

Ino had gone straight up to the two boys, Chouji looking confused and Shika irritated, and demanded they tell her why nee-chan was too busy to visit. The two older boys had paused for a moment, sharing a look which had made Ino stamp her foot in frustration – *don’t leave me out!* – before Shikamaru sat upright.

The adults were huddled by the door, mumbling amongst themselves, when Shikaku and Chouza came through from the back.

“Sora, you sent Tetsu-kun for us, what’s happened?” Chouza rumbled, half a step in front of the Jonin Commander.

Ignoring Ino’s whining, Shikamaru turned his head to listen. Something had happened, his aunties and kaa-san looked worried.

“-Kiharu’s gone missing, Inoichi’s already at the office-”

Oh. The Nara heir turned his head away, curling up again and pretending he was asleep.

He wasn’t even 5 yet but he wasn’t stupid. Something bad had happened to Kiharu-nee-chan and they didn’t want to scare them. Ino and Chouji shuffled away, thankfully leaving him alone, as he heard them *pitter-patter* over to their parents. The sofa was warm and the cushion Shika buried his face in smelled like ginger. He wasn’t going to cry, he wasn’t.

“-Shisui told us a short while ago-”

A warm hand came down on his back, shaking him gently, by the dark-haired little boy ignored it.

“…son,” a familiar voice rumbled above him and Shika slowly turned his head. He felt groggy, and his legs hurt a bit from how he’d been twisted. He must’ve fallen asleep at some point…

“Oyaji,” the younger brunette glared balefully, even as Shikaku swept him up onto his hip. The old man should be out there looking if he was so clever- “You’re going to find Kiharu-nee, aren’t you?”

Blowing out a breath at his son’s knowledge – he really expected nothing less –, the Nara Head nodded, a small, vicious smirk pulling on his lips. He’d always like Kiharu, she was a sweet kid who was good for his son, very clever even if she was terrible at board games. She’d always been very, dare he say it, *cute* in her enthusiasm around him. And she was a sharp as any kunai. Poor kid didn’t deserve this.

“Yeah, kid, we will.”

Shikamaru never stopped frowning.
By nightfall, almost the entire village had heard about the little civilian girl who was missing.

Some people shrugged their shoulders apathetically, this was a shinobi world and things like this happened all the time. Some people felt pity for a little girl or the young baker they recognised from the Market.

In an Uchiha training field, Itachi and Sasuke had spent the afternoon with their older cousin, only being allowed to return home when the sun had started to dip behind the Hokage monument. The youngest boy was confused, wondering why Shisui-nii looked so lost, before he determinedly claimed that his nii-san would find Kiharu because ‘he was the best ninja and he could do anything’. Itachi had smiled sadly, saying nothing.

Inoichi and Seiichi had spent hours cooped up in the former’s office, trailing through reports and testimonies and trying to piece everything together. They left to report their findings to the Hokage as night was setting in.

Genma finally went home, after a 12-hour shift, to find Izumo and Kotetsu eating Yondaime’s from Ichiraku’s and looking mournful. Their scruffed up clothes and bruised faces told him that they’d been sparring, probably to vent some frustration. He could understand the sentiment. Raidou had been quiet all day, staring at the portion of takoyaki he’d grabbed for lunch for a long moment, seeming lost that it wasn’t the usual free pretzel. And even then, Mikoto-sama had closed shop (Genma had picked up on the gossip) when Shisui had arrived and announced that Nekki’s was closing early before both had returned to the Uchiha Compound.

Hana Inuzuka had been seen running through the village to the memorial site, dogs trailing behind her, and sitting in front of a small headstone decorated with faded silk flowers and glass beads. Thinking back on it, Genma reasoned that it must’ve been her and Kiharu’s old friend from when they were really small, that Yamanaka girl who’d never been found after Kyuubi. Poor kid, she was probably remembering how the other girl had gone ‘missing’ as well.

They all were.

In a small apartment complex, a Nara was writing at the pokey desk in the corner of his bedroom. When his best friend had dropped off his cousins, he Shunshin-ed through the window and the two boys talked long into the night.

……………………………………………………..

"Always keep a little prayer in your pocket
and you're sure to see the light."

Grubby fingers, dirty from rooting for berries in the bushes, brushed through inky fur. The strands were swept this way and that, shining in the low light, and I burrowed both hands in the warmth.

"Soon there'll be joy and happiness,
and your little world will be bright…

Have faith little one,

’Til your hopes and your wishes come true."

Rumbling breathing and my own high, reedy voice were the only real sounds around us. Hitoshi was exhausted, sleeping most of the day and unable to support himself for long. It had been less than a
month, but his muscles had still deteriorated slightly and he was weak from being fed via a tube. His massive head in my lap, he rumbled contentedly as I sang one of my favourite childhood songs. My first mum had liked to use it as a lullaby, we’d all enjoyed it so much.

“You must try to be brave little one.
Someone's waiting to…love…you…”

“You haven’t sung so openly in a long time, Kiharu.” ‘Toshi rumbled in my arms and I blinked in surprise. I’d long thought he’d fallen asleep.

“Yeah, but I got used to humming to you when you were sleeping, so it’s a bit different. The nurses said that sometimes people in comas could hear stuff so we were encouraged to talk to you. I’d run out of things to say, eventually and just…started singing, instead.” I shrugged, rubbing velvet ears between my fingers. “How are you feeling?”

“Chakra is still very low,” the feline grunted, open for once in his sorry life. “It will take me almost a week to get back to a level I can take us back…and since when, you lazy cub, did you learn how to reverse summon? It took months to get you to summon me…”

Gritting my teeth, I smoothed the fur around his tiredly blinking eyes. “Tou-san showed me and I practised really hard but I couldn’t actually try it out until back there in the room. I didn’t even know if it was going to work…” fingers reached up to brush my throat, the cut slowly starting to dry up, and glazed eyes remembered how close it had been. I was lucky that Tou-san had low-key made me a jumpy little shit. “…Let’s just say I was motivated.”

A rough pink tongue, harsh as sandpaper, flicked out and skimmed my wrist.

Urgh, gross, crotch-mouth. And, ‘Toshi probably had month-long morning breath.

The forest was really dark now, very little moonlight filtering through the dense foliage, and I really didn’t know how to start a fire. Matches were my friends, not flint. Thankfully, I had my own kitty-shaped space heater and the forest was pretty tropical. The temperature had definitely dropped since the sun went down but it was still comfortable out.

“Hitoshi…this was where you lived, right?” a pause and then a reluctant grunt. Understandable.

“Why are there no other creatures here? Like, I hear the crickets – well, I think they’re crickets, they sound weird, like whispers – but I haven’t seen one bug?”

A heavy sigh, this one reverberating deep in the panther’s chest. I thought it sounded…weary, mournful. His hot breath warmed my hands and I bit my lip in anticipation.

“Those aren’t crickets, Kiharu. Summons aren’t like humans or the creatures on your plane. We don’t have a heaven. When we ‘die’, our spirits are returned to our ancestral home. That isn’t the cascades but my fellow summons, unseen and whispering to each other, that you can hear. Some nights, you might even see shadows in the corners of your eyes.”

Oh.

Lips numb, I resumed my gentle petting. No wonder he hates it here…his entire pride is all around him but just out of reach. Without thinking, my mouth moved on its own.

“Can you…understand them?”
Hitoshi’s eyes flicked up to look at me, giving me such a disparaging look, I wanted to swallow my tongue.

“….no, Kiharu, I cannot.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, ‘Oh’, now tell me what I missed whilst I was unconscious, cub.”

Memo to self, never ask again…Second memo to self, work on reading the mood.

“Err, well-” I fumbled, like the asshole I was, “I’ve spent most of my time between the shop and your room. Tou-san’s stuck to the missions desk and patrol and I think Fugaku is petitioning to put Itachi through the next Chuunin exams by himself-” And wasn’t that just another thing to add to the bullshit pile? “Ino-chan has a new arch-nemesis, besides cousin Tetsu, in this little girl who keeps on calling her flowers stupid. Mikoto and I were talking about circulating our menu, having daily or weekly specials for all my ‘extra-awesome’ – Shisui’s words, not mine – desserts. Like the cheesecake flavours etc.”

The predator rumbled to show he was listening, ears twitching slightly when I combed through the longer hair on his jawline.

“Ensui was really annoyed last week, Yoshino has liked Mikoto-hime’s earrings for ages and finally managed to wrangle out where she got them from. And he can’t blame me for ratting him out, she was getting ready to use Shika-time as a guilt trip! So, yeah, she won’t leave him alone about it. I’m actually really impressed he’s still holding out, especially when – last Thursday – she hired him to do all the D-Ranks around the Compound in a single afternoon. Like, serious ouch.”

I nattered on for hours, voice getting hoarse as the forest darkened, eventually turning pitch-black. At that point, I’d laid down against ‘Toshi’s side, curled up like a kitten to his warm belly and hidden my face in his fur.

It focused on what I needed to do when we got back, not wanting the linger too long on how everyone had probably reacted to our disappearance. Not to mention the state of the hospital room.

Poor tou-san…all by himself in Konoha…

No, I swallowed harshly, Inoichi-Oji and Sora-oba will look after him. And Mikoto would look after Shisui, the kids watching each other’s backs. I couldn’t be with them right now but I wasn’t going to be gone forever. This wasn’t heaven.

Most of all, I tried really hard not to think about how they were reacting, investigation-wise. Tou-san can’t know that my reverse-summoning worked, it took me so long to get the first bit down…what if they thought I’d been taken? Would they go on a manhunt for Tobi or look inside the village?

Had Shisui told the Hokage?

“Hey, ‘Toshi?” I whispered, trying not to think of how dark everything was, the whispers around us, the eerie silence of the woods. My stomach squirmed uncomfortably, unsatisfied with some measly berries (Hitoshi hadn’t been in any state to get us to the river he remembered) and those shitty pork buns at breakfast felt like a lifetime ago. A grunt was my answer.

“I…I hope we can go home soon.”

A heavy paw fell over my shoulders, the weight – almost stifling – was comforting, like I was
completely protected. A thick tail curled over my hip and I fisted my hands into the panther’s soft underbelly.

“We’ll be home soon, cub…go to sleep.”

*Akihiko; ‘Shining Prince’, the name I gave to the best friend whose death activated Shisui’s Mangekyou.

Chapter End Notes

A/N- Hi!! First things first, W.O.W. Guys, last chapter had over 100 reviews?!? (including the 20+ which were my geeky, excitable replies) that is amazing and I'm so grateful for all the support! I honestly cannot believe it. Truly, it means the world to me and hope you'll all take the time to do it again! As an Author, it can be super scary posting, like you're just talking to a void. I mean, no matter how many views I get, who's to say that people don't just read a chapter and then write it off? All the kudos and comments (and adorable bookmark tags, I see you guys~ :) is just a total blessing, so thanks again. And as for the four guests who trolled me on here? All I had to do was reread your amazing words and I didn't feel so scared anymore. Such overwhelming kindness makes their words completely forgettable, irrelevant, and I promise to complete this story to the best of my ability! YOSH! So, thank you guys for...well, everything <3

Now, this chapter was kinda like my little summary. Meaning, I tied my brain in knots trying to write all the different povs (it's like a seamless transition whilst maintaining Kiharu as the only true First Person pov - hopefully) so I had to leave it for a few days and then smash it in 8 hours! Yay! I mean, it's only been 5 days since my last update but, by my standards, that's like weeks haha. Anyway, hope you enjoy the chapter (Why am I so angsty in these recent few??) and please comment again! XXX

P.S- the song is from the Rescuer's Movie and my mum still sings it when she does the dishes (cute~)

P.P.S- new chapters/artwork added to "Kiharu and Friends"...including double Shisui cameos and some Shika fluff hehe
“Hokage-sama.” Inoichi and Seiichi bowed low, the door thudding closed behind them.

The office was dark, the sun barely visible as it finished setting, and, under the electric lights, the Sandaime looked ten years older. Piles of paperwork littered his desk and the ash-tray was almost full, an empty tea-cup resting precariously close to the edge.

“Inoichi-san, Seiichi-san, what can I do for you?”

The God of Shinobi started refilling his pipe, settling in for the long talk that awaited him. He easily recognised the signs of agitation in his shinobi and wondered what they had to report. Inoichi’s fingers flickered through code and the Sarutobi nodded. The Clan Head had disclosed Seiichi on a confidential file.

Absently, the older man wondered how much worse his day was about to become.

“Sandaime-sama, Seiichi and I have narrowed down a list of possible contacts inside the village, that is, if Kiharu’s hunch was correct. Looking at the evidence ourselves, we agree with her reasoning.”

Inoichi flicked open one of the files, holding up the reports by the Hyuuga ANBU who analysed both scenes. “Assessing the original crime scene at the Naka Shrine, the most plausible explanation for what took place is that of a prescheduled meeting, one that was interrupted and could not be risked by leaving a witness. And as for the lack of chakra signature…in a fight so vicious, there should have been some remnants. But, there was nothing.” Holding up the next sheet, the report on the chakra in the hospital, the Yamanaka continued. “However, in the hospital, there were two different signatures so, seeing as Hitoshi’s attacker failed to leave one, we believe there may be more than one party involved.”

Hiruzen sighed deeply, rubbing his wrinkled brow with one hand, whilst the other reached out for the folder Inoichi offered. When he made to open it, Seiichi took another step forward.

“Forgive me, Hokage-sama, but perhaps a privacy seal would prove beneficial for the following conversation.” The Chuunin gestured around the room and his Kage nodded in concession.

“Indeed, Seiichi-san, you are correct.”

The walls flashed yellow and Seiichi’s eyes widened.

A small, muted chakra signature glimmered on the edge of his perception, only noticeable because his senses had been blown wide ever since he’d heard of Kiharu’s paranoia. Tucked up into the
ceiling, where no guard was ever posted…That was no ANBU…

Fingers raced through signs – ceiling, chakra, listening – and the Sandaime shot up from his chair. In the exact same moment, two ANBU appeared from the corners of the room and leapt, the two ‘brothers’ dropping into ready positions, kunai drawn.

In a flash, a figure was pulled from the ceiling, inked seals dancing all over his body as he viciously fought the guards who’d grabbed him.

“Hold him!” Sarutobi ordered, his voice rumbling ominously like a thunderstorm and KI pressing over the room like a heavy fog.

One of the ANBU managed to grab an arm, flinging the intruder against the back wall, hard. A buzzing noise vibrated the air before, in retaliation, a swarm of dark insects poured out of the man’s sleeves.

“Fuck, an Aburame?!”

The ANBU still grabbing him suddenly let go, jerking back with a hiss and his shoulders dotted with irritated red and purple splotches. When he staggered back and fell to one knee, the Sandaime slammed a hand down on the intercom on his desk. “Get me a medic nin. NOW.”

“Poison,” Seiichi glanced at his best friend who nodded slightly in understanding. Digging a hand into his weapons pouch, the chuunin pulled out a few more kunai, nicking the unknown Bug-user when he tried to make a break for the window closest to him. The remaining ANBU guard took advantage of his minute hesitation, lunging forwards with her katana drawn and exchanging a handful of blows.

The standoff kept the assailant in one place for a few moments and it was all the time Inoichi needed. Fingers locked in hand signs, he stretched out his mind.

The intruder finally subdued, the female ANBU held his arms secure and forced him to his knees before the Village leader. In the background, the poisoned guard was being frantically stabilised, a syringe (a special chakra-enhanced anti-venom substitute which would see him to the hospital) quickly injected into his arm. With the intruder, Inoichi lowered his kunai and stepped forward, Seiichi already half-a-step in front of him and with his own weapon levelled at the man’s jugular.

“Who are you?” The Yamanaka ordered, pulling back from the ‘spy’ s mind slightly. It was…bizarre, like his very self, emotions and memories, had been sealed away. Erased.

The man – no, not a man…a boy, Seiichi realised in horror – said nothing.

“How did you bypass Hokage-sama’s seals?”

When the boy made no move to reply, Inoichi reached forward and ripped the white mask from his face, preparing to re-enter his mind and rip the truth out, if need be, emptiness or no.

Several things happened at once.

The intruder, a dark mask concealing his features under the white, immediately started choking, frothing at the mouth with his head thrown back, neck corded grotesquely. His interrogators cried in shock, the Sandaime rushing forwards.
“No!” Seiichi snarled, “That bastard-!” What if he had information on his family?!

The boy was jerking now, spasming as the medic lunged over to slap a green-lit hand on his throat. It was too much though and, a few seconds later, the corpse slumped bonelessly.

The room was silent for a moment, all staring down at the body.

Inoichi slowly picked up the mask, pale white and eerily similar to ANBU. And there, inside of the shell, was a burnt-out suicide seal, triggered to activate if removed by someone else.

“Well…shit.” Seiichi stared down at the intruder.

Shit, indeed, Inoichi mentally agreed.

Suddenly, the older man leaned down, ripping off the black mask that covered most of the boy’s features and sucked in a sharp breath at the young face revealed. Brown hair and that strange blue mark beside his mouth…He couldn’t have been older than Kiharu…

“I-I-” The tracker stuttered, glancing over his shoulder as Sarutobi’s sorrowful expression. “I know him…he-” No wonder I was the only one who noticed him, not only am I so stressed that I’m hyper-aware but… I already know the ‘taste’ of his chakra... “I run missions with Shibi-san, we’re both tracking Specialists…it’s his nephew-”

“Aburame Tatsuma…” Sarutobi sighed deeply, eyes closed like the world had just fallen on his shoulders. “And, apparently, he was a member of ROOT.”

We’d probably walked just over five miles by the time evening swept in.

Hitoshi was weak and, in all honesty, a bit lost in the forest. I mean, he’d not been here for years but he insisted that there was a river close by. And I prayed he was right.

I was starving, had been for two days now, and the berries around here were incredibly unsatisfying. I’d find a new bush as we walked, be given the green-light of ‘You-Won’t-Die’ by ‘Toshi, and then strip the thing of every last fruit. And then, an hour or so later, I’d be dying again.

What, were the berries that shit or had I just stretched my stomach in my gluttony?

It was even worse for the panther. He’d not eaten anything; berries, even if I somehow convinced him not to stick his nose up – actually impossible –, weren’t going to do him any favours. He needed protein and fast or else, not only would his health keep declining, he’d never recover his chakra in a week.

And I was too terrified about the situation back home to even want to think about having to stay any longer than absolutely necessary.

Who knows what damage I’ve done when I’m not there to keep an eye on things… I mean, I wouldn’t be involved in the missions or anything but I’d be there and I could always nudge my dad, Oji-san and Genma-nee in certain directions. But here? I’m totally blind.

“Kiharu, listen to me for once, you lazy cub,” Hitoshi growled, swatting my face with his tail as he went past. I had been a climbing above him, so he could make sure I didn’t fall and break something,
as we scrambled over the treetrunk-sized roots that coiled like massive snakes over the ground. The *Harry Potter 'Chamber of Secrets'* imagery wasn’t great, thanks. There was a reason that film (and book, in all honesty) had been my least favourite instalment in the series-

“Er, what?” I mumbled, tongue out and fingers swiping cat hair from my mouth. That’s it, that’s the last time I zone out with my mouth ajar.

“I can hear the river, it’s just a little further up.”

When he made to continue in the direction he’d gestured, taking a running jump to land on the next monstrous root, I felt my eyes widen in worry. “Err, ‘Toshi? Isn’t it getting a bit late? As in, too dark to see, let along catch something? And, aren’t you supposed to avoid water at nighttime because of predators?”

The look he sent me over his shoulder was overflowing with disgust.

“I’m the biggest predator around, you idiot, and-” he raised his voice slightly over my squawk of indignation, “-what animals, anyway? The Monkeys are further up the mountain and we’re too far downstream for most of the others. We’ll be hunting spirit animals-”

“Wait! We’ll be eating a something that’s been reborn?” I gaped, thinking about how *people* (Ahem!) could be reincarnated, sometimes supposedly as animals- “No thanks, I’d rather starve, you monste-”

Angrily snapping his teeth at me, Hitoshi leapt back down to my side, easily jumping between the huge, twisted roots that had replaced the floor as we moved south. Whilst he’d been sore and stiff for the first day or so, he’d gradually loosened up the more we kept moving. “You’re so stupid sometimes,” emerald eyes glared derisively and I felt my hackles rise. “They’re spirit fish. Meaning that they’re just constructs, akin to normal animals in your Realm. This place isn’t on a different mortal plane, cub, there are still other living creatures here. It is only the lack of humans and the existence of the Summoning Clans that make us so superficially different.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, ‘Oh’. Now, are you coming or not?”

“Yeah, yeah,” I grumbled, scrabbling on all fours up the root and trying not to think about how, when I reached the next one up, I probably looked like a cat that just missed landing on the counter, hanging on like Mufasa.

*Sigh.*

But, it was just like ‘Toshi had called it and, a mile or so later, I could clearly hear the rushing of water.

The river was wild and untamed, carving into the land and forming a deep trough of water that flowed relentlessly through the countryside, like a coiled stormy-blue snake.

It looked just as deadly as any viper.

“Toshi!” I called over the loud churning of the water, squinting a bit against the wind that whipped at my face now that we were free of the trees. “It’s too fast here, we’ll have to look for another bit! Neither of us could swim in this current and I doubt the fish are here too!”

The panther, leaning over the craggy edge next to me and peering into fathomless waters (as I hastily
scooped up some water to splash at the angry cut on my neck), pulled back to nod in agreement. “You’re right, I’m in no state to survive a swim in this and you’re a pathetic swimmer at the best of times.”

Why did he plague me so?

“So we’d be better off going further south, even if that brings us closer to Bear territory. Come on,” he padded past me, paws scratching wetly on the exposed stone and tail curling around my hip. Climbing to my feet, I wrung out my ‘washed’ handkerchief and retied it around my neck. “Let’s try and eat something before we sleep.”

Early in the morning – two days after her little chat with her husband –, Mikoto told Itachi to look after his little brother, posted an apology at the entrance to a closed Nekki’s, and swept into the Police Station.

Her Jonin uniform was a little stiff from disuse but the heavy weight of the flak jacket and the tight band of her hitai-ate were more than welcome. The long katana, lovingly preserved even after all those years off the roster, was razor sharp and wrapped in red around the handle. Under her flak jacket, Mikoto was dressed in a charcoal kimono-style top with long sleeves billowing out to the tips of her fingers to conceal movement and a pair of cropped navy trousers falling to skim her calves. Heeled black sandals sheathed her feet and padded soundlessly as Mikoto strolled inside, casually pushing open the door like it was her own home.

The receptionist (why were they always women, hmm? Kiharu-chan’s voice seemed to whisper in her mind, a comment from months ago that had stuck like a burr) jerked in her seat and Mikoto spared her a brief smile as she swept straight through to the back, expertly ignoring the choked “M-Mikoto-sama-!” behind her.

Little desk cubicles, like a beehive or honeycomb, stretched out before her as the Matriarch paused to take in her bearings. When the door ‘thump’-ed closed, an intern – Uchiha, as always – glanced up curiously.

When it registered just who he was staring at, the teenager jumped from his chair and bowed respectfully. The motion, abrupt in the midst of the typically stoic Clan, drew the curious eyes of almost everyone in the room. Who all then proceeded to react in various ways – from the slight widening of eyes to more hurried bows – and Mikoto felt her lips twitch in amusement.

“Welcome, Mikoto-sama…Fugaku-sama is in his office, if you would please follow me?”

Nodding along to the detective that had stepped forward – Osamu –, Mikoto walked alongside the younger man as he led her towards the back, greeting the members of her Clan as they went.

When they were almost there, Mikoto turned to her escort and asked, easily overheard by the rest of the listening-in Police Force, “Where can I find the investigative team in charge of the disappearance of Dazai Kiharu?”

Uchiha considered themselves above gossip, Mikoto was fully aware. The murmurs that broke out after that announcement were, obviously, ‘just coincidental’.

Honestly, Mikoto had the patience of a Saint.
Then again, as an Uchiha herself, by both birth and marriage, she was just as prone to drama.

“Please take me there immediately, Osamu-san. I’ll be supervising the investigation from this point onwards.”

The detective paled slightly, glancing nervously towards the Police Chief’s office – as if he thought her husband would emerge like a demon summoned, and berate him for insubordination –, before swallowing and giving the Matriarch a slow nod. “Hai, Mikoto-sama, please follow me.”

The ebony-haired woman smiled in thanks, sweeping along after the officer as he scurried further down the corridor. When an explosion of whispers erupted behind them, she had to press her lips together to hold in her chuckle. This was quite fun, she admitted, and she could see why Kushina had liked to do this, Kiharu-chan as well…

Osamu-san stopped in front of a non-descript door, half the corridor wall either side composed of blind-shuttered windows, which was about half a dozen meters from the main Station floor they’d just come from. The detective politely tapped a knuckle on the door a few times before stepping aside, one hand coming up to nervously smooth the neat little ponytail at the nape of his neck.

“Come in!” An impatient voice called and Mikoto pushed down on the handle immediately, the door swinging open and revealing a well-lit grey room with several desks and a large whiteboard on the far wall. Three officers, a detective and two sergeants, were lounging around the room; a young man with shoulder-length hair was taping photographs to the board, a shorter man was scribbling over a desk and the detective paced along the windows, flipping through an extremely thin folder.

“The team in charge of the Dazai case, I take it?” Mikoto smiled, her recognisable voice drawing surprised gazes.

“Mikoto-sama, what a pleasant surprise,” The detective quirked a brow, snapping the folder shut.

“Kagen-san, it’s been a while,” Mikoto smiled, moving into the room and nodded politely to the two sergeants. “Inabi-san, Tekka-san, I’ve come to help with the Dazai case.” The Uchiha lady closed the door behind her, quietly thanking Osamu as he left, and pretended she didn’t see the two younger men twitch. Some officers really didn’t appreciate having someone come onto their case, she could completely understand. That wasn’t going to stop her though.

“So,” the only woman present turned to the board, immediately noting Kiharu’s photograph from her last birthday stuck in the middle. Hitoshi, lounging in the sunshine on the Yamanaka porch, was placed next to her. “I hope we can work well together. Now, what leads do you have so far?”

She valiantly ignored the almost-inaudible grumbling behind her. For now.

……………………………………………………………………..

The night was pitch black for a while until the moon came up.

Hitoshi was relentless, unfaltering as he scrambled up slopes and loped through the banks. At the darkest point, the terrifying blankness – like the womb again – where I couldn’t even see my hand in front of my face, I was forced to clamber onto his back and hold on for dear life. His night vision was so much better than mine, even if he had to slow down under the extra weight. And when moonlight filtered through the branches above us, I breathed a sigh of relief. After so long staring into the empty night, the feeble silver beams were like torchlights and we were able to find a shallower bank within the hour.
Here the water was much more relaxed, low enough at the sides that it lapped at our feet and Hitoshi could just about sense the bigger fish swimming down below.

Whilst the panther settled down to hunt, crouching on haunches on the small outcrop with emerald eyes pinned to the rippling water, I gathered sticks from the treeline. The best ones were far enough from the water that they were dry but not so much that I’d risk getting lost, and I ambled between tree trunks in silence, pensive with thoughts of home and the heavy ache of my stomach. Straying no further than a meter in, I slowly gathered some branches.

Like fucking hell was I gonna get myself lost here, nevermind how pathetic that would make me.

When I figured I had enough, being a total amateur at this shit in both lives, I picked a bit of bank that looked the least grim. As in, no squishy mud or moss, and then I settled down to learn on the job. Building a small ‘tee-pee’ structure, I ripped up some handfuls of sun-dried grass for kindling and internally marvelled that binge-watching Bear Grills would prove to be so useful for a numpty like me. Who said TV wasn’t educational?

Furious splashing erupted behind me and I jerked my head around in time to see ‘Toshi, sopping wet, drag a fish – about a ruler long, so like, 30cm? – onto the banks and then throw it at me.

It flapped uselessly in the grass, gills gasping and mouth open and scales gleaming as it twisted desperately, and I wondered if starvation was worth it.

There was absolutely no fucking way I was killing that fish.

Now, call me a whimp all you want, but I was the girl who gently caught spiders in glasses, stepped over worms, ran like I was being shot at when dive-bombed by a wasp and turned the channel over when the cheetah started stalking the baby giraffe.

I was not capable of killing something.

Ninja world or not, I was still a girl who’d originally grown up in a place where I’d never had to kill, human or any other creature, for survival of any kind. And I’d held onto those ideas furiously because they were just as ingrained as my sense of humour, sense of self – probably even more so! – and I couldn’t just pick up a fish and gut it or something!

More scrabbling behind me and the next fish brushed my shoulder, making me jerk away with a squeak.

Dessert, I internally chanted, ignoring the growing pile of ‘drowning’ fishies and picking up two rocks, praying for a miracle in the form of fire. Give me dessert any day.

So, crouched like the hobo I was, I devoted myself to striking rocks (no dice) and then, when I grew so fed up I was willing to go berry-hunting for the nth time, I stripped some small branches for… kebab sticks?

Would ‘Toshi even be able to descale and gut his victims with no thumbs?

“What the…why are you so useless?” The panther in question growled, sauntering over with the final catch in his mouth and eying the still flapping fish with bewilderment. “Where’s the fire? And you’ve not even killed them?”

Ignoring that last bit, I wordlessly pointed to the flame-less fire tee-pee.

“Kami-sama,” the panther flopped down, legs and face soaked, and I nervously restarted my attempts
at fire making. It might not be cold, but Hitoshi couldn’t spend the night with soaking wet fur. With our luck, he’d catch pneumonia. “And, what do you think you are doing with those silly rocks, cub?”

“Er, making fire?”

A slow blink later and I could almost see the neurons connecting in the cat’s brain.

“You…of course, you don’t know any jutsu or have had to make a civilian fire before…damn.” Damn, indeed. “But surely you’ve gutted a fish before?” Without waiting for a response, the cat continued, rolling his eyes and sitting forwards. “Regardless, I’ll show you how, come here.”

Holding up my empty hands and gesturing to my lack of pockets, I wondered if we’d ever actually think anything through in our lives. “With what knife, Toshi? I’ve nothing on me and your equipment is back at our house.” I glanced considering at his claws before the thought was pushed aside. Whether ‘Toshi tried with a single claw or I somehow tried using his paw, the fish would end up a mangled mess, simple as that.

It was silent for a long, awkward moment.

Hitoshi ate his fish raw, I stripped three entire bushes in the dark and, when we settled down for the night, I sacrificed my yukata (leaving me in a little camisole) to towel down the panther as much as we could.

…………………………………………………………………………………..

Shisui was on a mission.

He’d been up early, training hard and fast in a flurry of taijutsu and target practice before wolfing down a large breakfast at the nearest food stand. If the fourteen-year-old had his way, he’d be too busy for lunch.

The past two days had been something of a nightmare. After meeting the Hokage that first morning and then the thing with the Hospital and, afterwards, telling the family…He’d spent an entire afternoon with his younger cousins, which had been unusually tiring, and then spent the night on Ensui’s sofa, after brainstorming until late.

When he’d gone to the Hokage the next morning, Sandaime-sama told him that all that was needed from him right now was his official report of the previous two days.

It was like he was doing nothing!

After filing in his statements, he’d ended up spending two days either training or asking to see the Hokage (“He’s in an important meeting, Uchiha-san” or “The investigation is progressing fine, Shisui-kun. However, current developments are of an extremely sensitive nature and, as such, I cannot disclose them to you at the present time. I will send for you immediately, if necessary, but please continue on with the rest of your duties.”)

Even asking around for Seiichi-san or Inoichi-sama got him nowhere! No one had seen them in days! Sora-sama had explained that her husband was at the office, even when he (quite rudely, actually) called at the house in the evening.

And what were they going to do now? The idea for summoning Hitoshi had been quickly shot down; what if he wasn’t able to come? If he was dead? The contract was always sealed on Kiharu’s person (she was technically the next in line, as the most recent to sign the contract, and she liked to
keep it safe on her person when she could. Ensui had engraved a storage seal onto a locket just for
that purpose) so there was no way of knowing if the contract had faded with his death. And if this
was a kidnapping? They couldn’t leave Kiharu there alone, possibly making matters worse for her,
making them kill her or ensuring that they’d never find her!

How was he supposed to help if he wasn’t with them?

“Excuse me, Kunoichi-san, but is Inoichi-sama in?” the jonin asked politely, stood as casually as
possible, leaning against the receptionist’s desk with his arms and ankles crossed.

Shisui had spent the last two days combing over all his conversations with Kiharu, in his own head
and, to some extent, in his statements to the Hokage (Kiharu’s paranoia had made him a bit more
hesitant than he’d normally be), and he’d come to a dead end. What did he know? One, Kiharu had
been told by the panther about the Sharingan and then worked it’s meaning out by herself. Two, she
didn’t think the village was secure from that man’s influence. Three, someone had come to silence
her.

After they’d been to see Hokage-sama.

“I’m sorry, Uchiha-san, but Inoichi-sama is in an important meeting and will not be available for the
rest of the day.”

Two hands, small but scarred, slammed down on her desk and made her head, already leaning down
to her work, jerk back up again in shock. Leaning over, Shisui glared at her unimpressed expression.
He had to be involved! He had to. Ki-chan had trusted him with what she knew and now she was
gone!

“I don’t think you understand – this is a matter of life or death!”

“That’s enough, Shisui.”

Curly head snapping around, Shisui turned bright eyes on the older Chuunin, who was stood in the
corridor doorway and wearing a grimly resigned expression.

“Seiichi-san, please let me help in any way I can.” The young Jonin strode over, stopping a meter
away from his best friend’s father and bowing low. “I need to help. Please.”

Dark eyes flicked over to the kunoichi, who quickly looked back to her work, before closing tiredly.
“Jonin or not, Kiharu would murder us both if I got you involved.” The older man pointed out,
hinting at the S-Rank status of the real investigation. Whilst, because of his skillset and rank, Shisui’s
age wasn’t considered to be of much thought, Seiichi knew that his daughter would go mental if she
was part of the reason her fourteen-year-old friend was involved in such a dangerous venture. She’d
kill them. Both of them.

“I-I know that, Seiichi-san, but – I’d happily take her anger if it meant she was back in the village!”
the Uchiha rose, smacking one fist into the opposite palm with determination shining in his eyes.
Well, the Dazai relented, at least the kid has spunk.

“...Fine, follow me.”

Hiding his triumphant grin behind his collar, Shisui happily followed the brunette through the
twisting corridors. Thank Kami-sama, he could actually be of use.

“I’d say the ones most likely to be running the operation will be Kiharu’s uncle and father-”
“Mikoto-sama looked like she meant business earlier, so I wouldn’t be surprised if she tries to get the Police involved as well, Ensui.”

Long fingers reached up and pinched the Nara’s frown, rubbing the skin as if that could soothe his growing headache. The bedroom was dark, night having long-since set, and Ensui had only turned on his desk lamp, which was where the two were hunched over their notes.

This, Shisui absently noted, was his second late-night brainstorming session in as many days. It was kinda cute how, when they needed to solve something, both Kiharu and Ensui liked low-lighting and someone to bounce their ideas off – at least, until their giant brains reengaged and came up with something.

“So…I’m thinking you should go for Seiichi-san and Inoichi-sama, Shisui, or else…”

“…it might look like the Uchiha vs. the village, yeah. Ki-chan has done a lot, I know I already told you, and I think she’d poison us with a happy smile if we undid any of that. So, I tag along with those two, right?”

“That’s the idea.”

The Headquarters for T&I was just as intimidating as expected. The outside was deceptively nondescript, like a normal office-block, whilst the inside was bleak grey, filled with narrow corridors and plain doors. The two shinobi purposely strode through the winding halls, Shisui half a step behind, and climbed down two flights of equally-pokey stairs before stopping in front of a door, which looked identical to all the others.

That was the key thing about this place, you had to already know where things were to function around here. Escapees would get lost within moments.

(“A labyrinth,” Kiharu had whispered, describing it to him once. She’d needed to deliver her uncle’s forgotten bento box one time and had been forced to memorize left turns and right turns and to count the doors as she went.

“A what? That’s not a real word, Ki-chan!” Shisui had laughed. ‘Lah-ba-in?’

“It could be, though!” She insisted, wiggling closer in their blanket fort, camped out as they were in her living room. At 8 years-old, Kiharu had demanded they have a ‘proper’ play-date. Shisui, on one of his rare days off from training, certainly hadn’t argued. “A maze with no end, that changes itself and can take you anywhere in the world!”

“You daydream too much, Kiharu!” Shisui grinned, ducking his head when she scrubbed a hand through his curls-)

The doors opened almost-silently and Shisui immediately noted that they were in-

“A morgue?” he questioned out loud, voice echoing slightly in the empty room. Large glass windows covered one wall, opening up the entrance-way into the actual lab, which was filled with gleaming metal and empty gurneys.

“This is part of the blanket S-Rank, Shisui,” Seiichi warned, not breaking stride as he swept through the glass door and into the lab. At the sounds of their arrival, a medic-nin came around the corner, wearing a lab coat and disposable gloves.

“Dazai-san…and Uchiha-san, the Head and I were just looking the body over if you would follow me.”
The body? Shisui’s eyes narrowed. Who died?

The lab was long and curved around the corner, hiding half from the view of the doorway. Following the lab technician, Shisui marvelled that the department had managed to wrangle an entire Morgue in here, despite their being one at the Police station. This one must be for prisoners, Black Ops or special cases, the Uchiha deduced.

Inoichi-sama was stood in the far corner between two sheet-covered bodies and Shisui felt pale, just a bit. Were those enemies or comrades under there?

“This body is male, twelve years old.”

All three shinobi went white, Shisui almost green at the thought. War survivor or not, this kind of thing was always appalling and…it had been years. Kami, he was the same age as Ki-chan.

“-and died from an activated seal sequence, branded onto his tongue as, what seems to be, a security measure. From what we can see from the remains-” With little ceremony, the medic whipped back the sheet and Shisui had to force himself not to recoil. It…wasn’t pretty.

Using a rod, the medic opened the mouth and pointed at the badly burned tongue, the mouth staining black with poison. “-and with our limited shinobi who can understand Fuinjutsu, we can see that it stopped the person from speaking about certain topics. When paired with the mask – and if the other seal was removed with a foreign chakra signature –, this one would release a deadly toxin into the gums and brain when activated.” He gestured to the black veins that led from tongue to gum and were faintly visible along the outside jawline. “A silencing and suicide seal, to sum it up.”

Shisui felt sick again.

“This, Shisui, was an intruder found inside Hokage-sama’s privacy seals. When he was noticed, he used his Clan techniques to inject an ANBU with poison in an attempt to escape capture.”

The chuunin gestured to the other body.

“When he was secured, he refused to speak but, once his mask was removed, he went into shock and died from poisoning within a few moments. A medic-nin was summoned to stabilised ANBU Tiger but, despite doing all they could, he succumbed to the poison, which has now seemingly disappeared from his body.” A glance at the medic-nin and a nod of confirmation.

“The boy here was an Aburame Clan member, a recent graduate of the Academy who had been spending very little time with his Genin teammates. But, most importantly, he was a member of ROOT.” Inoichi finally spoke up. “Shisui-kun, you say you want to help us bring Kiharu back in any way you can.”

Swallowing hard and trying not to look down at the two corpses, both faces discoloured post-mortem from the poison, Shisui nodded firmly at the two older shinobi.

“Yes, Inoichi-sama, Seiichi-san. What can I do?”

A long glance was shared between the two men, filled with grimaces and sad frowns, before they eventually turned back to the young Jonin. Kiharu was going to kill them for this but-

“We might need to use you as bait, Shisui.”
Stepping out into the morning air, Mikoto breathed in the crisp breeze with a sense of deep satisfaction.

Yesterday had been difficult, the team had only the basics of the case hammered out and were slightly jolted by her presence, but she felt like she’d made good progress. And, she swore to herself, they’d make even more today.

The village was quite as she walked, too early for most people, even the shop-keepers. Speaking of, Nekki’s was officially closed for the next few days, alongside a pause on Teuchi-san’s fridge in Ichiraku Ramen, as Mikoto put all her focus on the current investigation. Kiharu, as she was right now and with her savings, wasn’t in desperate need of the income and neither was Mikoto, so she’d decided this was the best course of action. It would have been almost impossible to go on as normal and it didn’t feel right, anyway. Call her sentimental and foolish, but Mikoto didn’t want the stall to herself.

The sun, just brushing rooftops as it ascended, painted the sky pale blue, the expanse untouched by cloud from horizon to horizon. It was going to be a scorching day.

“Good morning, Mikoto-sama.” A slow voice sounded behind the Uchiha Matriarch as she approached the Station and the older woman glanced over her shoulder to see her nephew’s friend push off the wall he’d been slumped against. Hair pulled into the standard Nara ponytail, dressed in a typical Chuunin uniform and with eyes expertly painted green, Ensui looked fully awake for once.

“Good morning, Ensui-kun.” She smiled, slightly confused as to why the boy was calling her out, as the Chuunin walked to stand in front of her.

“Shisui and I spoke the night after Kiharu and Hitoshi disappeared and we’ve decided to help out as much as we can.” Hands in pockets, dark eyes half-lidded with something dangerous, the young man looked more like Shikaku had another son than a nephew.

Shifting her bag higher onto her shoulder, Mikoto smiled proudly. “I’m sure you’ll both prove extremely helpful, Ensui-kun.” A thought struck her and the Jonin tilted her head slightly, surveying the street like her nephew would jump out from nowhere. Then again, considering his nickname ‘Shunshin no Shisui’ was all but in the Bingo Book, she wasn’t wrong to do so. “Where is Shisui-kun this morning, anyway?”

“With Inoichi-sama and Seiichi-san.” Was the prompt response. “And I was hoping, if it’s not too much trouble and even if it is, that I might work alongside your team, Mikoto-hime.”

The woman in question eyed him for a long moment before she decided to speak plainly. “You’ll be the only non-Uchiha in there, you know, Ensui-kun. Your dark hair will not conceal that.”

A grin, razor sharp and identical to that of a bloodthirsty Yoshino (well, the boy must’ve picked up some things after so many years), cut across the Nara’s face. “That would be the point, Mikoto-shishou.”

Inside the Uchiha Police station, the officers and detectives were trying to anticipate if their Matriarch would return for the second day in a row. The Chief of Police had said nothing, merely going into his office as per usual, not even batting an eye when two interns had been talking about why the Clan’s Lady had overturned an investigation. It seemed that Fugaku-sama was turning a blind eye to
his wife (there was no way she’d acted without permission…right?). But, when she’d made her surprise appearance the day before, they’d all been blind-sided. Mikoto-sama had never really visited before that moment, aside from occasionally looking for her husband, nevermind expressing interest in a case…

When the doors opened, everyone tried to inconspicuously look to see if it was the woman in question. They’d been doing this all morning, eyes flicking up when anyone arrived. The intern closest to the door leaned back in his chair as the receptionist sat forward and greeted whoever had entered.

And then promptly gaped – as much as possible for an Uchiha – when not only Mikoto-sama walked through, but she was followed by a Nara. And not just any Nara, the Clan Head’s nephew, who was notorious for being chased through the streets by his Aunt–

A Nara who had the Lady’s bags slung over one shoulder and two takeaway coffees in his hands and–

“So, where do you want to head out to first, Shishou?”

The intern snapped back to his work, eyes wide and world-view crashing around his ears.

Shisui was in the field again.

He’d been training since dawn and, before then, he’d barely slept. What with how horrible the past few days had been, he’d scarcely had time to breathe! He’d spent most of the week casually sounding out his fellow Jonin – as Seiichi did the same with the Chuunin shinobi – and trying to see if anyone was connected back to ROOT, Danzo or the other intruders.

Needless to say, it was almost impossible to tell. And the ‘almost’ bit? That was generally because ninja were so twitchy.

Hatake-san had been his first port of call, only to discover the masked ninja had been assigned a long-term ANBU mission a week ago and so wasn’t available for questioning. When he’d informed the two older men, they’d argued that the timing was too perfect not to have been orchestrated to have the Copy-nin out of their reach.

Shisui wondered if there was even a line in the sand anymore, a point when coincidences were just that.

Then again, as shinobi, things were never as they seemed. And after these past few weeks? Shisui felt twitchy just thinking about it.

So, after two days of running around and trying to act casual, dropping leads like a spider weaving a web, the two older men had taken one look at the exhausted picture Shisui made and told him to “go get some rest, kid”. When he’d complained, they’d threatened to sideline him in the investigation and the Uchiha had backed down quickly after that.

He’d been sent home last night to find his Aunt waiting, lips pursed and a note to attend dinner from Mikoto-sama clenched in her fist. Taking it from her, she’d swept away without a word.

When he’d gone straight over, he’d felt the tiredness in his very bones. And, unfortunately, his ‘Aunt’ had noticed. While Shisui knew that Mikoto-sama could be terrifying…seeing her so sweet to Itachi, Sasuke, Kiharu and the customers…he’d been lulled into a false sense of security!
The scolding he’d received when he’d shown up in the same clothes as the day before and bags under his eyes, had had his ears burning for hours and the look she’d given him-

So, er, after Mikoto barred him from training more than once a day (training for longer was forbidden, too), he’d found himself in their field. Well, it wasn’t theirs but Kiharu always came up here to chill, it was where Ensui and Shisui tended to find her when she went off, so it was really more hers.

Normally looking on the bright side of life, the past few weeks had been awful. Shisui was used to laughing and grinning, side-by-side with his best friends and relishing in the good things (bad things, missions and murder, were tucked away, dealt with quickly so he could focus on living in the now). But, recently, Ki-chan had been smiling less, ignoring opportunities to make people blush or for a cheeky comment.

Ensui hadn’t been in good spirits either, stressing out over Yoshino-sama’s constant nagging and running around with Mikoto, like some strange dream-team (well, that’s the kind of thing Kiharu would’ve called them). Normally, this would be a prime teasing opportunity for Ki-chan and Shisui could sit back and enjoy the fall out (which was always awesome) but…even when she’d been here still, she’d been dealing with all the theories and secrets by herself-

When Kiharu was feeling grey, the world was just a little less bright.

And now, she wasn’t here at all.

With a sigh, Shisui lay down in the long grass, remembering the last day they’d been here.

“Hmm, mmmm~”*

The simple tune, hummed under his breath, was quiet in the empty field. It was a simple enough song, easy to pick up but hard to forget, and Kiharu had had him humming it for days afterwards. When she’d caught him singing it, her eyes had done that thing where they got all warm and fuzzy, like she was really happy Shisui remembered her simple little tune.

That evening, he’d written out the notes as best as he could, thankful that Mikoto-sama had drilled basic music into his head (they could be used for secret messages), and memorised them with his dojutsu. Just in case.

The meadow was lovely, the midday sun scorching the yellowed hillside, long strands that looked more like sheaths of wheat than blades of grass. The field ripped like water in the warm breeze, which tugged on branches and ruffled Shisui’s messy curls.

Droplets of red – poppy flowers – were scattered randomly down the hillside, swaying precariously on too-thin stalks in the wind.

The village, huge and bustling with life far below, glinted in the bright light, metal shining and pigmented colours bleaching under the sun. From here, Shisui could see people, small as ants, scurrying through the streets, the racket just out of earshot. It was…reaffirming, to sit and just take it all in. Everything wonderful about his home, about Konoha, and to remember why it was they all went to such lengths to protect her.

It was the people who made her truly precious though.

“Hey,” Shisui smiled, sitting up to lean back on his hands with his legs stretched out. A long blade of grass tickled his cheek when he turned his head a bit, grinning over his shoulder. “I won’t bite, ya’ know.”
A small head popped up from the long grass, huge childish eyes eying the older boy carefully.

His little watcher had been there a while, weaving through the long grass like a field mouse, and Shisui decided it was high time to say hello.

Biting the inside of his cheek, Shisui tried a different tactic, playfully calling out “Unless you’re too scared?”

Thankfully, the trick worked a treat – like it always did on Sasuke – and the little boy, dressed in a worn tee and shorts with standard sandals, immediately scrambled closer.

“I’m not scared, ‘dattebayo!”

Grinning a bit at the cute little catchphrase, Shisui winked. “So, why were you hiding from me then?”

“I was training!” the little blonde announced, growing bolder the more Shisui talked to him. Looking at his thin cheeks and wary eyes, Shisui guess the poor kid was an orphan. And those whisker marks…

“Training?” he heard himself parrot, still focused on where he’d seen the kid before.

“Yeah!” one fist punched the air, a huge grin flashing white teeth and crinkling blue eyes. “Like a ninja ’cuz I’m gonna be Hokage, ‘dattebayo!”

_Jeez, the kid was like a little ray of sunshine_, Shisui marvelled. “Oh, well then, I’m Shisui! And the name of my future Kage?” He smiled, winking playfully. The blonde – _wow, he must’ve been around Sasuke’s age and he’s already picked out a job?_ – stared at the older boy for a long, frozen moment. His messy hair, only a few shades brighter than the grass around him, brushed his eyes when the wind picked up again.

“Y-Yeah!” he seemed to recover, grin back full-force and eyes shining slightly. “Uzumaki Naruto, and don’t you forget it!”

Laughing genuinely, for what felt like the first time in days, Shisui carefully pushed himself up and reached out to ruffle Naruto’s hair, pretending he’d not noticed how he flinched when his hand came down. “Well, I’m starved so how about we go get some lunch?”

Now I remember where I’ve heard of this kid…

“O-Okay!!”

Shisui carefully reached out and plucked the startled boy off the ground, smoothly swinging him around and onto his back (“The village is way cooler when you’re taller! Trust me!”).

This little, jumpy kid is the so-called ‘Demon’ of Konoha…_and the boy Kiharu was so worried about-

(“There was a little boy, Shi-kun. Naruto and he was just out there in the woods and found us by accident. I-I thought he was gonna die too. And now…I haven’t seen him anywhere, not even at the Orphanage with Iruka-kun-”)

“So, who’s your favourite Hokage, ay?”

“The Fourth was awesome, ‘dattebayo!”
“The Yondaime? My best friend knew him and even has a dessert named after him! Maybe, I’ll take you for some sometime…”

Ensui would be the first to admit that he wasn’t the best Nara for planning ahead. Sure, he was great with theories and mechanisms, but he wasn’t like his Uncle. He couldn’t make a move, already thinking ten moves in advance and secure in a strategy.

So, he’d definitely not anticipated the sheer scale of the reaction his ‘apprenticeship’ garnered.

His folks had been fine with it, besides the usual scolding about ‘never telling us what you’re up to’ (Kaa-san) and ‘missing family dinners’ (Kaa-san, again), but Shikaku had been on his front step when he’d come back to his flat that evening and helped himself to the teenagers measly stash of sake.

“You’re troublesome, you know that… But, luckily for you, I think you know full well what you’re doing. Just watch out for Yoshino, you may be in the unenviable position of her favourite nephew… I’d avoid the Compound for a bit if I were you.”

His uncle had been right though.

Yoshino had raged all evening, dragging Ensui back to the Main House and plonking a disgruntled Shikamaru in his lap. Dinner had been painfully sweet. As in, a nice idea and they’d had his favourites, but Yoshino berated him for dropping his ‘apprenticeship’ on them with a spitefulness that hadn’t let up.

Holding a Shikamaru-shaped raincloud (Kiharu’s descriptions always stuck) and shovelling mackerel in his mouth, the Chuunin hadn't had the heart to tell them that the apprenticeship wasn’t an actual thing.

Had everyone forgotten than Mikoto owned half of Nekki’s or did they figure that Mikoto had been a detective or something on the side? Honestly, this village. When it came to the Uchiha, either they wanted to know everything or didn’t care to pay attention.

And speaking of Uchiha, there had been some serious waves at the Station when Mikoto had all but announced that Nara Ensui was her student. Well, technically, Ensui had. And very clearly.

Moving around the place had been tense, filled with stilted silences and eyes boring into the back of his head. The team in charge of Kiharu’s case had been on a new level of reluctant to work with him. It was aggravating because, as much as they respected their Matriarch, Ensui could see that they didn’t appreciate Mikoto’s involvement either. Tch, so damn troublesome.

So, after spending most of the afternoon on the second day trying to figure out what the original team had learned (blood from a stone), Mikoto had suggested that the two of them should revisit the crime scenes.

As soon as they’d landed on a roof a few streets over, Mikoto had changed course and, when he’d realised where they were headed, Ensui had felt a smirk pull at his lips.

When they’d strolled on past the receptionist, who recognised the Nara and waved them through without blinking, Ensui had taken the lead, striding without hesitation through the winding halls and knocking confidently on his ‘Uncle’s door (Kiharu was an enabler, there was nothing else to say).

Asking for those folders had been equal parts aggravating and satisfying.
On one hand, those folders were extremely helpful in closing the information gap between the two operations (not that this was a race, but it was important that the Uchiha’s effort didn’t look undervalued and, with Shisui acting as the Uchiha representative on the T&I case, they had both bases covered). Inoichi, Seiichi and Shisui had access to information that the Police wasn’t privy to. Whilst that gave them a distinct advantage, officers had more feet on the ground and were much more likely to get the civilians to talk.

On the other hand, it had been…difficult to see the reluctance to share in Seiichi’s eyes, not to mention…there were pages missing. Whilst it wouldn’t be obvious to most people, Ensui prided himself on his ability to theorise, to notice. That’s what had proved so helpful with Kiharu’s strange little invention ideas, what had seen him through his Chuunin Exams. And so, when they’d ended up transforming his little apartment into their base of operations (it made sense, the Nara lived alone), he’d reread the damned thing cover to cover more than five times.

“There are pages missing.” He called from the sofa, the sheets spread out on his coffee table.

“Missing?” Mikoto parroted, coming in with two cups of coffee and a tea-towel over her shoulder. Feeling vaguely guilty that she’d made him a drink (and probably tidied up whilst she was at it, Mikoto was naturally very maternal), the nineteen-year-old accepted the mug with a quiet thanks, risking a scolded tongue for a quick slurp as he gestured to the pages. “There is some new information here, Shishou, but there is definitely something missing.”

Sitting down opposite him, Mikoto lifted up the pages for her own inspection. “How can you be sure? There are no gaps and the folder is brand new, so the pages cannot have left marks of discolouration to suggest any are missing.”

“It was Shisui,” Ensui replied promptly, taking another sip of coffee and hissing when it seared his throat. “A day or so ago, I saw him on his way to meet Itachi-san and the guy looked like he was going to be sick. It was only for a moment or so, but Shisui is my friend and I can read him like a book.”

“So, my nephew needs to work on concealing his emotions more?” Mikoto quirked a brow over the rim of her own cup.

Smirking in triumph, Ensui gestured to the paper spread out between them. “And what in those files could shake a Jonin like Shisui so badly his mask slipped?”

Realisation sparked in Mikoto’s dark eyes as the Matriarch quickly rescanned the neat writing. “There’s nothing. Their investigation has not reaped much more than ours has, aside from ANBU reports on the crime scenes. So, something must have happened.”

“Exactly, and something big enough that, for whatever reason, Inoichi-sama didn’t want to put it on file.”

The Dazai household was empty, of course, when the two men arrived.

Kiharu and Hitoshi had been gone for almost a week and they’d hit a roadblock. The Chuunins were acting the same as normal, the Jonins were as normal as they could manage – maybe ‘regular’ was a better description – and Genma was still inching his way through the ANBU Corps. Shisui had let loose some thoughts around certain figures, leads that would trace back to Danzo (they hoped) and they were just waiting for someone to spring the trap. But, for now, the young Uchiha had been sent home, looking like death warmed over, and the last gossip Seiichi had picked up on was that the boy
had been seen eating with the Demon kid, of all people.

More importantly, Aburame Tatsuma had died six days ago and...nothing.

Danzo hadn’t so much as twitched out of place in the past week, calmly going about his days as if Inoichi and Seiichi didn’t suspect him of being some puppeteer from the shadows. Hokage-sama had failed to respond appropriately, in Seiichi’s private opinion, when he’d allowed the investigation to run at its current pace, acting like nothing had happened and allowing the Police to run an official investigation at the same time! Why, when Mikoto and Ensui, of all people (and wouldn’t Seiichi have liked to have been a fly-on-the-wall for the conversation between the Nara and Uchiha to allow that apprenticeship), had shown up the previous day and demanded the ANBU reports on the crimes scenes, the Tracker had almost swallowed his tongue.

He was more than fine with Mikoto and Kiharu’s close friendship; the lady was a good grounding force for his daughter and a good business partner too. And Ensui! Ensui was a good Chuunin and an even better influence on his daughter! Not to mention, all the help he’d provided with his ‘tinkering’ over the years-

*That hadn’t meant he was fine with them butting in on their investigation.*

Kiharu…Kiharu was a simple girl and a slightly strange one at that. She had very little in the way of friends her own age, only a handful or so, and a strange collection of adults who had been sucked into her orbit.

She’d made friends with others as well, toddlers and school children, the Gate guards at various Compounds and a handful of Police officers but-

Seiichi didn’t know how Danzo, how Fugaku, how anyone would react to the serious lengths so many important people were willing to go to for a single child. Sure, Kiharu was a special girl, business and all, and the official *secret* S-Rank investigation was centred on the ROOT intruder, but what did it look like on the outside? To see Clan Heads and their wives running around in desperation, to see Uchiha Mikoto running a case despite not being an official part of the force?

But it was his family on the line, so how could he do anything other than hand the evidence over?

But they’d *not* reacted or, at least, *Danzo* hadn’t. Some of the higher ranking Police were complaining about Mikoto going to such lengths, stepping out of her ‘official duties’, for some ‘civie kid’. Genma had overheard some of the Council members grumbling amongst themselves, getting suspicious, but there had been very little else.

*What are we waiting for? What are they waiting for? Do these people really feel so secure that they are not even concerned that we might unearth something incriminating?*

So, here they were, back at square one. *Great.*

“Tea?” Seiichi asked tiredly, scrubbing one hand through his hair as he toed off his sandals and led the way through to the kitchen, the Yamanaka following behind him.

“Please,” Inoichi nodded, all but collapsing into a chair at the table. “What do you think our next step should be, hm?”

Clicking the kettle on and pulling two cups from the cupboard, Seiichi pulled the Hitai-ate from his forehead. Damn thing was giving him a headache. “Honestly? I don’t have a clue. Tatsuma was just some academy kid, only graduated a few months ago. How the *hell* did he get a seal like that on his tongue?”
The kitchen was silent for a long time, both men lost in thought and the Chuunin found himself stroking one finger against the indentations on his teacup. It was one of Kiharu’s, loss of habit meaning he’d grabbed her’s down, but he’d drink from it anyway. Buttercup yellow and with a ring of ducklings standing out from the rim, she’d declared it ‘cute’ and insisted she bought it with her own money. The kettle clicked and Seiichi pulled it off the stand, filling the two cups and taking them over to the table. Sliding the plain blue one over to the blonde, Seiichi stared down at the liquid blindly.

“‘Ino-chan’s getting fed up that Kiharu isn’t coming around and that the stall is closed every time she goes past…Yoshino told Sora that Shikamaru hasn’t stopped frowning since he worked it out, the kid’s too smart for his own good…’”

A deep breath and a low ‘thump’ as Inoichi set his cup down again. “My brother has taken his third long-term mission in six months.”

Now, that caught the brunettes attention, chin jerking up to blink into pupil-less turquoise. “What? That’s crazy, that means he’s spent less than two weeks in the village in the past half-year…how did he get away with that?”

Quirking an unimpressed brow, the older Yamanaka quipped, “By going when you’re not there? Your colleagues either do not have the backbone to stand up to my brother when he’s determined or they’re not above being persuaded.”


Inoichi took another long drink from his cup like it was alcohol and not tea. “She didn’t.” His lips twisted bitterly, as they always did when his brother and sister-in-law came up. “She didn’t respond. He’s been sleeping in his office for months now – like I wouldn’t find out. But, he’s too stubborn and he knows me too well. Every time I try and do something, he evades perfectly. He doesn’t want my help, neither of them does.”

When the tea had cooled and a small film started forming over the top, Seiichi was roused from thought when Inoichi stood up.

“Which reminds me; Shibi-san was due to return from his mission today, Seiichi…we should go and break the news to him.”

Blinking rapidly, the brunette bit out an agreement and knocked back the stone-cold tea, grimacing at the bitter taste. Urgh, why the hell did Inoichi even let him make the drinks when he knew poison that went down better?

They headed straight for the Aburame Compound, leaping across rooftops in a direct cut across the village and dropped just outside the gate. They’d wanted to speak to the intruder’s Uncle immediately but, as always seemed to be the case recently, the man had been out of the village, tracking a missing-nin from Sand that had crossed into Fire.

“Aburame-san, has Shibi-sama returned? It is important that we speak to him as soon as possible.”

The gatekeeper merely nodded and, because he was paying such close attention, Seiichi was able to just about make out the tiny insect that flew out of his collar.

“Aburame-san, has Shibi-sama returned? It is important that we speak to him as soon as possible.”

Waiting for a few minutes, Seiichi let his eyes wander. He’d been around here countless times, on patrol and to meet up with various Aburame fro missions etc., but he’d never had – or taken – the time to just look.
Like all Clans, a simple gate cordoned off the private Clan property from the rest of the surrounding houses and, also like every Clan, the place itself was organized in its own style. The Aburame, both because of their intensely private nature and how intimidating others found them, lived on the outskirts of the village. The houses were, in actual fact, simple grey buildings, some several stories high like a small apartment block and others simple terrace houses. The woods, wilder and more untamed than those belonging to the Nara, were dark and brushed the edges of the property. Konoha was famous, as in the title and from the legendary skills of the Shodaime, for its forests but the trees around here were still different. Unlike Hashirama-sama’s monstrously tall constructs, those in this area were shorter and walking between them was almost akin to being underground, the sunlight blocked out so securely.

“Yamanaka-sama, Dazai-san, you wished to speak to me. How do I know this? My Clansmen’s Kikaichui was sent for me.”

“Yes, Aburame-sama, we need to speak to you…privately.”

Two hours later, Seiichi was preparing for what was possibly the most dangerous mission of his life.

Seiichi had never been invited into the compound before – he didn’t actually know anyone, off the top of his head, who had – and couldn’t help himself from casting sneaky looks around.

His face remained half hidden and the rest, what little was visible, was just as stoic as ever but the Chuunin thought Shibi seemed amused at his curiosity. Inoichi, being the smooth professional in his element he was, was completely unphased. In all honesty, the house they’d been shown to was strangely normal, considering the bizarre reputation the Bug-users had, but Seiichi supposed he should’ve known better.

After all, people didn’t expect a huge panther when they walked up to their porch.

The office was completely nondescript, as functional as expected. Plain cream walls lined with wooden bookshelves and a single desk in the centre. But, more importantly, it would serve their purpose.

The Aburame Head was silent throughout their tale.

Inoichi did all the talking, he was an expert on the human mind and Seiichi didn’t even know what he could have said in his place. “I’m sorry but your nephew died a few days ago from a suicide seal when he was caught eavesdropping on the Hokage,” didn’t really cut it. So the Yamanaka laid everything out. Or rather, as much as they were able to disclose which, under the wrap of an S-Rank, wasn’t a lot.

But Shibi was an incredibly instinctive man, for all his logic and reason. Something inherent from working with his ‘allies’, Seiichi had often mused.

Once Inoichi had finished explaining the fate of the Bug-user’s relative, the office had been plunged into silence for a suspended moment.

A single finger rose and pushed Shibi’s glasses further up before the Aburame spoke.

“That makes little sense. My reason for claiming this? Tatsuma has only been a Genin for several weeks but has been missing from his duties for considerably longer.”
“I beg your pardon?” Inoichi leaned forwards, eyes intense. There had been nothing out-of-the-ordinary recorded for the Aburame, let alone a missing persons file or neglect of shinobi duties.

“Do you mean to say, Shibi-sama.” Seiichi licked his lips nervously, “That your nephew was missing from the Clan or had been disregarding his posts?”

The smallest twitch of a frown, easily missed unless you were looking for it. Shibi was genuinely confused by the turn of events. “The latter, Dazai-san.” Our expectant expressions forced the usually tight-lipped man to elaborate, understanding that this was important. “After his graduation, Tatsuma had rarely been seen in the Compound and had not attempted to contact either myself or his mother. When he neglected to make an appearance for his first C-Rank last week, an official enquiry about his whereabouts was issued.”

Making a quick decision and sparing his friend only the barest glance, Seiichi decided to see where this was taking them. Enquiry? Missing out on missions? This had not been anywhere in the archives. “And where could we find Tatsuma’s mother, Shibi-sama?”

“In the Compound here. She…is unwell.”

Gritting his teeth, Seiichi continued on relentlessly. “Tatsuma was only a Genin, Shibi-sama? Tatsuma was assigned to ROOT almost two years ago.” Well, that was all they could devise from the ‘age’ of his ROOT seal and so that was the timeframe they were forced to run with. And the skill with which an apparent-Genin had fended off two ANBU…there was no way this wasn’t extremely serious, extremely suspicious.

The Aburame Head was clearly frowning now, eyebrows crumpled severely over glasses, and the atmosphere in the office darkened further.

“That is not possible. Tatsuma was only a Genin and for such a promotion, even one in secret, I would be informed.”

So, Aburame Tatsuma was taken in without anyone knowing? Did that mean they’d spent an entire week on a file that had been fabricated?

“Inoichi, I think it’s time we asked Hokage-sama for permission to dig a little deeper.” Hopefully, right through Danzo’s brain. Whether by Yamanaka jutsu or the Dazai’s kunai, Seiichi wasn’t too picky.

When they made to depart with their respects, Shibi rose with them, reaching to sling his gourd over his back.

“This involves my Clan, I would wish to accompany you.”

“Alright there, Jackal?” Seiichi elbowed the masked ninja beside him, sliding extra kunai into his weapons pouch and retying his hitai-ate, lest it comes loose in a fight. Had happened before. Genma, in full ANBU uniform and forced to act accordingly, took the higher ground and silently let it slide (not that he had much choice).

Seiichi had a thing about breaking tension before a fight anyway, and almost everyone knew it.

“Ready, Seiichi?” Inoichi retied his hair and nodded towards the door.

“Rea-”
“Ready!” a cheerful voice perked up from the door and Seiichi felt like throwing something. Dammit, his daughter was going to murder him. He’d told himself that he’d respect her wishes and not get anyone she deemed ‘underage’ involved and now-

He’d realised he’d been blessed with an activist for a daughter when Kiharu’s eyes would flash every time she looked at the academy or a Genin. Just from watching her reactions, her father had gradually realised just how much she hated how children weren’t allowed to just be that. Children. Even though she’d never been much of a child herself, that had been by her own choice. She’d never waivered from her friends but she was unhappy with the way things were. He could tell, looking into those blue eyes which were so like Aki’s. So, he’d sworn that he’d keep Shisui out of it. For her. But then, the Uchiha boy had begged and his eyes looked scarily like Seiichi’s own, so he’d told him what was happening…and then, they’d realised they needed to get to Danzo somehow and now, here they were.

“And you’re sure, Shisui?” Inoichi hedged, face harshly lined.

Knowing that now was not the time for laughter, the fourteen-year-old nodded solemnly, reaching to check his katana was secure. “Yes, Danzo-sama has always been interested in the Sharingan so I let it slip that mine might be special.”

That was news to Seiichi but then, with all the stuff Shisui had unloaded under the S-Rank, the older man had too much to be surprised over to really care.

“So, if things get as violent as we think, he’ll probably go for me as a last bid.”

“Right,” Seiichi swallowed his guilt. This was for Ki-chan, his daughter, and Shisui was a Jonin in his own right. “Right, let’s go, then.”

Flashing out of the ANBU HQ, Seiichi tried to keep his eyes off of Shisui’s back in front of him. To keep from noticing how small he was compared to everyone else-

_Damn, I really am going to hell._

…………………..…………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………..

When Hitoshi estimated that he had enough chakra to transport the two of us back, I’d almost cried with relief.

Okay, I did. But just a little bit.

We’d been here just under a week, 6 and a half of the most god-awful days (not the worst, never the worst, that was just asking for trouble) I’d had in a long time and I was more than ready to go home.

After finding that reasonable fishing patch on the third night, we’d not really moved much. Not only was there no real reason to (we’d be travelling to a different Realm, so no need to go anywhere on foot) but the panther needed to conserve as much energy as possible. Sure, we’d ended up walking around a bit to gather those berries for my meals (fruits…were going off the menu for a while, when we got back), but that was largely so we wouldn’t get separated.

So here we were, rumpled and sticky and gross. Hitoshi was in the worst mood because he hated eating straight-up fish and I was a hot mess, scabbed neck cracking when I moved and my ruined yukata open around my shoulders.

Part of me almost wished we’d bumped into some of the other Summoning Clans (how fucking cool would that be, right? Shisui would be jealous for the rest of our lives!) until my own summon had
pointed out, oh so nicely, that they would not necessarily be allies. Hitoshi was only one panther after all, and an injured one at that, and some of the contracts had a hundred animals.

Thinking on the Snakes, I quickly agreed that it had been for the best.

“Ready?” Hitoshi drawled, his voice reverberating directly into my ear. I was hunched over on his back, arms looped tightly around his neck and ankles crossed under his hips, to try and make myself as small of a burden as possible.

“Ready.” I squeaked, holding on even tighter.

A pulse of energy seared across my skin and the world fell away.

When I came to, I simply lay there for a few moments, mind spinning and vision filled with white, as my brain tried to compute that we were no longer in the Summoning Realm. Sucking in a deep breath and immediately choking on the plumes of smoke that swirled around us, I slowly pushed myself upright and glanced around.

A ragged cliff, sun-dried grass and the sounds of rushing water.

“The Naka?” I looked around, noting Hitoshi’s slowly stirring figure just behind me. “Really? Now that’s just taking the piss, talk about a full circle…”

Still grumbling under my breath, I turned around to shake the cat’s shoulder, watching as his eyes twitched before slowly prying open with a growl.

“You okay there, ’Toshi?” I asked, standing up on stiff limbs and watching as the predator did the same, swaying a little on unsteady paws.

“Fine…come on, we don’t have any time to waste, cub.”

For the first time, I realised how late it must have been. The sun was dipping below the horizon and painting the yellowed grass amber. The wind was strong, making the trees sway violently above our heads and sending flashes of golden sunlight through the shifting canopy. Inhaling deeply as we started making our way through the trees, I hummed at the summery-smokey-leafy scent on the breeze. It was like bonfires on holiday and barbeques in the long evenings.

It was like home and, at the thought of a barbeque – and our own miserable attempts in the past week –, I was reminded of how starving I was. The trees rustled as we walked, the forest seemingly empty, like some bizarre parody of Hitoshi’s attack. The comparison had the relief slowly draining from my stomach. I didn’t know what we were coming back to. And that was the scariest thing.

But nothing jumped out at us as we walked on in silence, no animals, no weapons, no attackers.

The gates had just come into view when two loud cries broke the quiet of the evening.

“KIHARU-!”

A grin split my face, tugging painfully at the angry scab at my throat, as I stepped forward with my arms wide in anticipation. And I wasn’t disappointed.

Long arms wrapped around me, hoisting me up into the air, as a second pair grabbed a snarling Hitoshi around the neck and yanked him into the group hug.
“Izu-kun, Tetsu-” I gulped in air, relieved beyond belief at the familiar faces and that they seemed to be acting like normal. Surely, if the world had gone to hell, those two wouldn’t still be punished with gate duty, right?

My words seemed to have broken the haze of relief though and I was promptly dropped back to earth. The two sixteen-year-olds were pale, taking in the thick scar on my neck and the exhaustion on our faces.

“**Kiharu, where the hell have you been?** How did you both get back? What hap-”

A sense of urgency rushed through my veins, an overwhelming flash of adrenaline that had my heart racing with dread, and I was suddenly absolutely desperate to see my dad. *Shit.* “Boys, please, please,” I shook off their hands, twisting a fist into the fur between ‘Toshi’s shoulders. “I promise I’ll explain everything but where’s my To-?”

As if to answer me, a massive plume of thick, black smoke unexpectedly rose through the air. It was so potent, like soot or charcoal, it almost looked like a wave of pitch-black sand ascending to the sky. The toxic gas was heavy and spread quickly, stinging my eyes and cloying in the back of my throat when the wind blew through us.

“**Shit!”** Kotetsu gaped, rushing forwards and taking a chakra-powered leap into the nearest tree.

“What the hell was that?!” Izumo yelled up to him, shoving me closer to Hitoshi to encourage me to climb on. The panther in question, despite being drained to the extreme, was on high alert, bumping his shoulder into my side so I’d take the hint. Which I did.

“Forest fire!” his teammate shouted back, jumping down a moment or two later. “In this wind, we should definitely get into the village!”

What forest fire looked like that?

“You two!” the Chuunin still at the gate gestured furiously for us to come back. “Get those two to Hokage-sama immediately!”

The two teenagers needed no further prompting, taking off at a run with Hitoshi fast on their heels. We wasted no time slowing down when we hit the streets, expertly skirting around stalls and pedestrians alike. The Hokage Tower loomed overhead but I barely paid it any mind. Twisting my fists into ink-black fur, I stared over my shoulder, unable to tear my eyes away, as the column of smoke rose up like a beacon behind us.

*Arrietty's song,* the song Kiharu hummed and Shisui picked up on. From Chapter 19 and, in case you missed the tag back then, if you want to hear it: look up the Celtic harp version on YouTube (It’s just awesome for the vibes)~
A/N- This update took so long, my god. At one point I was at 16k like 'what are you doing? this isn't right, Torship!' (not that I speak to myself in third person) but you get the point. It was tricky AF so I hope you all enjoy it. I wrote most of this after binge-watching Brooklyn 99, the Mentalist and then Disney's Brave so I'm pretty sure there are some points of comparison here....I think....unintentional, btw. Also, I decided to make the police quite 'police-y' so that they didn't just sound like another part of the shinobi corps. Gotta get a bit of variation, I guess. Also, fun fact, this chapter was almost called 'Seven Days of Hell' but then I didn't think it was anywhere near a good a fit as what I went with.....and I'm pretty sure Kiharu was gone for 6, not including the day of the attack...I think....I've just lost myself in my own fic...it's a bit weird actually, looking back. (I need coffee)

ANYWAY, thanks for being incredible as always in the comments section and with all the love and support! I legit cherish every message, even if I don't get to reply to all of you so here is a blanket hug for anyone I missed out! \(^*^\)/ <3 I hope you like the chapter, you precious beans!! X

P.S- shout out to forever_kouhai for listing me/this fic as her inspo for her awesome fic 'Raising a Maelstrom'! What a cutie~
Afire

Chapter Summary

Fire is strange.
It’s this thing, it’s not like the other three elements.
And what it stands for can be even more confusing...death, rebirth, cleansing, marring...
...that you left the oven on...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The folder made a loud ‘slap!’ when Ensui dropped it onto Mikoto’s desk (it was just his table that she’d commandeered).

“What’s this?” The Matriarch raised a brow, sitting back from where she’d been pouring over the testimonies of the hospital staff who’d been on shift at the time of the kidnapping.

“A list of the Medical staff who were around Hitoshi’s room in the 48 hours surrounding the attack.”

“Anyone there who shouldn’t have been?” Mikoto rubbed at the crease between her brows.

Puffing out his cheeks, Ensui skimmed through the file in question. “Nope. All certified medics and nurses - well, aside from an intern but he was signed off as delivering paperwork - and no one is suspect.”

Ensui sighed tiredly, turning to lean a hip on the edge of the small table and flipping open a new file.

“I also spoke to the people inside the Hokage Tower that morning. A Chuunin, Yuuhi Kurenai, said that Shisui Shunshin-ed both himself and Kiharu inside the Tower, first thing.”

“We already knew that; Shisui told us that himself days ago.” Mikoto pointed out.

“But, what we didn’t know was that Yuuhi-san was also there when Inoichi-sama and Seiichi-san spoke to the Hokage a few days ago.” Mikoto leaned forward, intrigued, and Ensui’s forefinger started tracing sections of the report. “She said that all was quiet for a long time but then, Hokage-sama demanded a Medic over the Intercom, his voice so loud she heard it two floors below, and she saw a man being transported via stretcher around 10 minutes later. Inoichi-sama and Seiichi-san then left immediately in the direction of T&I.”

“Interesting,” Mikoto mused, slowly standing up and walking over to the whiteboard the Nara had ‘liberated’ from the Station. Picking up a red marker, she started drawing out a rough timeline. “So we have both Inoichi and Seiichi in the Hokage Tower just before an unidentified man was rushed to the hospital. Wait—” She turned sharply, piercing her ‘apprentice’ with dark eyes over one shoulder. “Did Yuuhi-san hear anything before the Medic was called?”

Scanning the report, Ensui slowly shook his head. “No...No, it was a total surprise, she says here.”

Tapping one slim finger to her chin, Mikoto reconsidered her diagram. “So, either it was
spontaneous, like a silent technique or a poisoning, or the privacy seals were up.”

Snapping his fingers on a sudden thought, Ensui rifled through his knapsack for a moment or two before holding up a crumpled pad of notes in triumph. “Here! When I went to speak to the nurses three days ago, they were really depressed over the death of a Jonin. He was in a private room one section over from Hitoshi’s ward and, apparently, in a lot of pain before he passed.” Frantically flipping through coffee-stained pages, the Nara stabbed his finger onto a pencil-faded note.

“Here, Mikoto-shishou-” Ensui, walked over to the older woman, “I made a note of it because the event, after Kiharu and Hitoshi’s disappearance, seemed to really lower morale in the medic corps and I also thought it was weird. Besides this issue with those two, there haven’t been any violent conflicts - I know, I checked when I was keeping an eye on if that unknown man was causing any more trouble - and there were no members of a team either loitering around or being treated as well. The nurse I spoke to only seemed to think it was okay to discuss it because I flashed the badge you lent me.”

“So,” Mikoto picked up the train of thought. “He wasn’t on a mission or-” a spark of understanding lit up her dark eyes, “He wasn’t injured on the normal line of duty. Tell me, Ensui-kun, why would a man be poisoned so severely with no teammates and not be taken to the emergency room?”

Hazel eyes blinked. “…ANBU.”

“And, is this the part when you tell me he was admitted just after a Medic rushed a man from the Hokage Tower?”

Ensui merely nodded, slumping back on his coffee table.

“So, he was either already there when Inoichi and Seiichi arrived or...he came later, by a different way.”

“...Neither Inoichi or Seiichi use poisons, Shishou.”

Lips twisting, Mikoto flipped the marker in her hand a few times. “Neither does Hokage-sama. So, why was he poisoned? From the sounds of it, it wasn’t a slow acting or a subtle one; painful deaths like those tend to be very quick to spread through the body or spontaneous after long-term exposure. If he was ANBU inside Hokage-sama’s office, then there are very few ways he could have been infected, without everyone else in the room also being similarly indisposed.”

“So, he was hurt defending Hokage-sama? From who? And, if there was an attempt of Hokage-sama’s life, why didn’t the alarms go off?” Ensui wondered aloud, jaw tilted back as he contemplated the ceiling.

Black eyes hardened like two chips of flint. “I have an idea.” There’s only one rat who wouldn’t warrant a Village-wide response.

“Ensui-kun,” Mikoto stared down at the file with unseeing eyes as the Nara turned to look at her. “I want his file, ASAP.”

Staring for a second, Ensui nodded, tugging on his sandals and shrugging on his flak jacket. “...I’ll see what I can do, Shishou.”

“Ensui-kun,” Mikoto’s call stopped him just as he reached the door. “Even if you have to be...discreet...memorise what you can and report back to me.”

“Ah. Sure thing, Shishou.”
The door clicked behind him.

With a tired sigh, Mikoto slumped down onto the Chuunin’s sofa, eyes staring out the window and over the rooftops without really seeing them.

Maybe it was nothing, maybe it was something. Either way, Mikoto had a hunch this was all connected.

*Oh, Kiharu-chan. Is it not strange that one little girl and her cat led us here?*

Ensui returned an hour later, looking thoroughly ruffled and more than a bit harried, opening the door and then slamming it shut behind him. Mikoto, turning from pinning up photographs of the Medics with access to Hitoshi’s room, couldn’t contain the slight smile that quirked her lips.

“Run into some trouble?”

Swallowing hard, Ensui shoved some crumpled pages into the Matriarch’s hands and turned away. “I don’t want to talk about it.” He croaked.

Amused despite herself, Mikoto straightened the pages to read, mumbling distractedly, “So long as you didn’t break any laws that I’d have to defend you from, Ensui-kun.”

The red-faced Chuunin made a wordless sound of embarrassment before slouching into the kitchenette, presumably for coffee. His ponytail was lopsided.

Flipping open the file, Mikoto settled down to read, lips twitching at the small smear of lipgloss in the top corner.

*Well. He did say one of his classmates was working in that ward.*

“Ensui-kun.” The Matriarch flipped the file closed. “You just came back but...could you go to my husband at the Station?”

Nodding, the teenager’s eyes narrowed but he let it go. “And what will you do, Shishou?”

Smacking the pages into the opposite palm a few times, Mikoto considered the whiteboard. “I have a few questions of my own to ask…I’ll meet the two of you there.”

Reaching under the coffee table, the ‘ex’-Jounin swung her sword through the air, the blade a flash of silver in the light. Her Katana slid into its holster, strapped across her back, with a sharp ‘snap’.

The afternoon sunlight was just fading into evening when Inoichi and Seiichi walked up the steps to Danzo’s house.

The property was large, ornate and traditional on the outskirts of the main Village. A koi fish pond was built into the front garden and a small bridge connected the gates to the steps. Red beams and white walls, black tiles and lots of trees, Danzo certainly lived in comfort. There had been no one at the gate (Danzo, supposedly, lived alone) and so the two had found their walk unimpeded up to the door.

Seiichi pulled at his flak jacket nervously, settling it more comfortably on his shoulders, before lifting a hand and rapping a single knuckle on the red door.
A timid-looking housekeeper pulled the door open a moment later.

“Good evening,” Inoichi stepped forwards after both men had bowed respectfully, smiling politely.
“Is Danzo-sama home?”

“Hai, Yamanaka-sama, shinobi-san. I’ll show you to the study if you would please follow me?” The small blonde, dressed in a plain blue yukata, stepped aside to let them enter - Seiichi took the moment to introduce himself - and then turned to show the duo down the hall.

_He knew when we arrived but there was no one at the gates or visible_, Inoichi noted, catching his friend’s eye and blinking once. Guards, then, or maybe even ROOT.

When Seiichi looked forwards again, he scratched his nose six times. _Six...six signatures..._

The blonde flicked his hair back over his shoulder with a small toss of his head. _How close?_

Seiichi’s eyes trailed across the ceiling, seemingly taking in the traditional decor that covered the halls as they moved towards the back of the house. Inoichi mentally reminded himself that Genma and the ANBU had the property surrounded.

The housekeeper finally stopped in front of a sliding door, traditional rice paper with thin golden lines painted over it. Kneeling respectfully, she slid the door open. “Danzo-sama, Yamanaka-sama and Chuunin Dazai-san have come to see you.”

“Come in.” A scratchy voice intoned.

The Elder was sat seiza in front of a traditional writing desk, hands folded and eyes closed. The room was very minimalist, only a few scrolls hung from the walls and bookshelves with sliding doors concealing their contents. Danzo didn’t even twitch when they entered. His serenity pissed Seiichi off.

Walking inside, the housekeeper sliding the door closed behind them, Inoichi and Seiichi lowered themselves to sit opposite the old war hawk, faces neutral.

Finally, Danzo’s shrewd eyes opened. “What is the purpose of your visit, gentlemen?”

“We need to ask you some simple questions is all, Danzo-sama.” Seiichi smiled politely, all teeth and no humour. “We understand that your time must be very valuable.”

“Oh? I did not know you did your own grunt work, Inoichi-san.”

The blonde didn’t even blink at the slight, reaching into his pouch and pulling out a notepad. Seiichi found the image of Danzo being questioned like a commoner on the street corner strangely satisfying, regardless of the fancy house. “Danzo-sama, do you know of a Dazai Kiharu?”

Blinking slowly, evidently unimpressed, Danzo leaned back with his hands tucked into his sleeves. Silently, like a hospitable house-spirit, the housekeeper reentered and poured them all tea, shuffled back out without being acknowledged once. Neither men touched their tea.

“Is she not the girl who ran away with a summon?” He sounded...bored. As if the girl in question’s father was not sat opposite, staring with steely eyes.

Seiichi’s fingers twitched in his lap but, beyond that minuscule tell, he didn’t give the older man the satisfaction of seeing him react. Inoichi moved to speak, the brunette not trusting himself.
“She was abducted alongside the comatose summon, in fact.” The blonde flipped a few pages before turning to show the older shinobi. “Do you recognise this in any way, Danzo-sama?”

Delicate black lines curved over the page, crisscrossing in an incredibly complex design that neither man could make heads or tails of. The entire image was vaguely similar to a lotus flower, sharp triangles filled with curved lines originating from a central seal. Inoichi had had to Mind Walk both Seiichi and the female ANBU to get the image down correctly.

The bandaged man was silent for a long, tense moment. “...No.”

Seiichi plastered a look of faint surprise over his face before he spoke up. “Well, that’s funny, considering we found that activated to conceal the presence of a Black Ops Shinobi, one not under orders from Hokage-sama.”

Smile like a slash across his face, the Head of T&I leaned forwards slightly. “Perhaps one of your ROOT, then, hmm?”

“I beg your pardon, Inoichi-san?” Danzo closed his eyes, looking both affronted and aloof. Seiichi’s temper wracked up another notch.

“There is no one in Konohagakure that can produce seals of such a high and complex standard, Danzo-sama. Except, someone obviously can. So, who is it, Danzo-sama?”

Lids opening once more, those small eyes now held a spark of irritation, harsh lines deepening even further. “What are you insinuating, Inoichi-san?” The unspoken warning, ‘be very careful with your next words’, was extremely clear, hanging in the air between them.

“I knew Minato for a very long time, back when we first joined the Academy, and he was a true genius of Fuinjutsu. Kushina as well. In the two years before he died, Minato liked to tell us about an extremely promising Genin that had been flagged for his skill with seals, a young boy promised to Kushina as an apprentice. Unfortunately, the Genin died on the night of the Nine-tails attack.”

Slowly, the Yamanaka turned the next page, the only noise in the office the whisper of parchment on calloused fingers. A torn piece of paper was tucked in between the pages, a specialised sealing design that had Seiichi’s mind in knots just looking at it.

“Fuinjutsu specialists all have a certain, identifiable style. Just like how everyone has different handwriting, we can tell which manufacturers have produced certain explosive tags or sealing scrolls in the Weapons Stalls. I, personally, lack the eye to properly appreciate creations such as these… However,”

Pupil-less aquamarine flicked up to pierce the Elder.

“Minato’s old Guards certainly spent enough time with him to have a strong grasp. They were most helpful in identifying the creator.” Inoichi slid the old seal from where he’d folded it into the spine, flipping back a few pages and holding the two images side-by-side.

“So, maybe you can explain, Danzo-sama, why Fujioka Eijirou, apparently not dead, is creating extremely complex seals for you.”

Teeth flashed in a sneer as Danzo drew himself up, clearly affronted. “Are you insinuating that I am behind this...this attack?” He waved a disparaging hand.

“Why don’t you tell us?” Seiichi leaned back, looking for all the world like he was just, as his daughter liked to call it, ‘chilling’ (He figured Ki-chan would be proud of him).
“You have no proof and these claims are unfounded, casting aspersions on my character.”

“Untrue, but,” Inoichi shrugged, turning over another page in his little book. “How about this one?”

A grotesque photograph of Tatsuma’s corpse, mouth swollen and seal clearly visible, stared out at the war hawk, taped onto the pages of the notepad.

Black, beady eyes barely glanced at the photo, lifting to stare at his two ‘interrogators’ apathetically.

“Well, Danzo-sama?” Inoichi asked when the older shinobi made no move to reply. The bandaged man simply sipped his tea. “Danzo-sama,” The Yamanaka frowned. “Concealing the survival of one of Konohagakure’s most promising shinobi was criminal enough. That you then proceeded to use his skills for your own purposes, turned those skills against the Village and against our Kage, is treason. And that is not taking into consideration your grooming of Academy students, without parental consent or approval from Hokage-sama, amongst other crimes. I must urge you to answer our questions or else, when you are taken into custody, this line of enquiry will continue in an interrogation cell.”

Not that you’ll be going anywhere else, regardless.

“Your questions are inane, baseless and unconnected to me.”

Nodding, as if to concede the point, Seiichi fished inside his flak jacket before producing a small scroll, the length of his hand and marked with the red seal of Hokage-sama. “Yes, I suppose you have a point…you could deny any involvement…which is why we have a warrant here, Danzo, to search your property and the ROOT base for that proof.”

Shimura sighed, putting down his tea, just as the rice-door slid open again behind them. The Dazai’s eyebrow twitched slightly at the interruption before he froze when the new chakra signature registered.

How...how the hell did he not sense the approaching chakra? He’d been on high-alert the entire time…

“Uchiha-sama to see you, Danzo-sama.”

……………………………………………………………

Balanced in a tree with chakra channelled to his ears, Shisui was the picture of a professional shinobi.

Inside, however, he was a jittering mess.

Usually, the young Jounin was really good at focusing on the mission, his duty and his orders, but what with everything at stake right now? If Danzo knew anything about Ki-chan and Hitoshi? To say he was all but vibrating in anticipation was putting it lightly.

It had been hard, trying to be professional about everything. He knew he’d let some things through the cracks, his Uchiha mask fractured slightly. But what was harder, even more so than feeling like he was running in circles and getting nowhere?

The fact that barely anyone cared.
Kiharu wasn’t anyone in the Village, just another kid, another civilian, another faceless shopkeeper (a young one). This world was a cruel one and Shisui knew well enough that children, young girls especially (and very young boys), went missing all the time. It made him feel sick.

Shisui knew a lot of kids; a lot of younger cousins, Kiharu’s little following, not to mention the more vulnerable brats like that kid Naruto he’d taken out for lunch a few times (he always seemed to pop up just when Shisui was looking for a bite). The idea that any of them or Kiharu could be taken was awful.

Ki-chan’s kidnapping was probably even worse.

Shisui didn’t want to find out if there was a stage beyond his Mangekyou.

Danzo had been extremely irritating with his evasion of answering and Shisui was sorely tempted to burst through the window and strangle the confession out of him. Not that he would. Of course.

His tree stirred slightly in the evening breeze and Shisui forced himself not to tense. A little breeze wasn’t a sign of anything.

However, two minutes later, the Uchiha found himself freezing when he picked up on the next words spoken.

“Uchiha-sama to see you, Danzo-sama.”

What?!

Perturbed that they’d not sensed anyone coming, Shisui’s brows furrowed in thought. Inching carefully along his branch, Shisui soundlessly dropped down onto Jackal’s and, holding his hand up clearly, the curly-haired boy started signing frantically. What-now-plan-interrupted.

The ANBU shrugged slightly, gesturing for him to wait-watch-listen and Shisui felt the rest of their squad settle back down again, vaguely embarrassed he’d been the one running for reassurance, even if they were all obviously thrown by the turn of events.

Sharingan still spinning, Shisui took a scant second to make sure his genjutsu over the group was still holding strong before tuning back in.

“-back to Headquarters for further questioning-”

“-to the Station. You are under arrest-”

“-that will not be possible.”

Things happened very quickly.

Suddenly, multiple chakra signatures flared into existence and Shisui snarled, unsheathing his katana and leaping in the direction of his team leaders. “They came from nowhere! Even my Sharingan saw nothing-”

Kunai drawn and ready, Jackal jumped alongside the young Jounin. “Seals,” He spat and Shisui abruptly remembered those that had apparently writhed over Tatsuma’s skin, the one seared onto his tongue.

The figures moved quickly, dressed in black with ghostly pale masks, and dashed towards their leader. In the treetops around and on the roof above, the two groups clashed in a violent clammer of
weapons and taijutsu. Moving fast, Shisui slashed his blade at two masked figures, furiously wondering which ROOT had attacked his best friend, and gritted his teeth when they both dodged.

The sounds of a fight resounded through the thin walls of the office and Shisui forced himself to focus on his own opponents. Those three could handle themselves.

The shorter male whipped out two long knives, the serrated edge gleaming ominously with liquid, and the larger man pulled a thick bo-staff from his back.

Shisui certainly had his own problems.

Without warning, Shisui lunged forwards, ducking under a sweep of the staff - which blew his curls back from his forehead - and arching a slash into his opponent’s undefended torso. ROOT number 2, unfortunately, intercepted the blade with one of his daggers, redirecting the metal just enough to offset Shisui’s reach and the Uchiha was forced to twist around several counterattacks before he was able to bring his katana up again.

The back of his neck suddenly tingled and Shisui threw himself to the branch below, feeling the heat of a fire whip crackle where his head had been a second beforehand. The flames exploded against a massive willow tree with an almighty ‘boom’, a column of smoke and fire reaching up to the sunset-lit sky. Firelicked across branches, ignitingthe surrounding trees and, when flaming branches fell to the ground, the sun-burnt grass immediately caught alight. Bull leapt down to put out the flames but was intercepted by another ROOT operative and the fire quickly razed across the lawn.

Luckily, the attack distracted his opponents and Shisui leapt back upwards, fishing some wire from a hip pouch and lasso-ing it around a leg as they tried to evade his sword. Yanking hard on the coiled wire, the ROOT shinobi was jerked off balance and Shisui lunged forwards to incapacitate him.

Before he could, though, the other operative flashed through hand-signs and spat a large globe of discoloured liquid in his direction. Not wanting to risk getting hit by an unknown technique, Shisui was forced to evade, giving the caught agent enough time to sever the wire.

Dammit!

Sharingan spinning, Shisui exchanged blows with the duo for a few more moments, keeping one eye on his teammates and one ear on the fight going on in the office. Surely, those three were able to-

SMASH-!

The innocent housekeeper was sent flying through the wall, paper and wood fracturing outwards and her body slamming into a tree. She collapsing in a daze for a moment, yukata ripped and blood pouring from a nasty slash on her hairline, the flaming grass raging around her. Then, she lurched into a crouch, reaching under her skirt and whipping out a kunai, before lunging back through the hole in the wall with an enraged snarl.

Fugaku-sama, Sharingan whirling, met her half-way.

Okay, so, not so innocent, then-

A handful of senbon flew past, an inch from Shisui’s temple and jugular, slamming into the eyeholes of a ROOT agent, who dropped like a stone. Rat was sent sprawling from a vicious uppercut and Shisui immediately Shunshin-ed between the follow-up blow and his downed teammate, slicing mercilessly at the outstretched arm and not even blinking when the limb was severed at the elbow. Rat recovered with a nod of thanks and then Shisui was gone, flitting through the various fights and swiping with his katana when he saw an opening.
For an Uchiha, especially one as skilled as Shisui, the blow that came out of seemingly nowhere was deeply unsettling, even as the fourteen-year-old spat out a mouthful of blood and readied his blade.

“Danzo.” Shisui snarled, lips bloodied.

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As soon as Ensui was clear of the apartment block, Mikoto rushed back to the mountain of folders, flipping through them to the very bottom and trailing her finger down the correct list. From there, she launched herself outside and onto the nearest roof, bolting over to the Tower and striding past the receptionists (again, women, why?) and making a beeline for the stairs.

The Village archives had varying levels of security, depending on clearance level and Rank, and Mikoto was let through relatively easily, her face recognisable.

The records centre was almost empty, only a few Chuunin milling around and organising the articles. The archives were in a long room, with no windows (it was, after all, underground) and flickering yellow ceiling lights. With rows upon rows of brown bookshelves and a faded red carpet, the room was aged and dull.

The Genin section was deserted - only Sensei’s had any real, regular reason to come here - and it wasn’t hard to find the shelf of most recent graduates.

Aburame Tatsuma was even easier to locate.

“Be careful, Sasuke-chan!” Mikoto called after her youngest, watching him race ahead when Itachi had come into view, halfway up the street in front of them. They were on their way to the market, late in the afternoon and most of the school children were out of class by now.

Keeping a watchful eye on her sons, Mikoto strolled over to the nearest stall and browsed the mandarins.

“Mikoto-sama!” A young boy called to her left and the Uchiha Matriarch turned to smile at the Genin trotting up to her.

“Good morning, Asahi-kun.” She turned to the twelve-year-old, stepping away from the produce so she wouldn’t block others. Onyx eyes slowly took in the young boy’s dirty hands and her smile widened behind her hand. “Another D-Rank?”

The faintest scowl darkened round features, Uchiha-black eyes half hidden behind a full fringe. “Yeah, and it’s worse because stupid Tatsuma never shows up-!”

Eyebrow quirking, Mikoto glanced up and spotted her ‘nephew’s sensei - Ogino Fumio was a quiet man, a defector from Kumo in the last war, and had the characteristic dark skin and broad build that were standard there - and teammate waiting patiently a little ways away.

“What do you mean, he doesn’t show up?”

The twelve-year-old looked incensed, no doubt aggravated that he was forced to work even harder on menial missions with their team one man short. Asahi had always preferred books and utilising his mind over getting his hands dirty.
“Well, that doesn’t seem fair. Wasn’t Tatsuma-kun your friend at the Academy?” Mikoto vaguely remembered her ‘nephew’ spending more than one day over that the Aburame Compound. It wasn’t far from the Uchiha, anyway.

“Well, not anymore.” Asahi looked at the ground, mouth a hard line. If Asahi’s father was any stricter, the young boy might never show any emotion at all. As it was, Mikoto thought he might have cried, if things were different. “Stupid Tatsuma doesn’t have time to even talk anymore, he just disappears for ages. Even his Uncle hasn’t really seen him.”

Hesitantly resting a hand on his shoulder, Asahi hunched under the gentle pressure.

“He…he told me to shut up. That…that he was stronger and didn’t need us anymore. But, it’s us who don’t need him!”

Little fists clenched, Asahi jerkily bowed, looking for all the world like he couldn’t bear to talk any more about his ex-best friend, and ran back towards his team.

Stood in the middle of the street, her sons coming over and a hand still outstretched, Mikoto wondered if all Genin teams fractured so easily.

The file wasn’t very telling, the boy marked down as quiet and a hard-worker, a given considering his Clan. From another perspective, such a boring file was, of itself, suspicious, especially suspecting what Mikoto did. However, his insects were listed as the much rarer ‘Kochu’ species than the ‘standard’ Kikaichu.

For most people, this wouldn’t mean anything. People, shinobi and civilian alike, were generally repulsed at the concept of bugs beneath the skin but…Mikoto had been friends with Shibi-sama’s late wife, Hotura. The gentle woman had been Shibi’s third cousin and the two woman had bonded, somewhat, over their arranged marriages. How many girls who started the academy already knew who they were going to marry? In their class, only the two of them...

But, anyway, Mikoto knew a bit more than most non-Aburame and, whilst she didn’t know exactly what each species was specialised for - such information was listed under ‘Secret Technique’ - but she knew there were certain poisonous strains.

Asahi’s Genin Team was being, very hesitantly, groomed for capture and assassination. They wouldn’t be assigned a…hit until they were well into Chuunin Rank but…if he had a poisonous strain, the team placement would be even more advantageous.

When she reached the bottom of the profile, Mikoto’s eyes slowly closed.

Well, look at that. She internally sighed. I’m right.

His birthday was listed as mid-November. And, just next to it, his death was stamped as the day the ANBU was poisoned in Hokage-sama’s office.

I’m sorry, Asahi. Mikoto sighed, slotting the file back onto the shelf and leaving the Tower. Making her way to the Station, deep in thought, the Matriarch wondered if her ‘nephew’ had been told.

It was only a few minutes later that a massive plume of thick, black smoke rose outside. The putrid gas blew in on the strong evening breeze, sweeping through the main street and making some civilians gag. Mikoto merely squinted against the stinging dust, Sharingan flaring to life in the rising dust.
The Station was a flurry of activity when Mikoto arrived as the officers were organised into different platoons and emergency ‘water-scrolls’ were distributed. The past few weeks had been scorching hot, yes, but the fire had been too...violent to be naturally-occurring. An explosion that size, however, with the number of trees that characterised Konohagakure, could spell serious trouble.

Mikoto had barely taken two steps inside of the building when Detective Osamu rushed past, looking surprisingly harried for an Uchiha.

“Detective-” Mikoto stepped closer, hand raised slightly and blinking when the younger man whipped around.

“Mikoto-sama, forgive me, I didn’t see you-”

“Osamu-san, where are my husband and Ensui-kun?” The Matriarch asked, eying his frazzled expression with growing dread.

Sighing explosively, the detective ran a pale hand through his hair, fingers catching in his small ponytail and tugging the elastic free impatiently. “Ensui-san was dispatched as part of a Chuunin task-force to combat the spread of the flames a few minutes ago. The Chief left around 10 minutes ago.”

“Left?” Mikoto echoed.

Blinking, Osamu quirked a brow. “Hai, Mikoto-sama. He went before the fire started and told me to tell you when you arrived, that Ensui-san had debriefed him. Is he coming back soon, Mikoto-sama?”

Teeth gritted, Mikoto shook her head sharply, eyes sweeping over the barely-contained chaos around them. “Nevermind, Osamu-san. Who’s in charge here?”

“Oh, er-well-”

Closing her eyes and praying for strength, Mikoto started towards the back of the hall and the place where Fugaku preferred to address the force.

………………………………………………………………..

Hitoshi launched himself upwards, muscles bunching and rippling under silken fur, and I clung on for dear life. Well, this would be a similar, yet much more exciting way to die than the first, I guess-!

We were airborne, weightless, for a few moments before we landed with a sharp clatter of claws on tiles. The Hokage’s office was on the ledge above us, our current spot a favoured place for Jonin to leap to and from and, also, for the Guards. Izumo wasted no time, immediately reaching up to rap on one massive window with ‘Tetsu half a step behind him.

The window shuddered open a long second later and the two older boys blurred inside.

The tensing of my summon’s shoulders was my only real warning.

Eeekk!

We cleared the window easily, my head pressed flat to the panther’s back so I wouldn’t brain myself on the ceiling, and then, we were skidding sideways on the carpet, curving around to face the
Sandaime and I heard a sharp breath drawn in behind us.

“Good evening, Sandaime-sama.” I smiled with as much bravado as I could muster, weakly sliding off to stand on legs like jelly, hoping that they thought I was simply fatigued from our ‘trip’ and not quivering from nerves. Little hint? *It was fucking nerves.*

“Well, Kiharu-chan, Hitoshi, this is a surprise.” The old man sat back down, looking for all the world like we’d appeared after a particularly good game of Hide-and-Seek. I was suspicious enough to note the hardness in those small eyes. “You’ve led us on quite the merry chase, or so it seems. Izumo-kun, Kotetsu-kun, thank you. Please return to your posts at the Gate.”

“Hai, Hokage-sama.” The duo bowed in tandem, leaping out the window with a final, meaningful glance at me.

*Ah shit. Was he- was he insinuating that we’d made a run for it?!!*

“Forgive us, Hokage-sama, but I was forced to Reverse-Summon us when a masked shinobi attacked us, shortly after Shisui and I spoke to you,” I explained, jaw tilted up and expression serene. *Breathe, Ki-chan. Breathe. You did nothing wrong.* “Hitoshi woke up only seconds before we disappeared and had only now accumulated the strength to return us home.”

A wrinkled hand reached for the pipe, lighting it swiftly and I vaguely wondered, in the back on my mind, if every conversation had the Sandaime reaching for his tobacco or if I was just that special.

“I see…” He puffed out a stream of white smoke. “Your father claimed you are a civilian, Kiharu-chan.”

“I am-” I swallowed hard, desperate that he didn’t think I was showing any sort of prowess that would get me landed in the Academy. Somehow, I didn’t think my Tou-san could block that path a second time. “I am, Sandaime-sama. However, Hitoshi is the last of his contract and my Tou-san’s personal summon. Hitoshi wanted me to inherit that mantle someday, Shinobi or not, so I signed the contract. I really badly struggled with the Summoning so I’m not surprised that Tou-san wasn’t aware that I could Reverse us. I hadn’t been able to try it, you see, what with Hitoshi in hospital-”

“I understand, Kiharu-chan, do not worry.” *Somehow, miraculously. I am not comforted.* “And what of this masked man?” Hiruzen was unmoved. The figures behind me - I’d not dared peek, terrified it would be Ibiki or Homura or-!- shifted slightly, evidently impatient that I get a move on.

I shifted my weight onto the opposite hip, feeling like I was on trial in the middle of the room. My summon, a statue beside me, was not very reassuring in his silence. “I came straight back to the Hospital room after seeing you, Sandaime-sama, and I remember thinking something was weird. I took off my coat, as per usual, to put it over my chair but...there was a pipe on the floor, one of the tubes from Hitoshi’s drip. I was scared he’d been injured and-”

“Why were you so certain he’d be attacked, Kiharu-chan?” Sandaime leaned forwards, pipe set aside and fingers threaded with his weight on his elbows.

Jaw popping, my nerves started to dissipate. He wanted to squeeze me for info, maybe, or something else. But those questions! The answer was so obvious! “I summoned Hitoshi back before he could be killed. That person was obviously toying with him, what with his ‘Ghost’ ability. Maybe ‘Toshi saw something, I don’t know, but I thought he might come and finish the job.”

“And...did he?” Small, sharp eyes bore into mine. I’d never felt smaller. It was really pissing me off.

“No.”
“And you’re sure?” A sharp baritone bit out behind me and I tried not to spook too badly. The speaker had not even been considerate enough to make noise to alert me, tch. Holding back a nervous gulp, I turned to look over my shoulder.

Ibiki was infinitely more terrifying in real life.

His skin was deeply tanned, aged from sun exposure despite spending most of his time in the interrogation cells, with hard black eyes and a straight mouth. His stubble was very subtle, more like a scratchiness to his skin than actual hair, and two broad scars bisected his face diagonally. He was massive, over 6’5”, and broad, a huge hulking figure swathed in black despite the summer heat.

Slap me sideways but he was strangely attractive. In a kind of Black Ops/Mark Strong kind of way. For fuck’s sake, Kiharu, now is not the damn time! Focus!

I paused for the shortest moment, as if I was gathering my thoughts. Not like I was trying to come up with a good argument when I couldn’t just say it was a ROOT mask and be done with it. Hopefully.

“Yes, Shinobi-san. I’m sure. He didn’t ‘attack’ Hitoshi, despite my being gone over an hour. He could have simply killed Hitoshi in an instant but he didn’t. He waited, behind the door, and threw a kunai at me. It’s only because of my dad and my summon that I was even able to duck enough.” I touched a hand to the dirty, blood-stained handkerchief tied around my throat. My eyes had not moved from Ibiki’s the entire time. Still suspended, I continued. “He came for me, unlike the man before, who would have had no reason to.”

“And if he traced the summoning back to you, identified you as the one who interrupted?” He parried.

“Well, I’d be dead,” I replied promptly. “And I doubt it would have taken him so long, regardless.”

My eyes finally left Ibiki’s, trailing over his shoulder and popping wide at the passive annoyance simmering under Shikaku and Raidou’s professional expressions. Why the hell were they annoyed?

“Thank you for your insight, Kiharu-chan,” the Sandaime broke the stilted silence and I ripped my eyes from Raidou’s, whipping around to face the Kage. “You may go now; Raven will escort you to the hospital so your neck may be treated.”

I’m sorry, what?

“Sandaime-sama?” I asked, standing alone and suddenly uncertain. Hitoshi had finally moved, standing directly in front of the Hokage’s desk and sitting obediently on the carpet. Somehow, I felt that, had he been human, ‘Toshi would’ve been kneeling in submission.

What a perfect little soldier you make, ‘Toshi. My mouth twisted.

“Go on, Kiharu-chan.” One hand gently waved me away and an ANBU, long black hair loose behind a bird-like mask, appeared at my shoulder.

“Why?” I shook off the hand Raven placed on my shoulder, stepping forwards and glancing around. “Am I not going to be told what’s happened since we were gone? Where’s my father or Nee-chan?” I sent a beseeching glance over my shoulder to Raidou but the Tokubetsu just gazed back at me.

“Nii-san?”

“Go on, Kiharu-chan. I’ll come and get you after.” Raidou nodded solemnly and my gaze dropped to the floor. Sometimes, I forgot how strict the older man could be.
“...no.”

Brow furrowed in concern and disbelief, Hiruzen leaned forwards. “I’m sorry, Kiharu-chan?”

Jaw clenched and eyes hard, I looked back at the Village leader. “I said ‘No’. There’s no point going to the hospital,” My voice grew louder, more heated, as my temper fractured. I was well past my breaking point now. “I’m just some civilian, what could they do for me?”

“Ki-”

“They’ll send me home with a plaster and a sweet like a little kid. They don’t really treat non-shinobi there, so just let me go home if you won’t tell me anything. It’s not like I’m involved or anything, like there must be a reason you’ve not sent for my family. But no, I’m just a civilian brat who can’t know anything!”

For a long, tense moment there was no noise, besides my impassioned breathing. I was fuming, recklessly loose-lipped, with fists clenched and I could feel the horrified gazes boring into my spine. Maybe I’d regret this later but, honestly? I didn’t give a flying fuck.

The Sandaime was completely unruffled, eyes shadowed by his hat as he let me say my piece. Hitoshi’s head was low, ears tucked forwards. He did not look at me.

“....You are a child, Kiharu-chan...I’m very disappointed in you. You are not privy to such details and I was obviously mistaken when I thought you could be mature. Raven, please escort her home and make sure she is not hurt.”

“Hai, Hokage-sama.”

A firm hand came down on my shoulder, turning me and leading me to the door. I stared straight ahead, unwilling to look at any of the men, least of all Nii-san, but also refusing to look down. I had nothing to be ashamed of. I was right and that’s why they’d had no response. How could you refute the truth?

Funny how we were only ‘children’ when it suited their arguments. That never stopped them from indoctrinating child soldiers or murdering anyone for the sake of some ryou.

The door closed behind us with a finite ‘thud’.

“Climb on, Dazai-san.” The ANBU’s monotone broke through my incensed thoughts, turning around and gesturing for me to climb onto their back.

Wordlessly, I did as they said, looping my arms around their shoulders and letting their gloved hands grip my calves. Then, with only the squeeze of their palm on my leg to warn me, the ANBU launched us out of the window and, for the second time that evening, I was speeding through the village.

Our house was dark and the further confirmation that Tou-san wasn’t available made my stomach twist. Raven leapt onto our roof, sliding down to the porch ledge and dropping onto the steps. I didn’t even try to hide it when I slipped my hand into my training sports bra and fished out my keys.

The corridor was dark but still clean (I’d only been gone a week or so, after all) but dad’s sandals weren’t in the hallway and his own keys weren’t on the radiator ledge. He’s really not home…

*It could be anything, I tried to reason to myself. Guard duty, that fire earlier..a-anything!*
“Dazai-san,” Raven appeared in front of me, breaking me from my thoughts and grasping my elbow in their large hand. Steering me into the kitchen, the ANBU fished a flannel off the tea towel railing and wet it in the sink. “Your neck.” They gestured to the handkerchief on my neck and I nodded in consent, my anger long-since deserted me. I was just...hollow.

The white cotton was stuck to the wound, a dirty grey and stiff from constantly being wrung out in the river and then dried against my skin. In the end, when peeling just aggravated the deep cut and blood started welling up again, the ANBU had me lean over the sink and slowly washed the fabric off. When it was off and they’d made sure the cut was clean, a long roll of gauze was pulled from a hip pouch and slowly wound around my neck.

I’d scar for sure.

Raven was completely silent, methodical and calm even when I made a nuisance of myself, pestering them with questions and pointed barbs. My brief apathy was gone as irritation once more sparked in my belly.

“How won’t even tell a young girl if her father is safe?” I sniped, head turned away to stare at our reflections in the windows, the only light on being the one over the oven.

Raven was silent.

“Why are you even here, then, Hyuuga-san?!” I clenched my eyes shut but felt it when the ANBU’s fingers twitched minutely at my throat.

“What?” I laughed bitterly. “You think it’s hard to work out? Long dark hair, your head doesn’t turn when you move - despite the decreased perceptual vision of those masks - and who else would Sandaime-sama send to look after a girl, a potential target for several unknown assailants? One of whom can ‘ghost’ through solid objects and attacks?”

The silence was telling. I laughed again, the sound loud and harsh in the empty house.

“...won’t you tell me anything?”

The ANBU tied off the gauze, tucking in the ends and moving back to hold a silent vigil in the far corner.

Ensui was running.

As a Nara, he hated moving quickly on principle but, right now? He was fucking legging it.

The fire had spread rapidly, tearing through the sun-parched landscape at a truly terrifying rate. The only thing scarier, after all, than a fire carefully controlled, was a completely unchecked one. And this one was setting Konoha’s internal fields alight, only half an hour after it started.

The blaze had seemingly started on private property, an ANBU team already dispatched to douse the flames there, with Ensui and other Chuunin sent to stop it from spreading, at the very least. Ensui was earth-natured, so he wouldn’t be able to put out the flames with a simple jutsu, but he’d been given several sealed gourds of water at the Station, so he figured he could be of some use.
The fire had gone in several different directions, simply catching between the extremely flammable foliage. It had started in a richer neighbourhood, ones with houses spread far apart with wealthy owners, just on the other side of the Aburame Complex. And Ensui?

Ensui was racing for the south-western fields.

It was, after all, where some children liked to play.

Pumping his legs faster, the Nara used chakra on his feet to propel himself between tree trunks, a water-scroll ready to go in one hand.

The fire had started to catch onto the treetops here, little flames licking up the bark and sparks searing into the low-hanging leaves.

Two small figures on the far side of the field, children from their height, had Ensui’s eye twitching at the absolute chance, even as he leapt from the trees and opened the first scroll over the burning undergrowth. A massive amount of water rushed out, dozens of gallons at least, and the Nara was forced to channel chakra to his feet to stay in place. Smoke and steam bloomed upwards with a violent hiss, flowing over the brunette and making his eyes smart as he squinted. Eventually, though, the water ran out, that section reduced to smouldering ash and singed greenery.

“Shinobi-san!” A girl’s voice cried - an Uchiha, judging by looks - as she ran over, pulling her friend behind her. They were small, no doubt just entering Academy age and, even if they seemed much more expressive than most Uchiha, Ensui wrote it off as a side-effect of their young age. Shisui was a bit of an anomaly, anyway. And, speaking of-

“What are you two doing out here?” He scowled, rolling up the now-empty scroll and stuffing it into a random pocket. “Did you somehow manage to miss the massive fire behind you?”

Let it not be said that Ensui was good with children.

(Shika-chan didn’t count. They were too similar to grate on each other. Well, at least not yet.)

“We were looking for Itachi-kun!” The little brunette - the one who’d called out to him initially - defended them and Ensui’s scowl deepened.

“Itachi-san? He’s out here?” the Nara waved an expansive hand to the smoking woods behind them. Vaguely, the Chuunin could hear his fellow shinobi arrive to quench the rest of the fire in this area. Good. “How can you be sure?”

“I saw him leave!” She nodded, face cool as an Uchiha but little voice incensed. What an interesting character…

“Itachi isn’t stupid enough to run into a fire.” Ensui reasoned, keeping half an eye on the teams finishing up with the fire behind him.

The little brunette Uchiha wasn’t convinced, cocking a brow and squinting up at him. “How would you know?” She accused.

Deadpan and extremely unimpressed with the current conversation, Ensui replied. “Because I know him. He is like Shisui’s little brother after all-”

Abruptly, the little girl was suddenly all friendliness, bounding even closer and staring up at the Chuunin with huge dark eyes. “You know Itachi-kun? How well? Do you make him laugh-”
Sensing where this conversation was headed, Ensui quickly interrupted, mercilessly crushing any guilt when the little brunette dropped back on her heels with a pout. “Get on my back, you two. The fire is still burning around here and I need to get you home.”

Crouching down, the silent one - even tinier, wow, with a little black bob - scurried over and Ensui swung her onto his hip once the chatty brunette was secure on his back. With a quick word of warning and a head-up to the other Chuunin, the Nara took a chakra-powered leap out of the clearing.

The Uchiha Compound wasn’t far away at all - kami, he hoped the fire wouldn’t get that far - and, a few minutes later, Ensui was dropping down in front of the gate, sparing a brief explanation for the gate-keeper (Kiharu liked him, so he was a decent guy) and relieving himself of his burden.

The tiny one had blushed crimson in his hold, smiling shyly and quickly ducking behind the guard, but the brunette was much more difficult to ditch.

“You’re going to go look for Itachi-kun, right?” She asked/demanded and Ensui rolled his eyes upwards, internally asking for patience.

“Listen, kid-”

“Izumi. Uchiha Izumi-”

“Listen, Izumi-san, Itachi is probably at the Station or with his brother, and I have to go find Mikoto-shisou, so just go into the Compound and stay there, okay?”

Nodding at the guard - was that amusement? Just great - Ensui leapt onto the nearest rooftop, heading back towards the Station in the hopes that someone might’ve seen the Matriarch recently.

If he looked back and saw a little girl staring after him, well-

Troublesome, tch.

………………………………………………………………

Night had fallen, a good few hours having passed, and I had cycled through more emotions than I knew what to do with.

Anger, helplessness, anger, bitterness, resignation, anger, sadness, anger-

I’d never before doubted my resolve to reject the shinobi lifestyle more than in these past few hours.

Maybe, if I was a ninja, I could have been debriefed alongside Hitoshi, maybe the panther would’ve confided in me. Maybe I’d be out there helping. Maybe I wouldn’t feel so helpless.

Well, fuck this shit!

Snapping out of my funk (and, consequently, leaping straight back into indignation), I told myself to get a fucking grip. I’d made my choices and, Kami-sama, I wasn’t going to regret them now. Sure, I had piss-poor access to some (read: most) things but, at what price?

Not having to be a murderer, on the whims of elderly assholes and under the constant threat of being court marshalled or arrested or shamed to the point of suicide for not following orders-
Hatake Sakumo was an absolute star (albeit a foolish, well-meaning one) and anyone who thought differently could **fight me**.

The Hyuuga ANBU Raven was watching diligently in the corner and, with literally nothing else moving in the house, all their focus was on me. **Joy**.

So, I couldn’t go anywhere - and, if by some miracle, I was transported away, where was I even supposed to **go**? Into the fire? This wasn’t **Terminator** - but I could still **plot**.

**Okay, so, obviously some serious shit has gone down when I was away. Sandaime-sama had suggested that they didn’t realise the second chakra signature was mine so they must’ve thought the attack was successful**. Internally wincing, I offered up an apology for the scene dad and the others must’ve come across, made worse by the thought we’d been successfully taken.

**Tou-san was definitely on the case then, he was a good tracker and he had every right to be involved** (here, unless something was seriously up, personal involvement in a case/mission was only seen as motivation, rather than a hindrance). **Inoichi-oji was probably involved**, too, I mentally added.

**So, a ‘civie’ girl goes missing alongside a comatose summon. What’s next?** I pondered the ceiling, tapping a finger to my chin in thought. The room was still dark, I couldn’t be bothered to even sort my snarling stomach some food let alone turn on the goddamn lights, and I had migrated to the dining room table. The polished wood gleamed blue in the evening light.

**Well, you’d talk to any witnesses and compile information on the missing person(s). Then, you’d make a list of suspects, people with grudges or motive and people with a history of this sort of crime.**

**History...a history-**

**Shit, fuck-No.**

Whipping my head around, I stared at my ANBU guard, blue eyes burning into dark eye-holes of the mask.

Internally, I was raging.

**How dare they, how fucking dare they?! Somehow they still wound up at Danzo’s door!**

This better not be the reason Shisui and Ensui, let alone everyone else, haven’t been told of my ‘house-arrest’.

The unnamed, unidentified Hyuuga was a statue in the face of my flaming eyes.

Unable to do anything, I sat and stewed in my disbelief and anger. I knew, by god I knew, that I had a-a **thing** for being involved. It came part in parcel with my knowledge from before, my need to be ‘in the know’. It was gonna land me in serious trouble one day - had probably already done so, reflecting back on earlier - and I knew that I was being an asshole. I wasn’t a puppetmaster, playing god with people’s lives, but I was still slightly obsessed with the threats I knew existed.

And anyone in Danzo’s vicinity had my senses going absolutely insane.

Shisui wasn’t around, neither was Tou-san or Ensui or Nee-chan and, whilst they could be on missions or helping with that fire from earlier, my gut instinct was telling me that things were so much worse. Hunches, the subconscious making connections beyond those of the conscious mind, were not to be underestimated or undervalued.
If I'd somehow ruined everything, despite trying to point them all in Madara’s direction...I wasn't sure how I'd cope.

Twenty minutes later, Raidou, Izumo and Kotetsu dropped into the garden, visible through the kitchen windows.

“Praise Kami!” I breathed, rushing to the back door and yanking it open. A second later, Raidou had wrapped me in a hard hug - signs of affection were treasures from the usually easily embarrassed man - and I melted into his flak jacket. Damn, I really needed the comfort right now.

Of course, that was the precise moment I spoke too soon.

Hands wrapping around my upper arms, Raidou pulled back to shake me gently, expression aggravated. “Do you have any idea how worried we were? And what was that! Disrespecting the Hokage?”

From the squawks behind the older man, I guessed the Terrible Two hadn’t been informed of that little nugget.

Eyebrows twitching - I was still pissed off over what had happened in the office amongst other things - I shook off his hands, stepping back to put some space between us and folding my arms defensively.

I really didn't appreciate being treated like this was all my fault (in a way, it was, but I knew that well enough without having it pointed out to me. They didn't mean it like that, but still. And I hadn't done it on purpose!).

“Hey!” My eyebrow ticked. “I'm really sorry but aren't you glad we're okay?”

Straightening up and rubbing a calloused hand down a scarred cheek, Raidou stared down at me reproachfully. “Of course we’re thankful but, Kami-sama, we thought you'd been kidnapped, Kiharu-chan. And then you come bounding through the woods, stand up to Morino-san and disrespect Sandaime-sama!”

“Well, I wasn't wrong, was I?” I snarked. “Why can't I know what's happened in my own missing person’s investigation?”

Turning me around and pushing me back inside with a hand on each shoulder, the Tokubetsu Jounin flicked on the light switch as he herded me towards the kitchen. “Because you're a child and a civilian. You lack both the clearance and the mentality to be confided in like that. It was incredibly inappropriate for you to behave that way, Kiharu-chan.”

Mouth set, the older man could see my resolve. Raidou sighed deeply.

Behind us, Izumo and Kotetsu had been suspiciously quiet, scurrying over to the sofa and listening to our argument intently. Raven had moved to cover the doorway.

“You're not allowed to know these things and you'll have to apologize to Hokage-sama later. You're not above the rules, Kiharu-chan.”

But I should be, I wanted to insist. But…

Where would the line be, then, if I was an exemption in secrecy laws? I'd never been trained to fight off attackers (Tou-san’s self-defence against muggers and creeps didn't count) nor withstand torture. What if I snapped and revealed everything?
I could understand. I was just a little girl, albeit a strangely insightful one, who was prying into State Secrets. I'd overstepped some huge boundaries, raised my voice and disrespected the local Dictator and kicked up a fuss about the Status Quo.

Shit, I was really screwed, wasn't I?

I'd done a lot of damage in a few impassioned sentences but I couldn't bring myself to regret it. I had been discrete with my views but recent events had kind of blown them out of the water. At least I'd not demanded a constitutional amendment or social revolution....insinuating that the health care system was used to repress a portion of the population (the majority, funnily enough) was relatively tame, in comparison to what I could have blurted out. My demands to be let in on the debriefing could simply be cast off as the desperation of a young girl in a stressful situation.

*Heh. Yeah, right.*

Eyes fixed on the lacquered table, I studied the way the wood gleamed in the light with faux nonchalance. “Was I wrong?” Raidou, sitting opposite me, shifted in his seat. “Was I wrong to want to know about Tou-san and the others?”

*Kami, I wanted my dad.*

Raidou didn't reply but his hand was warm on mine.

Sensing the atmosphere had settled - not resolved, no. But no longer so volatile - Kotetsu hesitantly spoke up, the two teenagers rising from my sofa. “Do you wanna go get changed or clean up, Kiharu? I mean, you've been in the woods for a week with an overgrown house cat for company.” A faint smile tugged at Izumo’s lips at his best friend’s antics.

Nodding, I couldn't help but roll my eyes at his reference to my summon. “He'll kill you if he hears you call him that,” I pointed out reasonably, hopping from my chair and heading towards the stairs.

“Only if he catches wind of it, Kiharu~” Kotetsu grinned.

Pausing in the doorway, I turned to narrow my eyes at the ANBU across the room. “Don't you dare ‘keep guard’ on me in the shower.”

The ANBU didn't even twitch but I got the sense they had rolled their eyes.

Either way, I wasn't convinced.

“I'm being serious, I'll station Raidou-nii outside if I have to,” I warned.

Raven was as expressive as a statue and I threw my hands up in the air in frustration.

“Urgh, fine! Raidou-nii, come on, you can wait outside the door and protect my helpless little body.”

Blushing but standing up regardless, the Tokubetsu sputtered as the two boys snickered in amusement. “I-I don't think~”

Tossing him an unimpressed look over my shoulder as I climbed the stairs, my reply was rewarded with a furiously blushing and speechless Raidou.

“Don’t be ridiculous, I trust you. I mean, I’m just a *kid*, chill. Anyway, you're so in love with Nee-chan, you don't even notice other people! So there's no need to worry, for anyone!”
I was only just opening the cubicle door, smelling of dad’s shampoo and dripping from my lightning-fast shower, when Raidou started knocking.

"Don't come in! I'm just getting out-” I wrapped a towel around my shoulders, swallowing when I realised I'd grabbed Tou-san's from the cupboard and that's why it was swamping me. It was freshly laundered but my dad had used it for years, the scent of his shampoo embedded into the worn fabric. Quickly rubbing myself down, I slipped on my underwear and pulled on some leggings, the stretchy material sticking to my still-damp skin. A plain white T-shirt went over my camisole and I flipped my hair out of the collar, ignoring how it landed on my back with a wet slap. Ripping open the door, tense blue eyes clashed with the Tokubetsu's hazelnut brown. "What is it, what's happened?"

"Come on, Kiharu-chan. We've been called to the hospital."

The hospital was a flurry of activity.

Nurses flitted around the reception, a handful of civilians getting treated for exposure to the smoke and/or flames and we were greeted by Sora-oba and Kaiya as soon as we stepped through the doors.

"Kiharu!” The brunette called, eyes wide and hand coming up to press against a wobbling mouth. Sora broke into a jog, a sleeping Ino on one hip, as she raced across the foyer towards our group.

We met in a desperate hug halfway.

“Oba-san,” I swallowed, smooshing my face into her torso, her arms – still strong from her kunoichi days and from living a busy lifestyle – squeezing me against her. “Oba-san, what's happened?”

“Oh, Nekki-chan, where were you? Your Uncle and father have been looking everywhere.”

Closing my eyes against her dress, breathing in the scent of freesia and honeysuckle, I took a moment to revel in the well-being of one of my precious people. “I’m sorry Oba-san. Hitoshi and I got out okay but we weren’t able to come home until a few hours ago.” One hand gripped the back of Sora’s dress, the other carefully coiling around Ino as she slept, peacefully oblivious, to the turmoil around her. “Who’s hurt?”

Leaning back to brush my hair from my forehead, Sora gazed down at me with sad eyes.

“Oba-san, after your oji-san and dad went to visit Elder Danzo, “The lack of the usual ‘-sama’ honorific was not missed, “in his home, a fire jutsu spread out of control. Several other shinobi were there at the time, but too busy to put it out-“

She’s babying me, I realised with a jolt.

“-and, in the confusion, several ninjas deflected from the Village. When your father and uncle,
amongst others, tried to stop them, they became caught up in the fire.”

We’d been walking the entire time and now, Sora turned into a discreet side-corridor, stopping before a patient’s room.

“Everyone is going to live, Ki-chan, but your father was badly burned, as was Inoichi. Genma-san is currently having his leg set and Shisui-kun-”

What.

WHAT-?!

“-is in surgery at the moment.”

Throwing off my Aunt’s hand, I lunged forward and shoved the hospital room door open. It bounced off the wall with an echoing ‘bang’.

My father, bandages wrapped around his shoulders and visible underneath the standard hospital gown, was propped up in bed, pale sheets tucked around his legs and an IV drip in his arm. His hair was sooty, probably singed, and he looked completely exhausted. Soot smeared over his tanned skin, a cut above his eyebrow tapped shut, and a split lip completed the look.

When the door smashed against the wall, Seiichi had lurched upright, left arm wrapping around his tender ribs at the jolt, and whipped around to face the intruder.

“You-You idiot!” I shrieked, jabbing a finger at his face and popping my hip to the left. Tou-san’s mouth dropped in disbelief.

“K-ki-chan?!” He breathed, dark eyes filling with tears, and I had to force my scowl to hold steady.

“How could you be so reckless?” I stomped closer, violently pouring some water from the bedside jug into a dispensible cup and slamming the beaker down when I was finished. “Don’t you know I love you, you silly man-”

It was at this point, when I shoved the drink into Tou-san’s hands, that dad ignored my kindness and wrapped his arms around me, pulling me into his lap and crushing the cup of water between us.

“Oi!” I yelped, feeling the liquid pour down my top. I was wearing white, too!

“Kiharu,” Dad’s voice, serious and deep under my ear, cut through my bravado with all the strength of an industrial laser. “I’m so glad you’re home.”

His voice was thick with tears and, where his cheek was crushed against my head, dampness had already started to seep through to my scalp. He smelled of smoke and blood and hospitals but I burrowed closer anyway, careful not to touch the heavy wrapping around his shoulders or put too much pressure on his ribs. When his breathing grew heavier, lungs hiccupping as he started crying in earnest, I slowly leaned back, ignoring how he desperately tried to hold me to him.

“Neko-Tou,” I choked, swallowing my own tears. Breathing deeply, I shook my head fondly as my hands – so small and pale next to his weathered skin – came up to wipe the tears streaming down his face. My father was so quick to cry, both happy or sad, and, for once, I couldn’t tell which category these fell into. “Shhhhhh-” I hummed, sat sideways in his lap.

Something about seeing my dad cry, as I had done countless times, calmed me. I didn’t take strength in the ‘weakness’ of others, for surely there was no weakness in expressing emotion, but it was more
that this was when he looked to me for support. I was only a child here but I remembered being older, being someone that people could depend on. I had been the ‘mom friend’, in all honesty. And for my dad, a talented Chuunin in his own right and a brilliant father, to seek comfort from me…even if it was only a cuddle and some affection, a friendly face and an ear to listen, I felt useful.

Maybe it was wrong to feel validated like that but that was how I felt, nothing else to it.

“Come on, you need to rehydrate, okay?” I reached over and poured him a second cup, tossing away the crushed one and surveying the massive wet mark on both our chests and the sheets with an unimpressed pout. “I’ll tell you everything whilst you drink up.”

Inoichi-oji had been just waking up from a nap when Tou-san finally let me leave (puppy eyes were not to be underestimated), lying down with the covers to his chin and Sora-oba by his side. The couple were holding hands whilst Ino was tucked under his arm. The four-year-old was still sleeping and, in the back of my mind, I lamented that she couldn’t have been that heavy a sleeper as a baby.

I’d just come from Genma’s room, after popping my head in for a quick scolding (it really went both ways) and wrangling a hug from the 22-year-old. His leg, propped up in a cast, made his blustering all the more entertaining. Seeing as Raidou had already been there when I arrived, I left with the warning that strenuous activity could aggravate nee-chan’s condition so they’d better be good.

Nee-chan’s demands for where I’d learned such things had followed me down the hallway. Rapping a knuckle on the door, I watched as turquoise eyes slowly cracked open, glazed from his nap, before widening in realisation.

“Kiharu, Sora told me what happened. Are you okay?”

Pushing off the doorframe, I moved to sit on the other side of the bed, taking one of his hands when Sora-oba let it go. “Aren’t I supposed to be the one asking you that, oji-san?” I teased, the joke falling slightly flat. Inoichi was sweet enough to smile anyway.

“I suppose I’ve looked better, yes,” The Clan Head conceded, shifting slightly with a sigh.

“Oh, I don’t know, Inoichi-oji,” I reached to trail a finger, the touch barely-there over the pink skin (the medic-nin had left just before I came). The scar, tapered and blurring, so unlike a clean cut from a blade, trailed from his clavicle, over his throat and up his jaw to the cheekbone, before burning through the hair over and past his ear. “I think it looks rather impressive.”

“I’ll have to get used to having my hair down, no?” He persisted, blue-green eyes flickering over to his wife and daughter. “I hope the three of you will not lead me astray with a new style?”

Grinning despite myself, despite the lump in my throat, I squeezed the hand in mine reprovingly. “Nonsense! That won’t be necessary, you didn’t lose **that** much. After all, even if you lost **all** your hair, you will **always** be pretty.”

Shisui came out of surgery two hours later.

Mikoto, Itachi and Sasuke had been there when I arrived—

“-thank goodness, Kiharu-chan, what mischief you attract-” Mikoto had clasped her hands onto my
shoulders, pressing a kiss to my forehead before squeezing my hands in hers. Itachi had been visible relieved, eyes softening in a pale face, and I’d felt a stab of guilt for worrying the younger boy.

He’d slipped a hand into mine for a while before little Sasuke had grown sleepy and the four of us had settled down in the hospital chairs to wait.

However, we’d only been there ten or so minutes when an ANBU came to escort Itachi to the Hokage.

When I asked why, the younger boy had simply pulled his hand from mine with a small, reassuring smile and left after speaking to his mother.

Fugaku, I was told, had been ‘around’ (the obvious concealment was really starting to set my teeth on edge) when the fire had started but had managed to make it out only mildly singed. He’d been in the Hokage’s office ever since, along with Ensui.

Thinking about it, why the fuck were both Ensui and Itachi being called to speak to the Sandaime. What did those two do-

Dammit, I wanted to see that stupid Nara.

Everyone else could lie through their teeth to me all they wanted but Ensui was one of the few people I trusted to actually tell me shit. He didn’t ‘do’ sugar-coating, which aggravating at times but still refreshing, and I knew that I never had to second guess myself around him. He’d tell me. And I was pretty damn sure he’d break rank to do so, too.

The only other one who would do so was currently on an operating table.

Finally though, finally, finally- a Medic-nin came out to tell us that the surgery had been successful and that we’d be able to see Shisui in another hour or so.

I won’t deny that I cried a bit.

I didn’t know how much of an effect this would have on things in the long term but…Shisui was alive. He’d fought Danzo and lived.

Now I just had to get my mind around the fact that Danzo had run, taking ROOT with him. Danzo, the man who’d an to disgustingly extreme lengths for his beloved Konoha…a missing-nin.

What were we going to do now?

“-We were able to successfully reconstruct the bone but Uchiha-san will be off duty for several months. However, we are certain…he will walk again.”

BLOOPER I

A Uni Student’s desperation
“-no vodka, no gin – what the hell?? No Rum?-Shit-”

The words were completely foreign but, in all honesty, Seiichi didn’t even dare ask.

He’d learnt long ago not to question where Ki-chan pulled all those weird names from. Nevermind the fact they meant absolute nonsense character-wise (as proven from her odd nicknames ‘Noko’ and ‘Nekki’, Kiharu had the strangest habit of focusing on sounds rather than meaning or spelling), but that girl was terrifying if you pointed out how such things made no sense.

Nothing on this world was worth seeing his darling Ki-chan’s blue eyes – identical to her mother’s – dripping with tears, like diamonds surrounding sapphires.

Nope. Nope, he wasn’t going there.

“Papa?” The angel in question called innocently, voice echoing from his study, of all places.

“Yeah, Hime?” he called back, setting aside the book he’d been failing to read and levering himself up from the sofa. Legs slightly asleep, the Chuunin slouched into the smaller room directly across the hall, taking in how his daughter was peering around the green room. “What are you looking for, Ki-chan?”

When she twirled around to face him, Seiichi noticed the jug for the first time. It was half-filled with a strange pinkish liquid, ice-cubes clattering with the movement and lemon segments bobbing.

The eight-year-old beamed innocently, heaving the massive pitcher up as if to show him. She really was adorable-

“Can I have some sake for my cocktail?”

C-c-cock-what?!

‘thud’.

Note: After his comatose body was escorted to the hospital by a pack of extremely concerned neighbours and he had spoken to several therapists, Dazai Seiichi started down the slow road to recovery.

.................................................................

BLOOPER II

If Ki-chan gave in to some small impulses (like she was sorely tempted to):

The Hyuuga ANBU was silent, stood in the open doorway and all but radiating disapproval.

Pissed beyond belief, the faceless ninja’s apathy only served to fan the flames of my rage. That smug asshole, who the hell do they think they are, looking down on me? ‘No child, civilian especially, is privy to such details’, my ass! ‘Respect Hokage-sama,’ - ha! I don’t think so!

Teeth gritted, I reached for a glass and measured its weight in my hand. Well, the Sandaime said they
had to protect me…nothing about me playing nice about it-

Unleashing all my frustration, I launched the glass at the wall with an unholy shriek. It smashed explosively just over the Hyuuga’s shoulder. Shards rained down, skittering harmlessly over ANBU armour and Raven didn’t even flinch.

Well, …that won’t do.

“Get wrecked, biatch-!” I crowed, blindly reaching for the salt shaker and flinging it with renewed vigour.

The Hyuuga asshole didn’t start ducking until I got my paws on some squishy veggies, found ageing at the bottom of the fridge.

*Warning: No Hyuuga were harmed in the making of this OMAKE. *Kiharu swears up a storm in the background*

Chapter End Notes

A/N- I’M SORRY! I’ve been wading through coursework for a while now and I had several hand-in’s due these past few weeks, so writing was put on hold. First of all, thank you to everyone who messaged or commented (sometimes twice) to check that I was okay, that was really uplifting and made me work even harder to free up some time to write! And thanks to all the comments etc in general! X Secondly, who likes the chapter~ I’m really liking the idea of the Bloopers/Omakes, so that’s possibly a regular thing. (I’m not gonna spoil the mood by adding them after a really tense scene etc ;) don’t worry!).

Announcements! Chasingangels (or Viper) has been an absolute gem to my incompetent self (I am a grandma with technology) and set this fic up a Discord chat! It’s super casual so don’t feel nervous about joining, this is the first place I’ve mentioned it so the two of us are just rattling around right now lol. If you wanna join, just message me on Tumblr!

Ta-dah! Hope to see you there! Also, feel free to find me on Tumblr at “ x-authorship-x ” or follow this!

<3
The Slow Road

Chapter Summary

The Slow Road to Recovery...could fuck right off. I had zero patience (it was the reason half the batter never even saw the oven)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The first thing Shisui was aware of was the noise.

Obnoxious ‘beep’-ing in one ear (oh, great, that was definitely the hospital then-) and the fuzziness of his head. He felt like that time his sensei had slammed him into the wall during training, ears ringing and brain completely scattered. He’d walked away with a concussion and badly bruised back, sensei’s strict command not to fall asleep reverberating in his ears.

Absently, Shisui wondered if this level of pain and confusion was what his sensei had been warning him about.

Probably. It sucked.

His body was alarmingly (or, rather, he would be alarmed if his brain wasn’t floating in the clouds -meds, then ) disassociated, numb, with his fingers tingling and everything below the waist just not there. Like it didn’t even exist.

Shisui wiggled his fingers once, twice, and felt his lips quirk in a tiny grin. They felt so weird, like they weren’t even his!

“-family only, I cannot allow-”

Urgh, the overhead screaming match was pretty hard to ignore too.
“-I’d like to see you try! You couldn’t drag my dead body.-”

Shisui’s eyes popped open.

His eyes were burry, the world briefly washed in a milky film, and a spear of panic for his eyes, his Sharingan and Mangekyou, lanced the Jonin’s heart.

His life - no, the previous night! - flashed before his eyes.

_Danzo- I-Itachi-

His quiet gasp caught the attention of the two females above him and, suddenly, Shisui found himself being prodded by an extremely relieved-looking medic.

Well, he would’ve seen that, had he not been blinded by a cloud of thick, brown hair.

Arms carefully wrapped around his shoulders, like he was made of spun glass and liable to break, and his head was tucked under a soft chin. Skin was pressed up against his nose, soft and so civilian. She smelled of cookie-dough and the hydrangeas she’d started planting in March. Her hair was a thick curtain around them, loose and dark, falling in tangled waves and curls to block out the rest of the world.

His arms were weak and fingers still numb, but Shisui forced his limbs to come up and clumsily wrap around her back. Bandaged fingers desperately sought purchase in a worn white t-shirt and held on for dear life. Her embrace was both gentle and weary, like coming home from a long journey. And, even as the stream of berations in his ear continued to question his sanity, even as the nurse continued to try and evict his visitor, even has his head was aching in confusion and the first flashes of pain started to spark in his legs, Shisui held on tight.

Because the last thing he remembered was the mind-blowing agony as his legs splintered like toothpicks and the fire raged around them, Danzo staring down at him with a glowing red eye, and his teammates caught in the flames.

And Itachi...stupid, stupid Itachi crouched in front of him.
“Hokage-sama,” the Uchiha Heir bowed low, back straight and arms by his sides.

His father’s gaze drilled into his back like a kunai pressed to the spine.

“Itachi-kun,” Sarutobi returned genially, small black eyes flicking between the Uchiha Heir and the older Nara boy who was still kneeling in front of the desk. “I understand you must be weary after your...excursions...but, your report.”

Eyes cast down, lashes brushing his cheeks, the onyx-haired boy acquiesced.

“Just before the fire broke out, my younger brother, Sasuke, suggested we surprise our mother with dinner. On our way out of the Compound, an explosion sounded a few minutes away in the South-East of the Village. We were closer to the Station than the Compound, so we continued to there instead. Upon arriving, my father had already left, as had most of the force.”

The Sandaime’s eyes flickered over Itachi’s head and, no doubt receiving confirmation from Fugaku, focused back on the young boy infront of him.

“However, Detective Osamu was still present, so I entrusted my brother to him whilst I located mother and Ensui-san. Unfortunately, Ensui-san had already been dispatched alongside the other Chuunins to extinguish the flames. By the time I had left the Station, I am told my mother returned and assumed command of the police force in my father’s place.”

Ensui’s shoulders straightened minutely - *Pride*, Itachi thought - but the younger boy barely gave the slip a second thought. It was here that his tale became...tricky.

“Sergeant Kagen-san informed me that my cousin, Shisui, had been seen at the heart of the fire, in one of the wealthier neighbourhoods, so I...I went to find him.”

The heavy silence that pervaded the office had Itachi internally twitching.
“That was...a foolish venture, Itachi-kun,” the Sandaime noted, sounding slightly surprised. As if he had not thought itachi capable of such action. But... it was Shisui, his closest friend. If Shisui was in the fire, how could he not go?

“I soon arrived at the burning property but it was obvious that some sort of commotion had taken place and that a number of persons had fled the scene. Judging by the trail of destruction, they were moving towards the Village wall and were easy to follow. As I moved, sounds of a battle became louder. There was a team engaged with the unknown assailants.”

Itachi immediately lowered himself to the floor, kneeling in submission in front of his Kage. “Hokage-sama.” He did not apologise. He... he didn’t want to...

“ITachi-kun,” Sarutobi sighed. He needed to know everything.

“I kept going. And everything was aflame, ANBU and non, and Shisui was on the floor with Danzo-sa- Danzo above him.” Itachi slowly looked up to meet the Sandaime’s eyes. “Shisui was badly wounded, his legs bent the wrong way, so I armed myself and moved between them. The fire was extremely close so I used the Grand Fireball to generate a fire wall between us to gather some distance against our stronger opponent. It was then that Ensui-san arrived and was able to distract Danzo long enough for me to move Shisui to relative safety in the trees above. ANBU backup arrived at that moment and Danzo was forced to flee.”

Fingers steepled, the old shinobi closed his eyes for a long moment. Whether it was in deep contemplation or from the bone-deep exhaustion that carved lines in his wrinkled visage, Itachi couldn’t tell.

“And this is your report, Itachi-kun?”

The preteen merely nodded. Those black eyes, like two shiny beetles, were too knowing for comfort. Itachi wondered if his father's burning stare would leave a physical brand on the back of his skull.

“You have displayed extraordinary skills and tenacity as a shinobi this evening, Itachi-kun.” His father's smugness was almost tangible. “However-” Fugaku’s pride was snuffed out like a candle. “We are all leaves on this great tree. You are only Genin and, without a squad, you should never have been near the fire in the first place. That you sought out a potentially-troubled comrade was admirable, but you then proceeded to follow the path of a high-level battle instead if alert your superiors. You saved your friend tonight, but you could have placed him in even more danger had
luck failed to be on your side.”

The silence was stifling, a physical weight pressing down on his shoulders.

“Well, if that is all Itachi-kun, you may go. You as well, Ensui-kun.”

Slowly, slowly, Itachi rose beside his mother's apprentice, feeling like the slave pulling his head from the jaws of the lion.

He didn't look at his father. He already knew what he'd see.

They were almost at the door, the taller boy a solid presence at Itachi’s shoulder, when Sandiamesama spoke again.

“You were a good friend and a loyal comrade this evening Itachi-kun, Ensui-kun. But do not forget that, if none of us depended on or trusted our teammates and fellow shinobi, there would be no Konohagakure. Dismissed.”

The door snapped shut behind them with a finite ‘click’ and they stood in silence on the other side for a long moment, as if to take in all that had happened.

The bandana for a Sergeant, a Junsa-buchou, was clearly wrapped around his left bicep, his right baring the konoha hitai-ate. Whilst new recruits normally started at the bottom, a simple Junsa (officer), Ensui’s veteran rank of Chuunin allowed him to enter at a higher level. Itachi had expected nothing less, even if Ensui was the first ever non-Uchiha to join the force. His mother had ways, not to even mention how skilled the older Nara had proven to be over the past week.

When the secretary pointedly coughed, the two boys forced themselves to move. Slowly making their way, side by side and in silence, down flight upon flight of stairs, Itachi just focused on putting one foot in front of the other.

The Tower was almost empty by now, only the ‘skeleton crew’ still at work, as the duo left the atrium. The street was dark, the street lamps flickering orange and yellow above them, and the wind was still heavy with smoke.
Turning to the Chuunin to acknowledge going their separate ways, Itachi flicked a kunai out of his sleeve when a hand came down on his shoulder. His blade curled threateningly into his would-be attacker’s ribs.

“Itachi-san,” Ensui drawled, deceptively casual. “How about we grab some food from my flat before heading back to the hospital, hmm?”

A dagger rested innocently on his inner thigh, just on top of his femoral.

It wasn't a question but Itachi nodded anyway.

It was only a few minutes walk to the Chuunin’s flat - “The roofs? Why? Shisui... well, he isn't going anywhere for awhile,” - but it felt much longer. Ensui, hands in pockets, was content to stroll along in silence, neck tilted back to watch the slowly emerging stars, but Itachi was exhausted. He'd almost collapsed in the hospital, only drawing strength from Sasuke’s upset face peering up at him for comfort and his mother’s presence. And then, he’d been summoned before Hokage-sama and his father for his account of events. He just wanted to sleep.

But things, evidently, weren't over yet.

He wished Shisui were here. His best friend had always been the more outgoing one, with plenty of friends before they’d all been pulled away by their parents and, then, a strong bond with an older Nara and a civilian Baker. He understood people, emotions, far better than Itachi could fully grasp, and he was as easy going as he was talkative. But, most of all, he'd always been a solid friend Itachi had found himself able to rely on. An ally through it all.

But, if he couldn't ask for Shisui, then Kiharu was a good second choice. They weren't as close but Kiharu was shameless and bright. There was something soothing about the older girl. Maybe it was because, despite their vastly different lifestyles, they had always been ‘lumped’ together as ‘too clever for their own good’. Maybe it was because, even when all the adults seemed uncertain, Kiharu never really lost her sense of direction.

She was also extremely close to Ensui-san. That would've helped, perhaps. At the very least, she wouldn't abide violence.

“Here we are,” The Nara slowed to a halt, turning off the street to jump the handful of steps in front of a tall building. The main door was huge and red with a row of mailboxes that Ensui was
comfortable enough to check, pulling out some take-out menus from his pigeon-hole and punching in his access code for the door. “Just a few flights, Itachi-san.” He reassured over his shoulder, as if the younger boy hadn't been here a hundred times in the past week, running errands for and visiting his mother in her impromptu ‘office’.

When the Chuunin unlocked his front door, moving to allow Itachi to enter first with polite (or was it mocking? Itachi wasn't sure. He'd never really spoken to his cousin's friend) dip of his chin, Itachi wondered whether he was walking into a trap.

Maybe.

Probably.

The shadow that paralysed him as soon as the door snapped shut seemed to support that theory.

In the pitch-black flat, the Uchiha’s Sharingan glowed crimson as it flared to life.

“Now, now, Itachi-san, there's no need for that,” Ensui drawled, still sounding impossibly bored. “I just need to ask you a few questions; some clarification, if you will.”

Itachi scarcely dared breathe.

“So,” the Nara's voice moved closer, threatening and dark as the shadows that bound him. “Why did you have me lie to Hokage-sama?”

I wasn’t crying, I wasn’t.

Shisui’s head was tucked under my chin and his arms were shaking where they rested against my ribs. The medic, whose name I didn’t give a shit about, finally threw her hands up and left, prattling on about getting the Head of the ward. Heh. As if I cared.
“-you idiot! I can’t believe I’m gone for one week and you get yourself landed in surgery! Do you have any idea-”

“Dazai-san!” A tall woman swept into the room, stethoscope swinging around her neck and wielding a clipboard like she was prepared to bat me from the room. “Uchiha-san is in an incredibly delicate position and only family members are allowed access this far into the ward. I must insist you leave immediately.”

Limbs entangled with my best friend’s, the medical staff were rewarded with my most vicious glare. Considering the fact I had picked it up from a bloodthirsty panther, it was rather effective.

“Dazai-san-”

“K-Ki...stays,” a quiet voice rasped.

My head snapped round so fast, it almost cricked.

“Oh, Shi, er-” I floundered at the dark eyes blearily cracked and staring up at me. “Water! A drink!” I shuffled free of the bed, careful with Shisui’s broken legs (I’d been perched beside his waist) and leaning over to pour him a cup from the jug on the bedside table.

“Here,” I mumbled, guiding the straw between the injured boy’s split lips and holding it steady whilst he took a few long drags. His throat, bruised black with clear fingerprints, bobbed painfully.

When I set the empty cup aside, the angry medic silently checking over the machines, Shisui spoke up again. He tried for an easy grin but it was more like grimace, his busted lip protesting to the abuse.

“So, I’m not dead, then?”

I burst into tears.

Great heaving sobs, building up and up in my chest like stormy waves rising over seaside walls and I buried my face in my hands. Shisui was quietly panicking beside me, hands fluttering weakly, and half-formed apologies falling from his mouth.
The medic left and Shisui floundered.

It honestly only made it harder to stop.

Because Shisui was here and he was alive and Danzo had run and oh my god -

“I-I’m so happy you're here, Shi!”

Between my fingers, I could make out how Shisui’s face screwed up at my words, throat bobbing and cheeks moving like he wanted to cry but wasn't sure how. I’d never seen him cry. He'd never been allowed to.

“I'm sorry I wasn't here, Shisui, but someone came after ‘T-Toshi and I had to get us out of there-”

Hands, still weak and so unlike their usual steadiness, wrapped around my wrists and yanked me down until I was huddled up against the Jounin’s side. “…you were safe, you weren't kidnapped?”

“No, we were safe.”

“And, and Itachi? The team?” His hands were sweaty and hot as they squeezed mine between them.

“Safe, all of them safe,” I babbled. “Some burns and broken bones but they're gonna live and it's okay -”

And then, the dam broke.

Great, heaving sobs were ripped from my best friend's chest. At first, it was almost like he tried to contain it, keep quiet, but I was stroking his forehead and pulled his head to hide in my neck again, and he finally relaxed a bit. The tears were earnest and lasted an age, wetting my shoulder with salt water and snot and spit as the curly-haired boy gasped against my shoulder. I leaned back against the pillows, Shisui twisted up against me, and just...held on.
The corridor outside was silent, not much of an indicator of privacy in a shinobi village, but I hoped so anyway. Shisui deserved some privacy.

Mikoto had left for a bit, to take an exhausted Sasuke home, promising to return once one of the Clan was watching over her youngest. Akane and Yuri-oba would be informed in the morning and undoubtedly come around then. So, in the lull between visits, we had some time.

“Shhhh…shhhh,” I hummed softly under my breath, carding fingers through matted curls and picking apart the knots when my fingers were caught. My own tears had eased, forgotten as the strongest kid I'd ever known fractured next to me. Shisui had always been bubbly and bright, even when he'd died in Canon he'd been smiling. There was something...almost venerable, quieting, about seeing that final wall crumble.

And slowly, slowly, Shisui quietened down, shuddering softly as my hand, trapped under his torso, rubbed a circuit between his shoulder blades. When I dipped my chin and caught his expression - embarrassment emerging as he gradually calmed -, I pinched his spine and Shisui jumped slightly in surprise.

“None of that now,” I reproved. “Crying is good and you'll always have my shoulder.”

Huffling, Shisui slumped even further into my arms. A fond smile tugged at my lips when his feathery lashes tickled my neck every time he blinked.“You should sleep, Shi-kun…”

“Wanna hear what ‘append…” the older boy protested in a sleep-thickened voice. Despite his words, I could already feel how his body grew heavier, the tension (no doubt from the pain) draining from his limbs. Scarcely five minutes later, I was rewarded with a soft, nasally snore.

The noise was familiar though, hypnotic and soft and my eyelids were so heavy, I hadn't slept properly in a week -

I was roasting hot when I woke up.

There was an arm awkwardly wrapped around my shoulders and my right arm was worryingly dead and there was drool all over my neck (that boy was so fucking dead) and it was annoyingly bright.

My eyes cracked open, eyelids crusty and bleh, and I winced at the unforgiving streams of sunlight
that illuminated the small hospital room. A glance at the wall clock and I pulled myself free, swinging my feet off the bed and tottering to the door. It was frickin’ 6am and I hated myself.

The nurse who walked past me on my way to the toilet gave me a judgy look. Jeez, I must’ve looked rough. Not to mention...the staff in this part of the hospital? Yeah, they hated me!

By the time I made it back to the room, I’d re-tied my pony in the mirror, poked my head into everyone’s rooms to find them all still sleeping and grabbed Shisui’s hospital breakfast from the passing trolley.

If he wasn't awake to enjoy it, I’d take that burden upon myself.

And, praise kami - considering his condition, he needed to sleep for... ages - the fourteen year old was still completely out of it when I came back. The nurse had been in, no doubt noticing when I'd popped out, as the IV was new and the water jug refilled.

As I helped myself to Shisui’s breakfast (it was grim, I was doing him a favour), I wondered where the ANBU guard was hiding in here.

The ceiling? Did all the ceilings have, like, pigeon holes in them for guards? Or did that make them too predictable and regular…?

I counted the ringlets on Shisui’s head, found a pen and scrawled flowers up my arms until I had a full ‘tattoo’ sleeve, visited my loved ones, and even left to buy pork buns from that vendor outside.

But nothing worked.

My brain...was buzzing.

...Where is Itachi and Ensui? Surely Sarutobi wouldn't keep them for this long?...And what was that meeting about anyway?....When did Mikoto say she'd be back? What time will Yuri-oba and Akane get the news and come over? Straight away? How have the kids been, did they cry?...What happened with Danzo? How the hell is Itachi involved?...
And so it went on, my eyes blankly staring into space as I paced and fiddled and wondered where my peaceful life had gone. Or, rather, the illusion of it. I wasn't so naive and stupid to think I'd ever been safe or would have lived in peace for the rest of my days. The End.

It was at half nine when, just as Shisui started to stir, an ANBU appeared in the doorway. A second later - I barely had time to blink - the main door to the ward swung open with a 'swish'. Oh. I could guess who's coming to pay us a visit.

Shisui’s face scrunched up, his glazed eyes telling me that the drugs were probably the only thing stopping him from snapping awake in the face of his superior, and clumsily got his elbows underneath himself. He pulled himself upright and I forced myself to stay put in the bedside chair. He looked crap enough without my embarrassing him in front of his Kage. Nee-chan and dad were certainly defensive about it, “maintain their independence” or some bullshit.

He was frickin’ wounded! They all were. Stupid idiots!

“Good morning, Shisui-kun, Kiharu-chan,” the old man greeted us pleasantly as he stepped through the door. I plastered a polite smile on my face whilst Shisui attempted some weird, seated bow.

“Morning, Sandaime-sama,” I dipped my head before, with an extremely reluctant second thought, I slipped from my seat to bow low to the floor. “I apologise for the disrespectful manner with which I treated you last night. I beg your forgiveness.” my voice was steady, ringing with sincerity, but inside I was choking.

Yes, I was still smarting over last night. No, I doubt I'd ever forgive the old man. I had a lot of shit to pin on him, from before and about his general policies. ‘Strongest Ninja in the Village’ meant shit when you didn't have any fucking qualifications to run said village! At least Dictators were politicians! What the hell was a Kage doing signing off supply requests for school books or whatever! Even Stalin had people doing that shit for him, no wonder the Hokages were always swamped in paperwork! God, Tobirama may have been the sexiest Kage Ever ™, but I swear he was a genius too -

“Kiharu-chan,” Sarutobi’s voice cut through my mental tirade, “I understand the pressure recent events have forced upon you. Please rise and think no more on the matter...however, I believe your father is awake once more and asking for you.” The request to kindly fuck off whilst Shisui was interrogated-er-reporting couldn't have been clearer.

Gathering my dignity around me, I aquested with a regal nod, sliding from my chair and sweeping from the room with a final, Terminator parting line, “I'll be back.”
Arnold Schwarzenegger was right. It was satisfying.

But even quoting movies that no one but myself even knew existed couldn't raise my spirits.

This whole ‘being kicked out the room as soon as anything important was going down’ was really grating on me. I thought it had been frustrating last night, not knowing who had died or was hurt or what the fuck was going on. But, this morning? In the cold light of day? I needed, badly, to know where I stood. Plot-wise at the very least.

But...no dice.

The annoying nurse, the one from last night, glanced at me suspiciously as she walked passed and I resisted the urge to trip her. Her heeled sandals made an annoying click-clack on the polished floors (I really had been spoiled by silent shinobi) and it would have been so, so easy to just nick her heel. But I resisted. I was supposed to be a nice person, apparently, and I’d already been through enough bullshit in the past month without adding ‘assault’ to my list of offences. I think I was probably The most hated civilian in the hospital by now, second only to ‘demon’ Naruto. Kakashi and Gai were probably the top contenders for the ninja league.

But, Sarutobi hadn't been lying, Tou-san was up and whining when I rocked up to his room, trying to convince the nurses that porridge wasn't an acceptable breakfast food and maybe they should try pancakes instead. Well, apparently the ninjas had been spoiled, too.

“Causing trouble before 10am?” I asked dryly and valiantly ignored the nurse's muttered “like father, like daughter,” from beside the IV.

“Like father, like daughter!” Dad echoed and I wondered if rolling my eyes too much would cause me permanent damage. Probably.

“Regardless, porridge is breakfast and you need to eat;” I unapologetically dumped the tray back in front of him from where he'd pushed it away. “Shisui is okay,” I tagged on. “Woke up for a bit last night, didn't say much-” the knowing look Seiichi sent me (my eyes were only slightly red, okay) was gracefully ignored, “-but he fell back asleep real quick. Hokage-sama is with him now.”

Mouth twisted unhappily as he gulped down the porridge, so fast I wasn't sure he even let it touch his tongue, Dad asked how badly he'd been hurt. Apparently, Mikoto had popped her head in on her
way out to express her relief at my safe return and let him know where I was.

“Two broken legs, extensive burns, damaged throat from attempted strangling, a nasty scar near his eyes, and extensive internal bruising. Docs say he'll be in a wheelchair for a while.” I reeled off mechanically, the list memorised from this morning's time wasting.

The spoon was dropped into the empty bowl with a clatter and Seiichi leaned back like he expected a congratulations. He didn't get one, unsurprisingly. “The surgery?”

I tapped a finger on his outstretched legs. “Every bone shattered. Some pieces were unsalvageable so he's had some work done to fill in the gaps. He probably won't have the same maneuverability when he heals up and will wind up with a cane before he's forty, but...he'll, he'll walk. And that's what matters.”

It's more than I ever thought he'd have.

And, suddenly, it hit me like a tonne of bricks. *This...this could change everything. No Danzo means no coup, right? No massacre, no suicide, no avenger...was this the solution all along?*

A grin tugged at my lips but my dad was watching so I smothered the expression before it could fully take form. We'd just been speaking of Shisui's fucking legs, I'd be a cold Bitch to smile at that.

“Ki,” my dad spoke up after the nurse had left, glancing around like we were in a spoofy spy movie. Then, again. *Shinobi.* “Raidou-san told me something very interesting last night.”

*Why that little snitch!*

“Nii-san was out of his mind with worry for Genma,” I deflected, baring my teeth in a smile that screamed ‘just try me’.

I don't think dad got the message.

“What's this about you disrespecting Hokage-sama, hmm? And you refused to go to the hospital?” Dad pulled the ‘concerned parent’ card, frowning in that way he knew made me squirm with guilt.
Leaning back in my chair and folding my arms, I tried to play it casual. “Firstly, I would just like to say that I’ve already apologised and Hokage-sama has forgiven me.” Well, at least something came from that conversation earlier. “It was nothing, I was really upset, for good reason, that no-one would say where you were.” My concern for his safety evidently won me some brownie points as chocolate eyes softened. My dad always had been a sucker for my ‘Daddy's girl’ tendencies. I went in for the kill. “I thought...something had happened whilst we were gone and Toshi couldn't get to you.”

“Oh, Hime,” Tou-san ‘tut’-ed softly, swinging an arm around my shoulder and pulling me and, by extension, the chair closer.

Small fingers pinched his ear and twisted. Hard.

“Ow-!?"

“And. I. Was.” another pinch. “Right!”

Letting go of his lobe and hopping from the chair, I snatched up the clipboard at the foot of the bed. “And don't think I failed to notice how we spoke of everything but your injuries!”

Seiichi slumped back on his mountain of cushions with a huff of defeat, folding his arms just like I had earlier. There wasn't a scrap of guilt on his face, just sheepish resignation.

Flicking through the doctor's notes, I muttered under my breath at the stupidity of those around me. “...6 weeks, apply prescribed cream twice daily...risk of infection… ‘bite wound under surveillance’? Bite wound?” Stony navy glanced up to pierce the older Chuunin. “A bite wound?”

“Downed bastard tried to play extra dirty,” Seiichi grunted back, flicking a hand to gesture to his wrapped ankle. “I had a foot on his shoulder to hold him down whilst I-well, you don’t need to hear the details, Ki.”

“No, no,” I disagreed, shifting to rest the file on my hip. “Some details would be nice, for once.”

This time, it was dad who shot me the unimpressed glance. “Ki. You're twelve. It's not gonna
happen, Hime.”

Setting the clipboard back on it's hook, I wandered towards the window and started fiddling with opening the blinds, needing to do something with my hands. “So, what? You'll tell me when I'm older, is that it?”

“Hey,” I could here the frown in my dad's voice and felt my own expression sour, too. Why did it feel like all I'd done recently was fight and cry? I hated this. “Don't be disrespectful, I'm the parent here.”

Cracking the window, I shrugged like it didn't matter. Who's feeling stifled? Hey, not me!

“Okay, Tou-san…”

…………………………………………………………………………

When lunchtime came around, the combined puppy eyes of Nee-chan and dad had me leaving, heading out to the market place to grab them all some take out. Apparently, the hospital food was ‘killing them’. Jeez, didn't they eat crappy junk on missions?

If they thought they'd be getting this treatment every single day until they were released, they were definitely in for a shock.

I didn't have a wallet on me and Tou-san, his uniform ruined and with only his hospital gown in his room, wasn't exactly forthcoming, but I wasn't worried. The shop and stall owners all knew me as ‘one of their own’. It wouldn't be hard to toss around a few IOUs.

It was the response I hadn't thought ahead about.

Now, I knew I'd been missed. But...I'd seen most of my most precious people already and was still mentally counting down when I could find the rest. The general public, the people whose faces I recognised or my regulars or my fellow business owners? I hadn't really thought much of it. Which was...an oversight.
Hey, they say hindsight is 20/20 for a reason, you know.

“Dazai-san, praise the Sage, you're back!” the old grandpa I bought teas from clasped one of my hands between his own. The old, gnarled knuckles, swollen from arthritis, scratched my fingers as he squinted down at me, beaming. I felt myself soften, feeling strangely bashful. I always did have a soft spot for adorable elderly folks.

“Yes, thank you, jiji-san,” I smiled, eyes cast to the side. And, no, I wasn't going to elaborate. “I'm just off to grab lunch for Tou-san and Nee-san, but thank you for your concern. Good day to you, jiji-san!”

With a quick, bobbing bow, I scarpered.

Dodging well-wishes from various familiar faces, I sweatdropped every time someone called out to me. Even people I barely knew! The novelty of a missing child actually returning must've been contagious. What….on Earth…

Wait. Were we on Earth? I'd never really thought about it...was this like multiverse or an alternate or...somewhere different entirely?

Extremely perturbed, I really didn't see the hug coming.

“Oh, Kiharu!” Warm arms flew around my shoulders and yanked me into a solid hug, squashed to my grandmother's chest and with Akane at my shoulder. She smelled of lilacs and tea whilst the ex-medic, as always, wore a deeper, slightly dusky yet addictive, perfume. “I- we were so worried!”

“Yes, we were.” Akane agreed dryly over my shoulder and I hid a wince in Yuri-oba’s yukata. Damn, I was dead meat when the Uchiha Elder got her hand on me. She'd skin me alive in such a way I'd probably end up thanking her for it.

A sharp cry to our huddle’s left and I mentally resigned myself to making a spectacle. Not that the gossipers hadn't already been watching. Gah.

Pulling back from the strawberry-blonde’s embrace, I turned in time to welcome my little sister as she came ploughing into my legs. “Gah! Imouto, careful-” I almost staggered back a step but Akane gracefully halted the impending trainwreck by slipping an arm around my shoulders, her amputated
forearm near my elbow.

Ino, naturally, was unphased.

“Where were you? The tiny blonde demanded, fists clenched in my leggings and an adorable scowl on her face. Honestly, if she pulled any harder and mooned me in the middle of the market place, I would kill her. “Papa said you were busy but you always are! You never came and I'll never, ever forgive you!”

In a direct contradiction to her debunking, Ino then impetuously held up her arms in an unmistakable ‘up’ gesture. Figuring I could use the brownie points, I obliged, tucking her head under my chin as baby-chubby arms half-strangled me.

I would later regret this.

Half a moment later, a deeply unhappy pineapple and a buoyant red panda appeared at the top of the street. Or, rather, Shika and Chouji came over in the trail of their much more energetic future-teammate.

Thankfully, neither was running. I think the Universe would break if Shikamaru willingly ran anywhere. I know my mind certainly would.

Chouji’s jubilant cry as he barrelled into my knees - I knew he was my favourite, so precious - was drowned out when Shikamaru raised his voice at me. I'm pretty sure...this was a first.

“ You, ” he bit out, hands fisted (I could see his knuckles straining in his pockets) and a glower darkening his face.

“Er- Shika-chan-” I started, wondering how much he'd sussed out.

“-are not allowed to go anywhere.”

Ah?
“Ah?” I bleated, completely stupefied. The actual fuck…

“At least, not without Ensui-nii or me…” the rest devolved into incomprehensible mumbles but, when I caught the end of a bit-off ‘troublesome’, I snapped out of my daze. Oh, fuck no. I leave for a week and this boy is back at it. Fuck off, Kishi!!

Wait. Nope. I did not, repeat not, want to start imagining Kishi as the creator god here. No. It just wasn't happening. I fucking refuse to be part of that clusterfuck-

“Shika-chan, that better not have been a ‘troublesome’ I heard there…” I raised an eyebrow in warning, trying to look intimidating with Ino on my hip and carding my fingers through Chouji’s ginger fur-er-hair. “We’re gonna talk about this later some more, but don't you go thinking I can't protect myself. Girls aren't troublesome things to be protected, like your favourite pillow. Don't be small minded, otouto.”

I knew the final word, that I thought he'd been silly, would hopefully get him thinking, but god if it wasn't hard trying to stamp out prejudice, even as it took root.

I’d adored the Nara as characters before but, by god, if the sexism wasn't pissing me off.

Shikaku was an extremely intelligent individual but he was ‘cowed’ by his ‘shrew’ of a wife, even though her ‘demands’ were for nothing more that small courtesies. Yoshino may have retired once married, a pairing that had very obviously been an arranged one, but she was in no way intimidated by the Clan she’d married into. But...I’d been blinkered as a kid, starstruck by my love of the characters to see things as they truly were.

But, that was different now.

I knew these people, had spent a lot of time at the Nara’s over the years. And Yoshino and Shikaku did not have a healthy marriage. Couples could fight, yes. They could argue and disagree, but Shikaku did not listen, firm in the traditional mindset that a woman's mind was a foreign and incomprehensible place. Sure, guys didn't have to understand us before we spoke, but girls struggled with guys just as much. Yoshino just wanted some help around the house, for Shikamaru to try and not sit on his laurels just because he was Heir of a ‘super smart’ Clan. And she wasn't wrong! But she'd gone about it wrong and Shika was suffering for it.
It technically wasn’t their fault, there were very few other cultures from which these deeply ingrained mindsets could be transformed, but that didn't mean it was okay.

Their marriage was stable, divorce was extremely rare here due to inheritance, village loyalty and bloodlines. That didn't mean it was the healthiest of households to grow up in. My cousin before had lived between two homes for most of his life and he always said that, sometimes, just because a home was ‘stable’ didn't mean it was happy or good. I wasn't sure where I could help Shika, though. If it was mainly from home, then there wasn't much I could really do except try to be a positive influence. As much as I wanted to grab some mysterious, shady offender and groin-stomp them. But, if Shika was actually smart enough to pick up on the undercurrents of misogyny that passively occurred in this society....well. That was a scary thought.

...I'd rather groin-stomp someone, in all honesty.

Lowering Ino to the floor (“You're all grown up, Ino, gimme a break!”), I smoothed a hand over Shika's ponytail as I dropped a kiss to his forehead. Just because I was disappointed didn't mean I wasn't going to greet the kid. He was misguided but well-meaning. I was gonna have to brainstorm with Hana (if there was anyone who shared my perspective, it was that little spitfire) after drilling equality lessons into his skull, but it didn't mean the kid deserved to be cold-shouldered. It was a very different experience for kids than it was for adults.

Turning to Yuri and Akane, I ignored the way Shika leaned into my side and got straight back to business. “Oba-san, I was just out to pick up lunch for the boys at the hospital, would you both care to join me?” Embarrassed, I looked away when Akane's eyes warmed at my half-calling her ‘oba’. It was a slip of the tongue, I tell 'ya. Peering down at the trio huddled at my feet, I shot them a suspicious glance. “And where did you three come from, hmm? You can't come to the hospital without your parents…!”

“Papa's there so I can, too!” Ino replied, arching her brow in a frighteningly familiar manner. Kami, it was like with Hana all over again. I was...a terrible...influence..

Her reasoning was valid, I'd give her that.

Turning the gimlet eye on the boys, my dignity returned somewhat when Shika sent me a baleful glare (ha! No alibi, sucker!) and Chouji blushed sheepishly. Just for that level of adorableness, I was tempted to make him the exception. Awww~

But, no, I was strong, and Akane thankfully offered to escort the two boys back to Yoshino whilst Yuri, Ino and I bought the food.
Which, as luck would have it (and my absent wallet), was Ichiraku.

“Ohayo, Partner-san!” I announced like the little shit I was, ducking under the signs and beaming at the ramen chef behind the counter.

Ayame bounced up and wrung one of my hands between hers, still a little too shy to go for a hug, as her dark eyes sparkled happily. Jeez, why were all the kids so frickin' cute?

“Welcome back, partner-san!” Teuchi boomed in return. “Looking well, praise the Sage, what’ll it be?” his eyes shone knowingly but, and this was one of the best things about the older man, he didn't push. What a reprieve. Bless this man.

“Ah, I'll have half a dozen ramen to go, Teuchi-san,” I stepped closer and drummed my fingers on the counter as Yuri patiently listened to Ino prattle on behind me. “I'm the food mule for lunch today, I'm afraid. Stick to miso, pork and shrimp, please!” I tried for a smile but it felt forced. Because it was. I was just...hyper aware of all the pesky customers side-eyeing me.

It was rare for missing children to return, let alone after to long (most...trails...went dead after a few short hours). I knew where they all thought I'd been and had to stiffen my spine, teeth clenched. The very thought of sex slavers had me recoiling in fury and disgust. I hate it.

Dammit, I mentally sighed, now I wanted a shower.

It was almost evening - this day had lasted 8 years, I was convinced - when a tall, greatly missed, figure stepped into Nee-san’s room, where Ino was trying to teach Genma how to braid my thick waves into something reasonably presentable.

A knuckle rapped on the doorframe, courtesy for Ino and myself no doubt.

I twisted my neck to peer at the visitor and, at the sight of Ensui leaning against the wall, the only thing that kept me from flying at him was Ino’s hands tangled in my hair.
“Ensui!” I cried, yelping slightly when Ino yanked too hard.

A lazy grin stretched the twenty year old’s lips. “You're in a whole lot of trouble, Ki.” He obligingly stepped closer, nodding genially at Genma and sitting in front of me when I held out my arms and made grabby motions. Once the older brunette was close enough, I slipped my arms around his ribs, neck comically tilted when Ino made no move to release me.

Ensui didn't say anything but his returning hug was fierce and, even as he pulled back, he didn't remove his arms from around my shoulder.

“Raidou-san told me what happened...i can't believe we didn't look again at one of the signatures being yours…” The older Nara grumbled into my hair.

“It's not like we knew I could do it, after all...I was appalling at Summoning so…” I shrugged uncomfortably. Even though it was the absolute truth, I almost felt like everyone was judging dad for not realising. Or reevaluating allowing me to opt out of ‘ninja-hood’.

The droll look Ensui shot me let me know he wasn't pleased.

Scrambling to move on, I reached my hands behind my head and gently started untangling Ino’s fingers from my hair. “Have you seen Shisui yet?”

“Sleeping,” Ensui rolled his eyes fondly, the casual humor undermined by the worry and stress lining his eyes prematurely.

Nodding, I admitted that he'd been sleeping for most of the time, only waking up for a few minutes with me and then for the Hokage. And, speaking of..

“What happened last night, Ensui? And where's Itachi, have you seen him?”

Pulling myself out of Ino's reach (dropping her into a drowsy Genma’s lap so she wouldn't have a hissy fit), I found myself tucked under the older boy's chin, the arm still wrapped around me reeling me in.
“No, not since he spoke to Hokage-sama. Sorry, Ki.”

Perturbed, I found myself frowning into Ensui’s neck.

…………………………………………………………………………………

It wasn’t until another two days had passed that Shisui was able to stay awake for any considerable amount of time.

By then, I had seen Hitoshi again (wrangled into a check up and then prescribed some salve for the fresh scars, ordered to rest plenty and eat well. Which he was more than happy to do in Tou-san’s room) and, after greeting him, proceeded to treat him to my Most Severe Cold Shoulder™. Disappointingly, he was more aggravated and amused than hurt, rolling his eyes and huffing when I ignored him.

No-one saw a problem, figured he’d pissed me off whilst we were gone, but, holy shit, I was holding a grudge. That two-timing, backstabbing pussycat! He'd snaked me! To Sarutobi, no less!

But, I was taking this as far as I could. Meaning, I coしたことisted with his ‘natural rivals’ right in his neglected face. Loyalty, indeed. Cat could learn a thing or million about it from a good doggo.

Hana had come bounding in before dinner, just after Ino was taken home (after napping with her Papa and basically giving Genma cornrows - I cry ) and I had all-but thrown myself at her.

Hana was an angel, a fellow creature of snarky barbs and common sense, and I was desperate to talk to my female best friend.

“Baka!” a hand, deceptively tiny, slapped me between my shoulder blades before I was hunched over in a headlock. A fist noogied my scalp, ruining my already-crap hair, and a few nurses tittered behind me. Oh, how I hate them. Hana wasn't done though, and I was soon being dragged down the corridor to the nearest bathroom.

“Wash your face, you look like an egg!” She whined, shoving me towards the sinks and fastidiously turning up her nose. Her tsundere act was spoiled, somewhat, by the three dogs who whined
excitedly and coiled around my legs. But, nevertheless, I rolled my eyes and did as she said, scrubbing my face with the freezing cold water and gasping across at my reflection. I looked rough, I'd give her that. But, it wasn't my fault I could barely sleep.

It wasn't the hospital chairs or sleeping in Tou-san’s crib next to him.

It was the dark rooms, the ANBU lingering in the corners and doorways (Raven still haunted my steps but I liked to pretend it wasn't happening). Their white masks were...unsettling. To say the very least.

It was worse than those weeks after Hitoshi’s attack. Now, a those fears were founded. They'd happened.

When one of the boys jumped up to plant his paws on my tummy and snuffle for treats, my back slid down the wall and I sat cross-legged on the floor.

At least it was clean. Ninja hospitals were OCD hygiene freaks, thank Kami.

Hana moved across to slump down beside me, curling her arms around her knees and twisting to stare at me.

“You've been going insane here, haven't you?”

I stroked a finger down the silky fur between a nin-ken’s eyes. “I can't go home to that house without him, Hana.”

“You did before..” the Heiress pointed out, head tilted just like her companions.

“It's not the same anymore,” I sighed. I felt so much older, like before, than ever. “He could just...come through the wall and I'd never know it.”

A sharp canine peeked out as she bit her lip. “You've never really been safe, Kiharu. No-one ever is. And we'll be careful, I bet your aunts or Mikoto-hime would insist you stay with them when you decide to go back. You won't be undefended.”
The bathroom was silent, except for the panting of the puppies and a drip from one of the toilet cisterns. I wet my lips and stared down at my lapful of dogs.

“I'm scared…” the hushed whisper seemed loud in the silent room, echoing against the tiles.

A hot hand slipped into mine and I gripped it tightly as Hana shifted to press our sides together.

“That's okay. But, you can't let it stop you.” Black eyes flicked down to our entwined fingers and perked up slightly. “I know! Tonight, we'll have a sleepover...we'll ask your aunt if we can have it over there with Ino-chan.”

“Yeah,” I huffed thickly. “She'd pitch a fit if she thought she was being left out...‘again’.”

Hauling herself up, Hana dragged me up after her by our hands, pouring the puppies out of my lap. When they whined and grumbled pitifully, I could do nothing more than send them apologetic glances, feeling like a felon for cutting short our cuddles. But Hana was apparently wasting no time and marched us back out of the bathroom, headed straight to my dad's room.

“Seiichi-san,” Hana started, popping her head around the door and holding up our joined hands, like evidence to the judge in one of these crime dramas before. “Can Kiharu and I have a sleepover tonight, please?”

Hitoshi, spilling out of the too-small bedside chair, immediately rose (and not a moment too soon, in my opinion. The plastic had been creaking dangerously all afternoon). Oh? Obviously, Judas wanted in, hmm.

My dad was more than slightly reluctant but, whether we ended up at the Inuzuka Compound or Yamanaka, he couldn't deny I'd be well looked after. After all, we'd been attacked at the Hospital, not in the suburbs.

So, after about 50 cautions and five hugs goodnight, I was allowed to go. Hitoshi, obviously somewhat miffed at having to invite himself (hey, you reap what you sow, kitty), vowed to meet us to the Yamanaka’s. Hana was inordinately smug and the puppies were ecstatic. I mean, I couldn't not smile.
Genma, eyes half lidded as Kotetsu and Izumo argued as they rearranged his pillows (the patient in question being sent this way and that as a tug-of-war ensued behind his head), only sent me a long suffering look when I bade him goodnight.

I didn't miss the fond smile lingering in the corners of his mouth, though.

*Mother hen, indeed.*

“Ensui’s in with Shisui,” I hinted, heading towards the older boy’s room. Hana aquiesced, nodding with wide eyes, and we hurried down the sickly-pale corridor. When a nurse, one of the women who had me pegged as a nuisance (the feeling was completely requited, bish), pierced me with a suspicious glare, Hana huffed under her breath.

“They do hate you…!” she marvelled, sounding a touch too pleased.

Shooting her a sharp glance from the corner of my eye, I asked, “And who snitched?”

“Ino,” Hana replied promptly.

“Huh?! I whirled around, my ponytail swatting the wall when we cut the corner. “Ino? She's *four*!”

“She's observant,” the younger brunette shrugged.

“...She's *savage* ,” I corrected under my breath. When something dark flickered in my perceptual vision, I shot a quelling glare over my shoulder ( *piss off*).

But Hana didn't have time to do anything more than grin as we arrived outside of Shisui’s room. Ensui (and Shisui if he was awake) had no doubt heard us coming but I knocked regardless. Manners and all that.

So, yes, I rapped on the closed door, waiting for Ensui’s low call before pressing down on the handle and swinging the door open.
“Hey, boys,” I smiled faintly, Hana nodding behind me, as we stepped inside and closed the door behind us. Claws skittered as the triplets explored the new territory, one snuffling hopefully at Ensui’s knees and the other two sticking their heads under the bed.

Shisui was propped up in the bed, eyes half lidded and complexion pale. He looked exhausted but he tried for a smile anyway and I felt a flush of affection. Even bruised and hurt as he was, Shi was still trying to make things better. The final third of our little trio was sat closest the door, legs crossed at the ankle and one arm lazily slung over the back of the chair.

And, on the other side of the bed, sat Itachi.

Mouth forming a small ‘o’, I blinked stupidly at the Uchiha Heir for a long moment.

“Ki-chan,” Shisui croaked, throat still badly bruised. “How are Seiichi-san and Genma-san? Ensui says Inoichi-sama was released earlier?”

Dark eyes, bruised purple with tiredness, bore into mine. There was a wall there, one I’d only seen a handful of times, but a plea as well. Shisui’s gaze was almost too steady and I wasn't an idiot.

I wanted to push, question the boys on what had happened, last night and with Danzo, but I knew it had to wait.

I'd put a lot of trust in Shisui already, and him in me. I had to now, too.

“Yes,” I confirmed after an almost-too-long pause, stepping even further into the room and perching next to Shisui’s ankles. Hana lingered by the wall and I tried to forget, for the sake of my composure, just how much the two youngest here did not get on. “The burns were quick to settle with some healing chakra so there wasn't any point forcing him to stay...the only reason Tou-san is still stuck here for a bit is because, not only were his burns worse, but he fell unconscious with a concussion and had a bite on his leg!” my voice twisted with disbelief, intentional to dispel the tense atmosphere, and I was rewarded with a grin from Ensui and Shisui laughing, albeit a bit breathlessly. Still, a laugh was a laugh, and I’d take what I could get here.

“And how are you feeling?” I flipped the conversation around, making sure to turn to Shisui in such a way that Itachi was clearly visible as well. And his face was as smooth as marble…. shit. “Y-your legs okay?” I stuttered, uneasy, and cursed myself for the embarrassing tell.
“Ha,” Shisui rasped. “I'm on so much right now they could be missing and I wouldn't even know!”

I winced. Shisui really needed to stop trying to make light of the situation by laughing at even worse possibilities. Huh, idiot …

Obviously Itachi didn't appreciate the joke either, rising from his chair and pale as a ghost. “It's getting late and mother will have prepared dinner.”

“True,” Ensui agreed with a slow drawl, timing his interruption so perfectly it didn't even sound like one. “Yoshino-sama wants a family meal tonight, so I'm afraid I'll have to call it a night soon, too.”

Shisui, although obviously disappointed, conceded, lying back on his pillows.

“Itachi-kun,” The twenty year old was seemingly struck by a thought, “we should walk together, the Compounds are in the same direction after all.”

Quiet for a moment, Itachi slowly walked around the bed. “Very well…”

With a brief goodbye, the two disappeared out the door.

…. since when did those two spend time together? Did something happen in Sarutobi’s office and now they're, what? Friends?

Well, I supposed. Itachi could always use more friends...and Ensui did get on with Mikoto very well.

(And hadn't that been a surprise, coming back to find Nekki's closed and Mikoto asserting herself at the Station, her ‘apprentice’ beside her. And then Ensui makes into actually into the Force?! Boy was smashing Canon without me!)

“How have you been, Hana-chan?” Shisui's question pulled me from my thoughts and punctured the silence after the other boys' departure.

And Hana finally melted, pushing off the wall and falling into Ensui’s vacated seat. “Good, I'm Top
Kunoichi in class and Kiba is gonna get his partner soon,” almost unconsciously, a small grin quirked her lips. “And you?”

A calloused hand gestured vaguely to his blanket-covered legs. “Been better but alright, I guess.” Suddenly, a bright grin flashed across the Jounin’s face. “Day three and I can't wait to get out of here!”

A matching grin stretched the academy student's lips and I found myself smirking in amusement, the three of us sharing a small chuckle. Jeez, I wonder if Shisui had twigged yet that he wouldn't be getting crutches...ha!

“Well, you look tired, Shisui,” I leaned back on my hands, blue eyes critically assessing the deep bags under Shisui's. “We just came to say goodnight, Hana and I are thinking of having a sleepover with Sora-oba and imouto.”

Dark eyes blinked sleepily. “Oh, nice... I hope you have fun, both of you. You'll be back in the morning?” smiling softly as the older boy's eyes slid shut again, I leaned forward and brushed his curls from his forehead. Hana averted her eyes.

“Of course,” I lightly rebuked, tucking a longer ringlet behind his ear. I eyed the finger scratches that littered the skin around his temples and brows. Where Danzo had gone to tear at his eyes and Shisui struggled free… “I'll bring breakfast this time, okay?”

White teeth, striking against his half-healed lip, flashed in a final smile. “I'd say 'you spoil me' but I'd hate to discourage you…”

Snorting, I pushed up from the bed, and gestured to Hana for us to head out. “Hardly. Goodnight, Shi-kun.”

“Night, Shisui-san!”

Eyes closed and with a faint smile, Shisui raised one hand in a tiny wave. “Night…”

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“Ino-!” I gasped, suds in my hair, as the small blonde splashed water over the side of the bath. Hana, on the other side of the Yamanaka in the round tub, cackled madly. “Hold still, don't you want pretty hair?”

The magic words did their work and, suddenly, the tiny blonde was a shining example of patience. Oh hmm.

The bathroom was steamy, curls rising from the water, as the three of us finished washing up. We'd all stripped down to our panties (“Like our own onsen!” Hana had smirked, running the water as Ino picked out a bath bomb) and relaxed in the deliciously warm water. It wasn't too high, we didn't want Ino to struggle, but the four year old had been remarkably well-behaved. Honestly, I just figured that mentioning words like ‘grown-up’, ‘ladies’ and ‘spa’ had triggered something. Whatever it was, I was grateful. I'd not done this since Noko and I were very small.

“There…” I sighed, fingers combing through Ino’s wet strands as I rinsed out the last of the conditioner. “Everyone nearly done? Only, oba-san said she would get started on dinner whilst we washed up…”

When Ino pouted, disappointed that her ‘grown-up spa treatment’ was over, but nodded and Hana dipped her head, I stood from the bath. Water cascading down my limbs, my soaked hair a heavy weight on my back, I stepped out and wrapped a towel around me.

Hana and I had swung by our homes, respectively, to nab some clothes (and, in Hana’s case, get her mum’s permission). Now, I shucked off my panties and dropped them into the washing basket with a wet ‘plop’ before grabbing a fresh set. Then went on a camisole and a T-shirt and shorts pyjama set.

Once I'd wrapped a towel around my hair, I turned and lifted Ino from the bath. Holding her hands as she stepped onto the bath mat, I slung a massive, fluffy towel around her shoulders.

As Hana got herself sorted behind me, pulling the plug in the bath as she went, I pretended to lose Ino in the folds of the towel, patting down the excess fabric and just missing her every time.

“Hana, Hana!” I cried, eyes blown and voice high. “Ino’s disappeared!”

Ino gave a little, delighted giggle under the towel.
“What-?” The Inuzuka gasped, wrenching open the towel cupboard and peeking inside. “I can't find her!”

“What’ll we do, we can't have dinner without Ino!”

Tiny hands appeared as Ino ripped the towel from over her head, the fabric pooling around her little shoulders and rumpling wet strands. Her face, pink from the bath, was beaming, blue eyes bright. “Here! I'm here!”

Gasping in delight, I wrapped my arms around her, scooping her into my lap and joining in with her delighted squeal. “Hana, look what I caught!”

The smaller brunette, grin truly wicked, dug wiggling fingers into Ino’s ribs and we both cackled as the four year old begged for mercy.

“Girls!” a sharp rap on the door interrupted us. “Dinner!”

We scrambled to finish up, grinning and eager as a certain trio of pups (who had made a bee-line for Inoichi and now lay, heaped in his lap, on the sofa).

That night, sharing ‘my’ bed with Hana - despite the numerous other guest rooms available - I lay awake. Our fingers and toes had been painted like rainbows and, in the kitchen, three flower crowns waited for us for tomorrow. Hana was sound asleep, snuffling just like the puppies cuddled around us. Hitoshi was on the cushioned window seat, an ink-black throw in the darkness of the room. His gentle breaths, coupled with Hana and the triplets, made for a soothing symphony that should have had me fast asleep.

As it was, my eyes did not waver, flickering constantly between the curtained window and the four corners of the room. Straining to see in the darkness, my body stiff and my stomach in knots. As if someone would step out of the shadows. Any moment now...

Light crepted over the top of the curtain rail.

Birdsong filtered through the early morning, the faintest music drifting in.
Morning came and still, I did not sleep.

……………………………………………………………………

“Get in.”

“*Nope.*”

“Shisui.” I grit out, jiggling the handles as if to illustrate what I wanted. “*Get in the wheelchair.*”

Mouth stubborn and arms crossed, the patient in question didn’t so much as blink. *Or* look apologetic!

“Why can’t I have crutches?” The dark-haired boy whined, eyeing the wheelchair as if it was something I’d pulled from a dumpster.

“Because,” I started hotly, repeating what the nurses had said for the millionth time. “You’re still weak *and* both your legs need the fullest support. This is just to give you some maneuverability and freedom!”

Bloody hell, it had been a week and Shisui was on track to overthrowing me as ‘most hated’ in this ward. I’d still be Number One Civilian, though…

Lifting up and slamming the back wheels into the linoleum, I bared my teeth, completely fed up. I’d been just as cooped up as the rest of them, just minus the meds, food and bed! Sarutobi had me postponing work until the situation with Danzo was more settled (don’t look at me, the old man was chatting shit for some reason...again) so, here I was.

“*Get In.*”

Shisui got in.
“Was that so hard?” I asked, pushing him down the corridor and towards the wheelchair friendly ramps.

“Don’t tell me you wouldn’t kick up a fuss, too, Ki-chan,” Shisui huffed. His left arm was resting on the armrest, cheek smooshed against his propped up fist, as I directed us towards the cafeteria. It was mainly coffee and vending machines but there was a sushi fridge at the back and some free tables.

“It's different,” I bluffed. Dammit, boy was right. I’d go mental. Well, as soon as the novelty of zooming around had worn off. “You were in surgery and, with those implants, there’s only so much medical jutsu can do.”

Shisui just pouted.

“Hey,” I started, once I’d come back with coffee and a sushi pack for us to share. “I saw Itachi on the roofs this morning, everything okay?”

Chopsticks pausing as the older boy lifted a spicy tuna onigiri, black eyes flickered up to meet mine. “Yeah, yeah, just chatting is all. Why?”

Suspicion niggled in the back of my mind. Absently, I wondered if ninja paranoia was finally catching. Then again... it's not paranoia if they are out to get you...

“Oh,” I hummed into the rim of my disposable coffee cup. “I just felt...like something was up, was all..”

“Don’t worry, Kiharu,” Shisui dipped his head to catch my gaze and smiled encouragingly. “It’s all gonna be okay.”

Somehow, no matter how much I wanted to believe my best friend, I suddenly wasn’t so sure.
Ensui had been working in the force for two weeks and he was on the cusp of...cracking.

It wasn't just that, whenever he went for a coffee from the jug, all the free mugs went mysteriously missing. Or that the archives were limited and seemingly desolate when Osam-senpai sent him down for a case file. Or that-

Tell you what? It was.

The Uchiha weren't happy with the 'outsider', despite the fact Ensui blended in remarkably well, and made this abundantly clear. With all due bitterness and drama, of course.

But, Ensui had been warned by Mikoto and his uncle. He'd known Shisui for years now. Even Kiharu had proved a fountain of insight (surprising, but maybe it shouldn't have been).

"-remember, they are prideful. They will not take kindly to a perceived invasion and you'll have to work with that. Work hard, don't let their tricks and jibes phase you. If you prove your worth, keep your composure, they cannot touch you."-

So, Ensui sucked in a breath, forcibly maintaining his lazy expression. With his hair coiled in a bun and his dark colouring, he could pass as a rare tanned Uchiha. Kind of. From a distance.

"Senpai," Ensui stepped up to Detective Osamu's desk. "Ohiro-san has filed her witness statement. The burglar was, by her description, a male of average height with dark hair and a green shirt." the folder made a light 'thump' as the Nara dropped it onto the other man's desk.

Running a hand over his tiny ponytail - a sign of stress or nerves or. Actually, he just did it all the time - the detective sighed tiredly as he leaned back in his chair.

"We're gonna need much more than that, if we're gonna catch this guy."

Ensui tried to control his frustration but his eyebrows twitched anyway. "That's all we've got so far-"

Pinching his nose, Osamu gave the new recruit the stink-eye. "Then find something."
Smugness and amusement were almost palpable behind the Nara. He ignored them as best as he could.

“Prove your worth...then they cannot touch you.”

With a deep breath, Ensui swung by his dinky little desk in the corner to grab his flak jacket and interview pad. He had a thief to catch.

A week and a half after Danzo… A.D ….I finally settled down in the kitchen. Sora-oba had, as she usually did, filled the fridge with groceries. And, on the shelf directly at my eye level, she’d placed a wad of bills and a simple note. A quick read had me snorting quietly to myself, rolling my eyes and tucking the note into my pocket.

The money I’d tried to slip her the last time she bought us food. Hah…

But I was stressed AF and needed an outlet.

Cue baking rampage.

Prinsesstårta had been a favourite of my sister, from a Swedish cafe she'd worked at when she was at Uni, and I had a hankering for a cake with a fuck tonne of cream...and marzipan...and jam....

As I got to work, prepping my piping bags so I wouldn't have to fuss half way through the process, I unapologetically brooded over the situation.

Slicing open a vanilla pod and popping it into the saucepan of warming milk, I reached out for my bowl of strawberries and emptied them into another pot. The jam wouldn't take too long...

The village had been...bewildered...by Danzo’s disgrace. Shaken, he'd been Tobirama’s student and a pillar of Konoha for decades. (I rolled the marzipan, a lump I’d made a short while ago for Shisui...
to taste and kept in the fridge, out over a dusting of icing sugar.) Betrayed and hurt and...the
confusion and gossip had the village buzzing. Some people eyed me strangely, perhaps making the
connection between my return and Danzo’s departure or, maybe, that was just my frayed nerves
overreacting.

The cake batter, a simple mixture with an extra of cornflour, was poured into the greased tin and
popped into the oven. Shit, I'd rolled the marzipan out too early...dammit.

Sighing and wiping a hand across my forehead (I wasn't sweaty but my head was pounding ), I
checked the jam and gave the bubbling, crimson compot a stir with a raspberry-stained wooden
spoon.

Out of the corner of my eye, as I folded custard and whipped cream together, I glowered at Raven,
who was stood like a ghost in the kitchen corner.

The Hyuuga ANBU had, apparently, yet to be relieved of their guard duty and to say I was done
was an understatement.

Whilst the Sandaime may have had excellent and completely valid reasons to assign me a...a guard
...whilst my father was healing and the situation with Danzo settled somewhat (no-one, no-one, had
forgotten Tobi but, as it was, there were no leads. Not that I thought there would be)...a shadow was
the last thing I needed.

Let alone one who stared at me with a pale mask from the corner of the room.

When the cake was fully formed, complete with green-tinted marzipan and pink icing roses, I cut
myself a large slice, resigned to dishing the rest out to the boys at the hospital.

The kitchen was silent except for the scrape of my fork on porcelain as I worked my way through
inch layers of custard-cream, jam, cake and icing.

Raven never moved.
When dad was finally released, a week and a half after Inoichi’s own freedom, we all celebrated with a family dinner.

My uncle was laughing with Chouza, Shikaku and Tou-san, the scar on his face slicing deep into his ponytail and carving mercilessly down his cheek and neck. My chest was warm, however, seeing that he'd chosen to style his hair as usual and seeing them all, laughing and happy.

Kaiya was opposite me, Chouji to her left and Sora to her right, and she spent a good few minutes eyeing me with a disgruntled expression. The Akimichi Matriarch had always been scary. With that expression? I was wide eyed and looking everywhere but at her.

“I hear you were the one to get yourself and that panther of yours out…” I waited for the rebuke. “Well done.”

Oh. I blinked. Oh.

A grin threatened to split my lips. “Thanks Kaiya-hime.”

Fiery orange eyeshadow glimmered in the low lights as the Akimichi treated me to a long, slow blink. A sly smile quirked rouged lips and Kaiya and I shared a dry look across the table. My impromptu shift in honorific passed, in that case. Excellent.

The meal was truly excellent, dessert (another large Swedish Princess cake that had stars in Ino’s eyes at the name) provided by yours truly and, as the adults settled back with tea and sake, the kids asleep in the next room with Hitoshi, I leaned back on Tou-san’s chest from where I'd perched myself in his lap.

“We have an announcement,” Chouza eventually spoke up, smiling at his wife with rosy cheeks from the food, laughter and alcohol. “The Clan is already aware, as is custom,” A bright smile grew on Sora and Yoshino’s faces. “But we wanted you all to be the ‘first’ to hear. Kaiya and I...are having another child.”

The table exploded with chatter, Chouza pounded on the back and Kaiya warmly congratulated. I reach across and squeezed the black-haired woman's hand, smiling happily. But, inside, I was incredulous.
Well...that sure as hell wasn't canon.

Blooper I

A music lesson gone awry

Twang, dwang, twanggggg -

Cringing every time Shisui plucked a string, I curled my hands into fists and forced them to stay put in my knees. I wasn't going to rip the guitar from his hands. I wasn't.

“Oh, give it here!” small hands were stretched out and made grabby motions.

Hugging his birthday present to his chest, Shisui refused. “Kiharu! I only just started!”

But at the rate he was going at, there wouldn't be a guitar by the end of today. “Oh, yes!” I rolled my eyes, hands still stubbornly outstretched. “You said the same thing about the Ukulele I had Ensui make for your promotion!”

“T-that’s completely different!” Shisui spluttered. “It took a sword for me!”

“Give. It. Here.”

With an explosive sigh, my best friend shoved his present into my lap. “Fine! If you're so clever, you do it!”

“I will!”

“Fine!”
“Fine.”

Arm raised to strum, I froze, having just remembered one small detail.

...I’d never actually learnt the guitar. Oops.

..........................................................

Blooper II

Behind the mask

“-stupid civilian who can’t know anything-”

“-you idiot!-”

“-no strenuous activities when Nee-san's so injured, Raidou-nii-”

“-you couldn't drag my corpse out of here-”

“-you're a terrible example and Tou-san prays I don't turn out like you, Tetsu-”

“-I see you, come on out! Creepers in the shadows are not my favourite people right now. Or ever-”

Raven would...really appreciate a Mission refund.

Chapter End Notes

A/N- Happy birthday to meeeeeee~! Okay, but this chapter took a while. I'm back home from Uni, ergo no free time and I had to write out the birthday AU anyway! Go check them out @ https://archiveofourown.org/works/14954444/chapters/34653314

I hope you like the chapter and the micro-series, let me know how you feel in the
comments (any particularly requested chapters will get sequels and continuations etc etc). Also! I wrote a Hanabi fic! Go check it out, the amazing katlou303 is my Beta for that (just as I am hers for her new TenTen fic, 'I Knew A Girl With Copper Veins' which you can read @ https://archiveofourown.org/works/14862645/chapters/34410348) and that fic is called 'You Have Shed A Thousand Skins' and you can find it @ https://archiveofourown.org/works/14889629
Anyway, I hope you enjoy and thanks for all the love and support~ <3

And yes...I have been wearing a crappy plastic tiara all day (the weird looks have been hilarious haha!)
Strays

Chapter Summary

Strays were both good and bad things. Nothing better than finding a stray chocolate or hair bobble. A coin on the floor, a drink in the back of the fridge, a lost present from the bottom of the bag... Feeling like a stray, alone and a bit rough? Not quite so great...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The sky was clear, the sun was shining, and Nekki’s was completely rammed.

Today was the grand ‘reopening’, if a fortnight’s closing could warrant such a thing, and I’d reasoned that there would be a bigger crowd than usual. Whether that was because people had missed my desserts or they were just being nosy, Mikoto and I had spent much of the days beforehand baking and buying in supplies.

We’d...kinda...underestimated?

“Dazai-san, I’ll have five! To go!” sweating, I quickly pulled another tray of pretzels from the oven.

“-my nephew’s birthday cake-” since when did I take ‘commissions’? I wondered, sweat-dropping.

“Dazai-san, wonderful to see you again-”

The shop was roasting hot, from both the summer heat outside and the sizzling pans surrounding the two of us, and I’d spent most of the morning wondering why I hadn’t just packed in the hot menu and made this place an ice cream stall.

At least it would've been cooler.
But the heat persisted, as did the crowds and soon even Mikoto was starting to look harried. And we weren’t the only ones suffering.

We’d been all out of ice cream by noon and the lack of frozen goods was starting to grate. The lack of cold air from the rolling pan was torture enough, not even touching upon all the annoyed customers who’d demanded the cool treat.

I felt bad for my friends too, to be honest. Ensui’s lunch break was distinctly un-break-ish as he organised the line, still in his uniform and hands raised placatingly. On the other end of the spectrum, Shisui’s scowl was threatening to become thunderous as he was parked ‘helplessly’ in the corner. Honestly, as if I’d let him ‘help’. His arms were still so weak he’d struggled to show up this morning - not that we were expecting him -, parked outside the shop when Mikoto and I had arrived and beaming smugly at the show of independence.

I’d been so, so, sorely tempted to smirk back, turn him around, and send him rolling back to the hospital. Ninja! Didn’t know anything about resting and healing!

Ignoring how the young Jonin’s eyes stared balefully over the top of his tea, I turned to flash a smile at a little girl, who was impetuously dragging her father over for a treat. She was so cute! Pigtails bobbing and sunburn on her little button nose, I reassured her father that it was ‘fine’ and she’d have her dessert in a few moments.

When the girl immediately dropped her ice cream on the floor after I’d literally just handed it over, her apologetic father immediately lost all of his ‘nice guy’ routine and demanded a second one or, if not, a refund.

Why you little-

I had to take a moment.

The Cold Room was, unsurprisingly, chilled as a fridge and it helped clear my head. The door was ajar behind me - no way in hell was I locking myself in a fridge - and I slumped down the side wall, careful to tuck my ponytail into the back of my yukata. I was going mental out there. We’d always had a good flow of customers - that was, after all, what made the dip in sales during the winter snows so nerve-wrecking - but this was ridiculous. It was almost 3 o’clock, six hours after we’d opened shop, and neither Mikoto or myself had had a break. Going in here for a glass of water and a breather or nipping off to the toilet didn’t count!

But… I’d rather be suffering here than cooped up in that hospital or stuck at home.
At least in the crowd I was less hyper-aware of being watched. Whether that was Raven or just shadows jumping out at me, imaginary (?) watchers in my perceptual.

I checked the small pocket watch Tou-san had leant me - my grandfather’s - and heaved a sigh before tucking it away and standing back up. It had been two minutes...time to get back out there.

Ice cream was mopped up, customers placated and orders served in an endless stream of racket and exhaustion. Crikey, I was out of practice. It was kinda ridiculous how hard it was to get back into the swing of things after a break, especially considering the recent stress.

“Oh, praise Kami,” I sighed, flipping the sign to closed and leaning against the wall. It was tea time and I was fucking done.

The floor was messy, crumbs and sugar galore, and Mikoto had already started on the dishes with a relieved slump of her usually-postured shoulders.

When Shisui started milling in between the stools (I only had a few, running around the edges of the counter and far wall, depending more on my clientele eating out) and wiping them down, resting the damp rag in his lap as he wheeled around, I shut my mouth.

I’d never, ever argued so much with that idiot than the weeks since The Incident (A.D. after Danzo). If that stubborn boy wanted to wear himself out, he could be my guest! Huh!

My indifference faltered when Shisui tried to grab the mop. Oh, for the love of-

“Nope!” I forced a smile, whipping the handle out of Shisui’s reach and ignoring the answering pout. “No wheel-tracks on my floors, you!”

What a shit excuse, Kiharu. Slytherin is ashamed-!

I pretended to ignore the screech of Shisui’s breaks as I fucking shoved that boy outside. Ha! As if I’d let him help. There was a massive difference between someone being ‘useless’ and ‘injured’.
I'd love to show that boy the Paralympics, just to prove how amazing and incredible everyone can be, if I didn't think it would only encourage him. In a bad way, I mean. The detrimental bit, where Shisui would just take it as an invitation to not wait until he was healed and try antics out whilst he was still in the chair. And, you know, the whole ‘wrong universe’ thingy was a wrench in the works too. Bummer.

Mikoto giggled quietly at the sink as I re-entered with great dignity. Thankfully, Itachi was outside and more than happy to wheel his cousin back home again. I waved them off, turning back to mop and smiling tiredly when my eyes met Mikoto’s.

“You look very tired, Kiharu-chan,” the older woman noted, slowing slightly in her washing. “You did not sleep well last night?”

I thought about my dark room, restlessly shifting and kicking at my duvet, ‘Toshi a heavy weight at my back.

“Fine, just fine,” I smiled faintly, squirting some soap into the basin and setting it beside the sink for the older woman to fill. Whilst I waited, I quickly ran a brush around and wiped down the till area. How in the hell did I get jam there?

It was after six when we finished up, locking the caged front and securing the door. The street was still bright, looking more like 4pm in the late summer sunset, but busy nonetheless. Fellow shopkeepers closing up and villagers out for a bite filtered through the streets, lazy in the heat and beautiful weather. The breeze was slight, ghosting tugs at the loose strands around my face and grazing my skin, but it was a welcome reprieve from the lingering heat.

The air was crisp and fresh, cool in the shade, and filled my lungs to the brim as I sucked in a deep breath, internally marvelling at the calm after such a day.

“What a day…” I groaned out loud, breaking the silence and glancing up at my partner from the corner of my eye. “See you first thing?”

A pale hand reached out and smoothed down my collar. Mikoto smiled affectionately, inclining her head and turning to leave with a soft “tomorrow. Goodnight, Kiharu-chan.”

I tucked my hands into the discrete pockets Yuri-oba had sewn into my clothing, turning away and kicking up dust as I set off down the street.
I wonder if Izu-kun and Tetsu-kun are off shift yet for dinner…

…………………………………………

“What?” I squawked, tea suspended halfway to my lips.

We were curled up on Nee-chan’s sofa, Izumo sprawled out beside me and Kotetsu lounging on the rug before us. The table was laden with pizza, a favourite of the boys, and snacks.

Nekki’s had been open for a week by the time I'd finally wrangled that dinner with the boys. Between new patrols A.D., working on the gate and training, I figured I deserved all the snacks I wanted by finally getting this dinner sorted. A for effort, Kiharu.

Izumo snickered softly at my reaction, bony fingers reaching over to right my cup before I spilled anymore of the hot liquid.

Kotetsu grinned like a mad thing and I scowled furiously as I patted at the spill on my front.

“I'll take it he didn't tell you then?”

Christ, Tetsu was so smug. Always was when something cropped up with my Uchiha friends. Jealous little twat.

“And?” I prompted.

“And?” Cheshire cat couldn't have looked so mocking.

I looked to Izumo and, thank Kami, the milder brunette took mercy.

“It's going around the Mission's Room and no-one’s denied it; Itachi-san isn't taking the exam!”
My mug made a quiet thump as I paced it back on the low table. *What in the actual fuck …*

“Bu-but why wouldn't he?” I floundered. What had I changed *now*?

The two boys shared a look before simultaneously shrugging. “Well, it's not like he has a team right now anyway.”

Izumo leaned forward to swipe another slice. “Maybe he has to wait for one,” the older boy reasoned with a kind smile.

My own answering one seemed strangely brittle. I knew it was too much to hope the boys didn’t notice.

Teenage boys may seem like obtuse idiots but they were sharp as tacts when they wanted to be.

Izumo looped an arm under my own and dragged me to the middle of the couch as Tetsu threw himself up and squeezed in on my other side.

A Kiharu sandwich between two 17 yr olds. *Jeez.*

“Okay, okay!” I growled, swatting at the arms that threatened to squeeze the stuffing out of me. Not a great combo with my food-baby of cheesy-pizza-goodness. Then again, if I threw up on Genma's sofa, I could *totally* pin it on these two…

On second thought, I loathed being sick. *Pass!~*

“Cheer up, Kiharu,” Kotetsu pretty much ordered, laying off the death grip and slinging his bare feet into my lap instead. How the hell he managed that, considering how disgustingly tall the two Chuunins had grown and how we were squashed in, I hadn't a clue.

Regardless, they were *gross* -
“Ew!” I laughed despite myself, shoving his feet away and fake(ish)-gagging when the black-haired teen was undeterred. When I ducked and Tetsu’s foot smacked into Izumo’s laughing mouth, bedlam ensued.

And, following a pillow fight and a rowdy sleepover that had the three of us exhausted and very late the next morning, I completely forgot about Itachi’s withdrawal from the exam.

The exam came and went with nary a word from the Uchiha Heir (a slight smile, “I’m not ready yet, Kiharu-chan, but thank you,”) and time moved on.

Nekki’s was back to normal, Tou-san slowly getting back ‘in the field’ as Shisui started physiotherapy for his atrophied muscles, and Ensui waded through life at the Station.

Unbeknownst to me, the Uchiha stewed.

.................................

When Autumn arrived, I was more than grateful. Life had been so hectic, getting back into the swing of things was rough.

I’d spent a month in a constant state of stress, a pretty short amount of time but, well...stress fucked with the brain. And this was….bizarre.

Shisui was doing well - or, rather, he was just about behaving enough that I couldn't justifiably insist he move in with us. Just so that he couldn't do anything stupid without knowing I was loitering around, reading to murder him - and Itachi had been spending more and more time with his older cousin.

Whilst it warmed the cockles of my shriveled, sarcastic heart, I was still a touch bewildered by Itachi. It wasn't like he'd suddenly changed or become a new person but...I'd never seen him so...unfocused?

He used to always be headed to training, in the middle of training or coming back from training. That's all he ever seemed to do. And it had only become more obvious as the years progressed and spiked again after his ridiculous graduation.
Maybe he was just looking after his cousin, terribly injured and left in a house with an extremely reluctant Great Aunt. He must've felt responsible for what happened to our best friend, in some way. Ensui...Ensui had told me everything, just as I knew he would-

- it was on a nondescript day, cloudy with patches of sunlight on a Thursday morning, a week after Shisui was released in his chair, when Ensui and I found ourselves eating a late breakfast in my kitchen.

The muted ‘thump’ of Ensui’s coffee mug set down on a coaster had my gaze flicking up from my toast.

“So,” he cleared his throat. “You’ve been waiting-”

“-to hear the details of that night, yes,” I finished for him, suddenly impatient. It was about bloody time.

Ensui narrowed his eyes at me knowingly. “Well, I was with Shishou, working on your case, when Mikoto-hime sent me to the Station. She wanted me to speak to her husband and wait for her there.”

Jeez, if that didn't sound suspicious...

“Fugaku-sama spoke to me about the case itself and I reported our findings and methods to him. Mikoto still wasn't back, but Fugaku left anyway and told me to stay put to wait for Shishou.

“It was, at this point,” Ensui took another slurp of coffee but I sat, riveted, breakfast forgotten. “That the fire alarm sounded. I was immediately dispatched alongside several other Chuunin task forces to quench the flames...they were... fast spreading.

“I found some Uchiha kids and took them back home, but they told me that Itachi wasn't there and I should go find him. I was- I agreed.”

Why did I have such a bad feeling about this....
“Turns out Itachi and Sasuke had been on their way to see their mother when the fire began. Itachi escorted his brother to the Station, missing Mikoto and myself, before leaving to look for Shisui—”

“Oh, for Kami’s sake!—” I dropped my heading my hands. God, if I couldn't see how this was going to shit.

The comisorating look Ensui shot me was 300% understanding.

“Right,” the older boy continued, “so Itachi went after Shisui, who was, as I'm sure you know, one of the Jonin at the source of the fire.” Actually! I hadn't known that little fucking nugget. Was Shisui there when the fire started?!

Wait.

Wasn't it started when Danzo fled...

I’d thought that Shisui had become entangled in the fight because he had the Mangekyou and Danzo wanted to grab it before he was forced to flee. Kind of Orochimaru towards sasuke style. But now...did this mean that Shisui had been there when Danzo was confronted?

My chopstick snapped.

“Go. On.” I bit out.

“Well,” dark eyes flickered down to the broken chopstick in my fist, “Shisui was injured, Danzo got to him—” Oh, wow. Ensui! Way to avoid explicitly confirming just who was tasked that mission and who was just ‘there’! “And that's when Itachi found them. I was only a few minutes behind, having heard from Detective Osamu-san and a few other officers where Itachi was headed.

“When I arrived, Itachi had bought Shisui some time. The fire was out of control and Shisui wasn't conscious. So, Itachi took him up into the trees whilst I tried to distract Danzo. He was....good. Insanely good. But, somehow, I ducked his blows and annoyed him enough to keep his focus on me. That was when backup arrived.”
The kitchen was silent for a moment.

“That's...insane,” I commented. I honestly....what else was there to say? I was at loss, for once.

“Yeah..”

It was a pretty vague picture but, well… Ensui was a ninja. They kept their cards incredibly close to their chest and he probably didn't want to fucking traumatise me with the gore….

But, if Itachi was the one to stop Danzo, particularly from stealing his eyes, no wonder the younger boy was so out of sorts! I’d been beside myself when I knew he was in the hospital, let alone at the feet of the psychopath!

I resolved to help him anyway I could.

Which, naturally, resulted in a baking day.

Sunday’s were always great. The stall was closed and both Mikoto and I had some free time to be social, deal with other tasks, or just simply put our feet up for a bit. The lie in was certainly most welcome.

However, despite this blessing, I found myself waking up at an evil 10am (incomprehensible on such a day) to visit the troubled Genin.

Basket on the crook of my arm, I smiled pleasantly at the people on the street, winking at Yuri-oba when I caught her eye in the shop window, until I strolled up to the Uchiha gates.

“Tarou-san,” I beamed up the the Gate Guard, an older gentleman with silver temples.

My grin threatened to falter when there was none of the usual softening around his stern eyes. Uh…

“Kiharu-san,” no ‘-chan’? Shit, “How may I help you?”
Well...at least he didn't demand to know why I wanted to trespass or something...kami...

“I'm, er, coming to visit Itachi-kun?” why, oh why, did that sound like a question?

Tarou stared down at me with fathomless back eyes, like two holes in his chalky face. He'd always been sweet to me, a softie for children now that his daughter was pregnant with his first grandchild, and he'd been one of my favourite guards. I had a Yondaime’s with his name on it and everything...

“I'm sorry, Kiharu-san,” I closed my eyes in defeat before he'd even finished. “Itachi-sama is busy right now.”

“I see...thank you, Tarou-san, have a good day.”

The older man simply nodded and I could do nothing more than turn back the way I came.

Itachi had never been less busy, but so unavailable. Dammit.

It was mid September now, a month after Danzo and still the Village buzzed. How can you move on, how can you come to terms with such revelations?

Of course, for me it was a different kind of acceptance. To the villagers, Danzo Shimura had been a pillar of society. To me, he was a monster. But...events were unrecognisable right now. I was something akin to a life raft, sent to drift in the sea.

Now I just had to find a fucking paddle.

“Kaiya-hime!” I beamed when I spotted a distinctive black pixie cut further up the street. As they were wont to do when my mind was elsewhere, my feet had led me to the main shopping district.

The Akimichi Matriarch turned around at the call, penciled eyebrows winging up in curiosity, before her expression warmed when I was recognised.

“How are you feeling?” I asked once I'd caught up to her side.
Basket of shopping on her arm, Kaiya’s expression softened down at me. The older woman rarely smiled (when she did, it was mainly during business deals and it was the single most terrifying sight in my life) but that’s just who she was. Greatly reserved, greatly dignified.

“Fine, thank you,” Kaiya drawled, moving towards the clothing district. I was happy enough to trot along beside her. “No sickness yet, or anything. But, it is still early.”

“Sora-oba had terrible morning sickness,” I remembered with a fond quirk of my lips. It was so long ago that Noko and I were braiding flower crowns into the expecting-mother’s hair, visiting most days with offerings of fresh strawberry cheesecake. It made me feel...old! I’d barely remembered my childhood before but, now, I had the memory retention of an adult. And it was all here.

“Ah, yes,” the tall woman smirked faintly. “She insisted you call her ‘-oba’ after you made her dessert. She was so embarrassed afterwards, but never regretful.”

I laughed out loud at that. Classic.

I ended up spending the rest of the day with the Akimichi Matriarch, the entire morning devoted to shopping and the afternoon back at the Compound. Chouza was making lunch when we returned, laden with bags, and was more than happy to dish out an extra serving for myself. Chouji was quietly thrilled to see me (it was pretty rare to see me without Ino or Shika or Shisui or- well, you get the idea) and I found myself roped into helping him with his kanji.

Which was, as everyone is well aware, a fucking joke. My writing, whilst pleasing to look at, was utter dribble. Crying shame that a scholar was reduced to this level of literacy, haha!

But Chouji and I spent an afternoon in his room, belly-down on the woolly floor rug with paper spread out around us.

I think we were pretty much at the same level, if I was being brutally honest.

Then again, Chouji was smart. I’d never realised how clever he was in the series, the focus being on his lack of confidence, foodie-ness and friendship with Shikamaru. Sure, he wasn’t a genius but, duh, most kid weren’t. He would read well enough though, slow and wobbly but he was only five! His letters were scrailing but mostly legible. Honestly, his handwriting was better than some of the chicken scratch I’d seen over the years.
Nothing quite like getting an essay back from your very distinguished professor, only to realise you have absolutely no clue what they said. *Because it looks more like a heart monitor than a sentence.*

By the time I strolled back home, Itachi’s jam-filled donuts had been sacrificed as my dessert contribution to dinner and dusk was just starting to set in.

I’d...talk to Itachi tomorrow….

I didn't.

‘Itachi’ was now, apparently, synonymous with ‘absent’. And it was next level frustrating.

Shisui saw him just fine! ( “what are you talking about, Kiharu? He was over for breakfast this morning! Which reminds me, you owe me three free pretzels.” )

Mikoto had given me a bit of a weird look when I’d asked if Itachi was out of the village or training somewhere. Honestly, apparently he was just busy training with his father (and, god, wasn't *that* a shining reassurance?) and the Police Force.

At that little nugget about the Police, I’d cornered a stressed Ensui (if I could box the ears of the Uchiha until they stopped being unfair, I’d do it in a heartbeat) but he’d been in such a rush, he’d only had time to shout over one shoulder that everything was fine.

I was really starting to resent that word. ‘Fine’. God, what does that even really *mean*?

Hana had little sympathy too.

(“- who cares? Probably has a special sensei and he's gonna skip straight to Jonin and never, ever work in a proper team like people should! ”-)

Yeah, no. That wasn’t helpful, Hana.
So, instead, I tried to convince myself that things were okay.

……………………………………….

“ -and I wanna walk with you...on a cloudy day...in fields where the yellow grass grows...knee high...

“...so won't you try...to come, come away with me…?”*

The surface was sparkling clean, shiny as a mirror, but still I polished it. Nee-chan, just off his crutches, had promised to come over for afternoon tea and so, I was washing the floors.

Or, rather, ‘the house’ might be more accurate.

“Why?” was all Hitoshi asked, his slumped form taking up the entire sofa, with half lidded eyes.

Hunched on the floor behind the back of said sofa, I rolled my eyes, unseen. “Because.” I answered, dunking my cloth into the bucket before wiping the floor again.

Hitoshi snorted when it became clear that was all I was going to say.

I could see my reflection in the mahogany beams.

“ ...glass half empty, glass half, full...well, either way, you won't be going thirsty...count your blessings, not your faults...”*

I moved into the hallway, leaving behind a sparkling household, a trail of cleanliness. This was actually super weird of me. Nee-chan had been round here a lot and I had always been a bit of a slob. Well, I had been before but...when Kaa-san died, I’d hated to see the home she loved be treated so poorly. But still, I wasn't usually this good. It was just...one of those restless days, I guess.

“.... you've got it all, you lost your mind in the sand...there's so much more, you can reclaim your crown...”
By 2pm, the house was insanely clean, a Yondaime's out on the table, and the kettle on.

Despite the cast, Nee-chan didn't even have to knock like a normal person.

Then again, recently Shisui had found great joy in ramming his chair into stuff that got in his way. Thankfully, that had yet to extend to children or other people, but my back door (our front one had a porch that was frustratingly inaccessible to wheelchairs. I already had a Genin team booked to rectify that next weekend) had acquired some chips from the abuse.

Shisui just said it was was I got for being too slow to open it. I just said he was a brat who didn't deserve me.

(Either way, I was happy to see him finally perk up a bit.)

But, anyway! Genma, yes, Genma came straight in the kitchen, sans sounds of a door opening or any kind of entry, and scared the fuck out of me.

“Gahhk!” I yelped when a man entered my perceptual. The ANBU that materialised behind the Tokubetsu had me yelling out. Again.

“Raven!” I gawked. “You-you're still here?!”

The still-unidentified-Hyuuga ignored me. Maybe they pulled a face or rolled their eyes. Sheesh, I’d never know.

“I didn't realise your newest buddy was still around, Kiharu,” Genma unhelpfully drawled. “And, before you ask, yes, I was repressing my chakra. Ki-chan is a summoner now; if I wanna scare her, gotta take proper precautions.”

“I can't sense chakra,” I pointed out, pulling the kettle off the heat when it started to whistle.

With the slightest hobble, Genma strolled over and sank into a chair with a contented sigh. “Well...I
know that now. Never can be too sure what your old man will teach you.”

Raven was gone by the time I turned back around and I pretended I wasn't nashing my teeth. “If Tou-san hears you call him that, he’ll have your pretty locks before you can say ‘senbon’.”

It was true though. Without that weird-ass bandana, Genma's silken locks were clearly visible, tucked behind his ears and very pretty.

Genma's throaty chuckle was pretty too.

_Yay_, I sighed happily. _I have such a lovely sister~_

Genma cut himself a massive slab of tart, without waiting for me or my permission, and I dunked an extra two spoonfuls of sugar into his tea. _I take it back_.

“How's my brother-in-law, then?” I was the picture of innocence.

Having just taken a gulp of his poisoned tea, I had never wished more for a camera. That spit-take was a thing of beauty. And I was pretty chuffed that I'd managed to time it _just so_, the spray missing both myself and the spread.

“Listen, Kiharu,” Genma coughed, cheeks flushed. Absently, I hope Raven was a closet-gossip in the ANBU headquarters. Spreading the word and all that…

“Raidou and I are best friends, _just_ best friends.”

“As you should be,” I conceded primly and hid my smirk at Genma’s slight relief behind the rim of my tea cup. “All good relationships must be built on strong foundations of friendship and respect.”

“That is not what I meant, kid, and we both know it.” The Tokubetsu seemed to gather some speed and I slumped back in my chair. This was _no_ fun. “What I'm trying to say is that we're _not_ a couple, okay?”
I decided to come clean. “Oh, I know that,” I talked right over Genma’s affronted ‘what?’, “ but I think you would be. A good one, I mean.”

Jeez, he had no right to look so surprised.

“You're both super good friends and you do everything together! There's no-one you trust more, same for Raidou, and you have a good dynamic!”

*Genma, are you even breathing?*

“Sure, you might be good friends but I think you'd be even better together. You're already living your lives joined at the hip, why not share them?” I eyed the other brunette’s glazed eyes with an overwhelming sense of satisfaction. “…Just a little thought, Nee-san..”

*Seeds: planted.*

…………………………………………

It was almost October, the summer days darkening as Autumn came in full swing, and the trees burned like torches all around.

Itachi had finally become more available, with little-to-no explanation (he’d *completely* pulled the innocent-ignorance card, can you *believe it*?!), and was spending more and more time with Ensui and Sasuke, on top of his usual closeness with Shisui.

It was like a great, big boys club (one that had a membership age spanning from 20 to 5, tch) and, honestly? I was starting to feel a bit...left out.

I had precious few *true* friends in this life and, those ones I did have, I was territorial as fuck. No, they weren’t possessions or whatever. That didn't mean I didn't get a bit... *touchy* ...about it all.

Those dicks (barring you, Sasuke, you grumpy kitten) were *up to something*. 
Unfortunately, I was passive aggressive so, instead of calmly discussing the issue with my friends, I went looking for someone else to hang out with.

Hana was helping her brother train for his Nin-ken partner, so she was off the list, and I wasn’t quite sad enough to go hang with adults or the babies.

Regardless, I wasn’t aimless for too long.

I was just coming on to Market street when a bushy ponytail came into view, the boy pausing at the sight of me.

“Iruka-kun!” I cried, surprised despite the fact I really had no reason to be. The world didn’t revolve around me and Iruka had probably just been getting on with his life whilst mine went to shit.

The Genin in question turned at the call, eyebrows winging up when his dark eyes met mine and a bashful smile pulled at tan cheeks.

“Kiharu-san,” the future-academy instructor greeted me, winding through the crowds of shoppers to stop beside me. “I heard you were back,” yeah, I mentally snorted, like a month and a half ago, you dork~ “Everything, er, okay?”

“Just fine, thanks Iruka-kun,” I grinned, digging a hand into my basket and offering him a tart. “Yondaime's? I was just going to lunch, if you want to tag along?”

Careful fingers, his nails bitten to the quick and scruffed from antics (no doubt), closed around the treat and the older boy shot me a small grin. The scar across his nose, from shrapnel during the Nine-tails’ attack, crumpled cutely. “Ramen?” He gestured in the direction of T euchi’s.

I rolled my eyes. Of course. “Sure, sure,~”

The Ramen chef glanced up when we ducked under the banners, making a beeline for the counter stools, and grinned at the sight of the two of us keen-os.
“Morning, you two! The usual?”

Laughing, I nodded, eyeing Iruka’s excited agreement out the corner of my eye. I didn't realise that he was already such a regular. Then again, it made sense; Iruka was a big ramen eater, well before he ever started getting closer to Naruto. I’d just never really seen him here, was all. Although, it wasn’t as if I was here all the time, I only really showed up to refill the fridge, grab the occasional meal, or catch up with the father-daughter duo.

So, we sat at the bar, chatting lightly until our food arrived. I’d never been terribly close to Iruka, a bit uncertain around him at this age (just because I loved his character, didn’t mean I automatically adored him as a person. I just...somehow found it hard to talk to him), but I managed a conversation well enough. I hesitantly asked about his genin team, and he tossed out a few names that wiggled in the back of my mind but had definitely faded from my memory. God, what I wouldn't give for Google or Narutopedia for a refresher! In return, I told Iruka about Shisui’s wheelchair (common knowledge but still some harmless gossip) and talked about my favourite ramen flavours.

When the food arrived, I was grateful for the excuse to shut my trap (word-wise, at least) and we dug in. God, this was awkward! Our elbows kept knocking as we ate and, at one point, we made eye contact with noodles hanging from our mouths. The blush on Iruka’s face, ha!

It was different from customer service, I could talk to those people for ages about the weather or the price of silk! And it was different again with my friends, the easy banter and comfortable silences.

But I knew Iruka, I knew the man he’d one day be. But...he wasn’t that man yet. And it was very different from everyone else. Shisui was a bit of a mystery in the fandom, a boy who’s life was a tragedy but we’d never had the chance to know intimately. The same with almost everyone else, if we’d ever known them at all. And the future Rookie 9 were just babies! It didn’t matter who they’d be when they grew up; I’d basically raised InoShikaCho, had a hand in the others too, and it was as easy as breathing to forget their 2D characters.

But Iruka was...other. I’d freaked out when I’d met Minato, I’d freaked out when I’d seen spiky silver hair on a rooftop and I’d probably go into cardiac arrest when Ino one day drags a pink-haired civilian home. He was a character that, at least to me, had always been there. And he’d changed so much! An orphan who loathed ‘the Demon’ to a teacher who took pity, to an older brother/father-figure and he’d always lingered in the back of the entire series. He was, or rather would be, Naruto’s family and I was honest enough with myself to admit I was struggling to see past that.

And, as for Iruka himself, I was a girl who looked at him weird. I’d not had the best first impression (well! Neither had he!! ) and, well, you couldn’t get on with everyone.
Surely I got brownie points for trying, though.

So, as we slurped ramen like the awkward kids we were, I just...tried to think of him as a person. There were very few people, I could count on one hand, I struggled to accept as real. I wasn't really sure why Iruka was one of them. Regardless, I was trying...

My attempt to be a good person was interrupted by a racket in the street.

“-Oi! Why you little-!”

Heads snapping up and round, Iruka and I watched as a small cluster of people (lower halves visible under the banners) gathered on the street. Teuchi, still stirring the broth, frowned in consternation. I couldn't blame him, crowds on your doorstep were never good news.

Hopping up, I decided to do my business partner a favour, and waved off the ramen chef's concern. As I walked over to explore the commotion, a curious Iruka at my shoulder, I sped up as the voices only grew louder. Insults were being thrown and, from the faint dirt in the air, a tussle must've broken out. Crap, I was a touch too young to deal with that shit....

Mercilessly elbowing my way through, I came to an abrupt stop at the scene before me.

Three men, two civilians and an older Genin, were stood in the middle of the crowd. Pale dust smeared their calves, kicked up from the dry ground, and their arms -strong, with clenched fists- were raised threateningly.

A small figure was huddled in the dust.

Aww, hell no!

“Oi!” I snarled, shoving forwards and fistong a hand in the back of the first man’s shirt. He reeled around, raring for a fight and threw a fist without even looking.

The punch came down like slow-mo and I found myself thinking, eyes popped wide, ‘oh shit’.
I went flying, crashing into the people behind me, with my jaw and collarbone aching. And all hell broke loose.

“Hey!” the small blob- blonde, of fucking course!- jerked to its feet and staggered forwards a few steps. The people around me were arguing loudly, Iruka fluttering helplessly as he pulled me into a seated position.

The brute that hit me was staring with shocked, regret-filled eyes and I glared through my tears. Oh, so now he was sorry?!

Fuck, fuck, fuck, that hurt! My shoulder was shrouded in pain, my bones small and close to the surface, and I’d bet my shitty luck I’d gone and fractured it.

“How dare you!” the entire street was watching as I screamed at the men. Teuchi was coming now, ducking outside with a truly thunderous expression and his ladle still in hand. “Why are you beating up children, you monsters!”

Parents murmured unhappily, a few stepping forward to ‘shield’ me (about time! My god, where the fuck were you when they were actually hitting us?!) and I could see some Officers running up the street towards us.

Speaking of... where in the ever loving fuck were Naruto’s famed ANBU guards?!

“You’re supposed to be a ninja, a protector of the village!” I accused the Genin that had struck me. I was so full of shit though, I was under no illusions that just because someone wore a uniform they were automatically a good person, a hero. Regardless, I was gonna make the fucking best of this.

My arm was shifted when Iruka tried to heave me up and I let out an ear-splitting yelp-

NOPE, DON’T DO THAT.

Ouch ?!
Two Officers elbowed through the crowd, which had only grown in the ‘excitement’, and I let out a sigh of relief when the three men were escorted to the Station for further questioning.

Not to sound like a spoiled brat who was going to throw weight around for what I wanted...but I was totes gonna do that.

Disturbance of the peace, child abuse and assault sounds about right.

“Hey, you alright?” I groaned, glancing up at the dusty blonde that scampered hesitantly towards us. “Why were they bullying you anyway?”

Sapphire blue eyes shone from a dirty face.

N-Naruto!

“Naru-chan!” I gawked, pulling away from Iruka and leaning up on my knees. “I’ve been worried, where have you been?”

Minato’s eyes squinted confusedly. “Wha-?”

Disappointment clouded my features but I wasn't going to cry over it. “We met a while ago, the girl with the sleeping kitty in the woods?”

I felt Iruka twitch but ignored it. Tch! Old News!

Naruto blinked those massive eyes before his mouth popped open. “Oh yeah!” score! “Your cat was so fat!”

Kami. Thank god Hitoshi wasn’t here to hear that-

“He’s just big, actually,” I half heartedly defended, only paying have an ear to Teuchi as he helped me up and escorted us back inside. Naruto, largely ignored at this point, snuck in behind me. “A panther, a ninja too!”
Ninja was apparently the magic word - as if the little orphan hadn't just been threatened and ruffed up by one - and the tiny blonde Uzumaki was suddenly a bundle full of energy, hopping after the chef as he half-carried me 'round the counter and to the back sinks.

“Iruka-kun, you'd best go to the seamstress’ two streets over.” Teuchi started, his deep voice solemn as he plopped me up on the countertop and started washing my scratched up hands. “Ask for Yuri-san, the Uchiha healer is usually with her. Kiharu's relatives—” I blushed crimson at the insinuation, “—will be able to help.”

Iruka, face scrunched up in a furrow of concern, dashed off without a backwards glance. Teuchi turned back to me, pulling out a first aid kit that had my lips pulling into a smile. *Pink kitty plasters, hmm?*

Naruto scuffed a foot in the doorway and I immediately gestured for him to come over.

The skidding of his tiny feet on the tiles as he shuffled over was extremely loud in the back room. And, knowing the normal pass-aggressive vibe that most people generated in regards to the local jinchuuriki, I counted it a massive blessing that Teuchi seemed to have decided to take a neutral stance. He lifted Naruto up beside me (his eyes saddened at the flinch such an innocent touch brought about) and slid the wet cloth closer, but otherwise ignored the four year old as he pressed some towel-wrapped ice to my collarbone.

Hissing under my breath, I determinedly reached across and picked up the wet rag.

“Here we go, Naru-chan,” I half whispered, worried of spooking him after such a day. His skin was tanned underneath the dust, evidence of a life lived outdoors, and I wondered if he was homeless.

*I was a terrible human being.*

I’d known that Naruto was kicked out of the orphanage and then given a shitty apartment by Sarutobi after living it rough for a while. That was *Canon*. But...Iruka had sworn he'd never seen a blonde of Naturo’s description at the Orphanage, far earlier than the age he was evicted that the fandom was aware of. I’d seen the signs, the little boy missing and possibly in the Red Light District and done *nothing*.

He'd been in my grasp the night of Tobi's attack and I'd let him slip away again into obscurity.
I’d never be able to make up for it.

“So, what was all that about, hmm?” I quietly prompted the silent boy. My shoulder throbbed but, honestly, making sure little Naruto was okay was much more important. I was pretty sure it wasn’t broke anyway; if it had been, I’d definitely know it.

“I…,” I had to strain to hear the raspy whisper. “...i just want’d some ramen…”

Hear that? That’s the sound of my heart breaking.

Judging by the softening of Teuchi’s uncharacteristically stern eyes, he was similarly affected.

“Well, ignore them!” my impassioned exclamation had the younger boy almost jumping a foot in the air and I grimaced apologetically. “They’re just mean and any time they try anything, let me know and I’ll sort them out!”

As one, all three of us glanced down at my purpling and swelling collarbone. Ah...er....

“Anyway, ” I moved quickly on, “if you’re hungry, I have a tab you’re free to use too!”

Naruto was looking particularly overwhelmed by now so I sent a meaningful glance up at the ramen chef. He hesitated but eventually nodded. Good. Any food from Ichiraku’s wouldn't be ‘charged’. It was...the very, very least I could do.

The thought of such a tiny thing, my ramen tally, overwhelming the little boy made me want to cry again for a completely different reason.

If I’m actually able to stay dead this time, there's no doubt I deserve to rot.

........................................
Akane had *not* been impressed, to say the least.

“Can a week not go by without you getting into scrapes?” well, *that* was hardly fair. I averaged about once a month if we were being accurate and I'd hardly count any of them mere tussles.

Tobi, Danzo, abusive asshole civilians….nope, all pretty unforgivably high-end in my books.

“I was defending the innocent,” I snarked mulishlessly as the Uchiha smeared paste from my jaw to my underarm. Damn, what I wouldn't give for some chakra healing round about now.

Akane cast a sharp eye over the boy in question, who was now gulping down a bowl of miso like it was going to be ripped from him any moment. He was clean, Akane having insisted he wash himself as much as possible in the great sink, and unhurt. The few scrapes Kurama hadn't healed yet were now gone, something I’d insisted on.

I was just relieved that Akane didn't seem to care too much about *who* my little damsel in distress was.

I was stupid enough to get my hopes up.

“*What*?”

The walk home, Naturo’s hand firmly clasped in mine (they couldn't pry this boy from me now, not without amputation), was a bit...tense. Minato's son had been pretty shy, a complete flip from his Canon character, and happy to come home with me.

Like a stray puppy, he'd stuck to me like a little shadow when it became obvious I wasn't going to reject him. Unlike everyone else, apparently… and, whilst I did intend to ram some stranger-danger caution into his head, I was glad he seemed pretty okay with me.

I...wasn't too great with kids. Shika was sleepy, Chouji was like a fluffy teddy, Sasuke tolerated me and Ino was easily placated with girly stuff.

But...Naruto had *issues* . Ones I had no idea how to deal with appropriately! But, I *was* going to do
what I *could*. And that was support him in anyway I was able.

Unfortunately, the universe had decided to make that as difficult as possible.

“*What*?”

Hitoshi, a hulking figure on the front porch, was silent. His eyes were two hard chips of emerald, muzzle crumpled in a silent snarl, and completely stiff beside the tell-tale twitch of his tail. He was *not* a happy kitty…

“‘Toshi...,” my voice was a low warning, Naruto carefully tucked behind me at the gate, and I shot my summon a quelling glare. He wasn’t going to be an ass, right?

“*No.*”

Okay, so apparently he was.

I had about a thimble-full of pity. I didn’t give a flying fuck if Naruto stank of Bijuu or Fox or whatever. If it was anyone else, fine! Be wary, be vigilant; after the summer we’d had, I was in 100% agreement. But not this kid.

Surely. Surely, surely, *surely*, he must *stink* of Minato!?

“I’m going to give you some context, Hitoshi,” I smiled pleasantly, looking for all the world as if we were having a cheerful chat over tea. The panther bared his teeth and I mimicked him, my snarl disguised as a grin. “I have an injured collarbone and bruised jaw-” this time, he snarled for a completely different reason. *Gotscha.* “-all from a group of three men who were beating up a child.”

I glanced at Naruto from the corner of my eye but, from the awed look on his face, Hitoshi’s imposing figure was more on the spectrum of ‘badass-awesome’ than ‘predator-that-wants-to-feast-on-my-flesh’. Well, okay then.

“Naru-chan, this is Hitoshi, that super strong ninja I was talking about earlier!”
Blue eyes lit up like sapphires in the sunlight and the small Uzumaki was more than willing to follow me as I led us up the front garden.

“You’re a ninja?!”

The awe on Naruto’s face no doubt stroked the carnivore’s ego; he didn’t relax but he looked a lot less like he was going to maul the ‘monster’ clinging to his summoner’s arm. Phew.

“...” I raised a brow. “...yes.”

“Cool!”

Well, at least he wasn't scared. Or not as far as I could tell…

I ushered us into the house, ignoring how the big cat stalked after my every step as if Naruto was in danger of going bat-shit crazy and mauling me. He'd get used to it.

“Grab me a towel from the cupboard will you, kitty?” I drawled casually, waltzing into the kitchen and winking at Naruto when he giggled at the nickname.

Hitoshi didn't move.

“Akane-sama’s meds only help so much and I might start screaming.”

He was gone and back so quickly, all I had time to register was a black blur and some muted ‘thumps’ upstairs.

A pack of peas was pulled from the freezer and wrapped in said towel, before I wincingly rested it in the crook of my shoulder. The punch itself had landed on the collar bone, but it had clipped my jaw as it angled down and my landing had only jarred the entire area further. A.K.A. not fun.
“So, Naru-chan, you've seen my house now; where do you live?”

………………………………………………

The sunlight was beautiful.

Glowing beams filtered between the trees, turning green to gold and amber over my head. The pebbles beneath my bare feet glittered like beetle shells, dappled grey and green and blue, clattering as I padded towards the shore. The water was calm, gently lapping at the rocks and shone deep aquamarine under the blazing sun.

Oh, I smiled. The Naka again… Noko and I loved it here.

It was glorious and I'd never felt such peace. No worries, nothing. It was like my brain had finally relaxed, like when you squint too long in the sunlight and you go in the shade. A cramp loosened, a weight removed.

A taut rope slackened and slowly, slowly unwound.

My lips opened of their own accord. “Why is a Raven like a writing desk?”

The crow that fluttered down onto my knee - somehow I was seated, weight leaned back on my palms with legs bent - clicked it's beak and puffed up it's chest proudly.

“Crows are the superior species, regardless.”

I wasn’t phased when it spoke. No thoughts as to who this creature was, how their beak formed words without teeth. None of it mattered anyway.

“I haven't any idea either,” I confided.

A shiny black head was cocked to the side, eyes like buttons gleaming in the sunlight. “Then, why ask?”
A sardonic smile quirked bloodless lips. “Not all questions have an answer. Sometimes we don’t know the answer. Doesn't mean we shouldn't ask them.”

When flowers, Sakursos and Suitopis, began to slowly drift down around us, I merely tilted my head back to enjoy the brush of silken petals on my skin. Behind me, a massive stag raged as it mauled the wolf pack surrounding it. They made no noise so it was easy to ignore them.

“He's a funny sort, isn't he?” A white she-wolf, jaw stained red, flopped down beside me. She had such pretty red eyes. Pity about her paw…

“Who?” I asked absentmindedly, carding bandaged fingers through her silken fur.

“Seiichi, of course!” she yapped, nosing at the golden fish that had followed the invading tide and swam around our feet. It really was a lovely little thing.

A fin tickled my ankle and I wiggled my fingers in the water in retaliation. Oh, Yuri was silly!

“Missing-nin! Imagine that!”

A niggle of wrongness wormed its way to the forefront of my mind. What?

“It was all your fault, though,” a pale snout nodded sagely, resting her head on her paws and sniffing wetly when the goldfish flicked water in her nose. “Can't blame a parent for going insane when their child commits suicide.”

My brain stuttered to a halt. What.

The white wolf glanced over my shoulder, garnet eyes resigned, and I turned to peek too. Curiosity killed the cat.

The stag was dead and the wolves were feasting.
“Pack is hard.” Somehow, Akane’s voice managed to register through the ringing of my eyes, eyes fastened to the gruesome sight before us. “We fight together, die together. But, that makes us just as strong as we are weak. There is a strength in numbers.”

Head spinning, the edges of my vision whited out.

“But there is also a danger. Change is resisted in the Pack.”

My fingers were numb but I kept stroking the old wolf anyway. She was...nice...

“We do things we don't want to for the Pack.”

“Such a terrible thing,” I agreed, frowning sadly as golden scales filled the water at our feet. “Such a pity...”

The wolf licked gold from her teeth. “And really, what were you thinking? The Pack is a wild thing. To stand before it...it was suicide.”

My mind was lost to me, neck as weak as a straw as I nodded obediently.

“Didn't Sakumo teach you anything?”

I woke up gasping.

Bloopers

The Talk (not that one, a different one)

“So….Shika,” I drawled, eyes on the cloud-filled sky. The comforting weight on my shoulder, the Nara heir’s little head, rocked with a nod. “Do you know what you said that was wrong?”
The five-year-old (jeez, everyone here was wayyy too young) heaved a great big sigh. I tried super hard not to think about how cute it was, like when your pet curled up against you. Aww...too late..

“I made you sound like you were inca-capa-ble.”

Wow. Well done for *quoting me*.

“And?” I twirled a finger in his ponytail. Shika sounded half asleep...then again, I *had* been quizzing him on this spontaneously for the past three days.

“We should always help our friends but res-pect that they’re their own people.”

Smirking in triumph, I purred quietly in reward and Shikamaru huddled even closer.

“Now, what do you do when Ino-chan is yelling…”

*Suck on that, Kishi!*

*1 Come Away With Me* by Norah Jones.

*2 King* by Lauren Aquilina

Sakuraso: primrose. In Japan, means desperation

Suitopi: sweet pea. In Japan, means goodbye

Chapter End Notes
A/N- Yo! So updates around now are gonna be pretty slow coming, simply because I’m next-level busy. It’s actually gotten to the point where I’m not even writing on my laptop anymore, just typing on my phone when I get a mo! But, here it is at last! Thank you to everyone who commented/reviewed in the last chapter, I adore all of you, and to all the people who read and support this story as well!

Couple of notes:

Had a few people commenting about how everyone adores Kiharu/the fic is shaping up to be a harem. All I can really say is that a) Kiharu has like….a handful of friends her age. People being fond of her is just natural. If you take a look at normal interaction, especially considering the amount of networking our girl gets up to, I’ve kept it prettttyyy low-key. B) is it considered a harem because most of her friends are boys? Gahhh! I bet if most of them were girls, majority of you’d never even notice *pinches temples* it like that. The girls of naruto are….few on the ground and every single one of them was shafted by Canon. That most of Kiharu’s friends are boys is because, out of the appropriate age ranges, there aren’t a lot of ‘girls’ to pick and I didn’t want to just fill the whole thing with OCs. Therefore, it’s not a harem and they’re not all madly in love with her. Their closeness? That’s called friendship. Okay? Yay!

Raven isn’t actually Kiharu’s full-time watcher anymore. I’d figure I’d tell you this as Kiharu doesn’t really have the opportunity to know any better and, therefore, reveal it to you. They’re back on their usual duties but, occasionally, they have to swing by the Dazai place to make sure everything’s okay and also keep a track on Kiharu with their Byakugan. They saw a muted chakra signature headed towards the house and basically reacted. They secretly like her….just a little bit. Like. A smidgen.

So, anyway! NARU-CHAN RETURNS! Thanks for reading and please, pleaseeeee review! Enjoy the chapter! <3
As depressing as it sounds, time is always ticking. We grow older every second, take a step further down our paths.

To quote K$sha...."Tik Tok, on the clock-" (*cuts off before the songs takes me down a completely different tangent*)

And, as with everything, this is both good and bad, sad and happy!

Timers on cookies mean that food-bliss is just around the proverbial corner! The day changes into night, meaning you can acceptably drink cocktails...yada, yada. Birthdays meant gifts and gorging on food and, in my case at least, wearing a plastic tiara like the twat I am.

But...childhoods end. Friends leave, as do loved ones and enemies alike. Age sets in. People die and memories fade, anniversaries pass. A loss for every achievement.

But, as I had resolved to live by, it's only when we know the absence of light that we can truly appreciate it.

Grief and sadness...makes the happiness all the sweeter.

When morning came, I’d fallen back into a fitful sleep. Tossing and turning most of the night away, I’d been careful not to wake anyone up.

That dream...why was I thinking of Kakashi’s father, Sakumo, after all this time? I’d been regretful to have missed out on helping him - although, I had to wonder if I’d have actually be of any help - but I’d been born too late. I suppose the same could have been said for any of the people I’d dreamed of saving. Like Tobirama and Kagami, Minato and Kushina...Kaa-san and Noko.

Sakumo was on the list but...not at the top.

But...why was I dreaming of him? I’d always been an extremely lucid dreamer, my imagination off the charts. It was one of the reasons I’d never, ever been able to stomach any kind of thriller or horror
film. One scene was enough material to throw me for weeks on end.

But...dreams were acts of the subconscious. Was I trying to tell myself something? Not to throw shade at myself but...couldn’t my own head be a little more explicit?!

The crow...they were omens of death, right? Jeez, I was drawing on some horoscope shit now. Next thing you know, I’d start an evaluation based on my personality type or ‘elemental spirit’!

Not...that I...did those quizzes...of course...

But, anyway . The crow could have meant death. But, well, it hadn’t been very intimidating or sinister ? And I knew Shisui would sign the crow contract at some point, sharing it with Itachi when he died (in Canon! Just Canon!). But..he didn’t have it yet. Then again, I did have those mental connotations already in place. But the bird had sounded female!

Okay, so, saying Shisui was the crow, female vibe or no, I knew full well the wolf had been Akane. Her voice had been the same.

The rest of the dream however...and that reference to Sakumo’s act of Seppuku...made little sense.

A heavy exhalation ruffled my hair, stinking of raw meat and morning breath, and I pried open crusty eyes. Huh. I’d barely even thought about the position I was in.

The duvet was kicked onto the floor and I was sweating buckets.

It probably had something to do with the way I was clamped to ‘Toshi’s chest, like a cuddly toy, with all of his legs wrapped around me. His head rested heavy above mine and his coiled up tail was curled around my bare feet. Hitoshi’s fur was glossy, soft and warm like the coziest of quilts. He smelled of cat (nuh duhh ), grass and the coconut soap I insisted using whenever he had his monthly bathtime.

Jeez, that afternoon was always fun. (We’re talkin’ swamped lawn, ending up with the two of us in the tub, and soap everywhere .)
“'Tushi!’ I hissed, wiggling around. Unfortunately, Hitoshi was a ninja. And one of the biggest apex predators around. Ergo, bulging cat muscles that could crush me easy. I could barely move!

My head was the only part of me that had any kind of maneuverability and I ended up knocking it against the chest in front of me.

‘thump’, ‘thump’-

A low, rumbling growl vibrated through my entire body as Hitoshi announced his displeasure at the wake up call.

In Cat, it was probably something along the lines of the Tiger Cave in Aladdin. ‘Who dares awaken me from mine slumber, foolish mortal,’ Yada, yada.

“‘Tushi!’” I hissed into velvet fur, still squirming. “Lemme go, you bish!”

“...no.”

Urgh!

“Kiharu!” My dad’s voice sounded from the stairs and, straining my eyes to the side to peer at my bedside alarm clock, I quirked a brow at the interruption. Since when did dad wake me up on a Saturday, especially at 9? “Kiharu! You up?”

Well, shit, dad. I fucking would be now, ay.

“Yus!” I hollered back, muffled in the fur pressed against my face. If my stupid summon tried to squeeze me any harder, I’d pop like a balloon. Vaguely, I wondered if ‘Toshi had ever actually done that in a fight. Nah... bit bear-ish, right?

“Er, can I come in?” dad’s voice sounded on the other side of the door, as hesitant to ‘intrude’ as always. Considering the fact he could probably hear my heartbeat, a side effect from having such a strong bond (one meant for an entire Pride but condensed between the two males instead) with Hitoshi for donkey’s years, I thought the effort was pretty cute.
“Yus, peese.”

The door cracked open and I could just about see dad’s curious face over the fuzzy lumps of Hitoshi’s shoulders.

“Er…” was Tou-san’s helpful and intelligent response to the sight of his crushed daughter.

“Hulp?”

Thankfully, dad managed to contain his snickers enough to trot over and place a heavy, tanned hand on the scruff between the panther’s shoulder blades. “Up you get, Hitoshi!” two fists grabbed handfuls of fur and started to heave. Needless to say, the carnivore was barely shifted. I decided to help out, regardless.

I was gonna regret this later. Or, maybe, immediately.

Then again, Hitoshi leapt away from me like he’d been electrocuted after I’d licked a big, wet stripe across his nose.

For my part, I sat up and started gagging, tongue hanging out as I choked on my shitty life choices. The things we do for survival...

“What do you think you were doing?!” The insulted panther thundered, hair rising like a spooked alley cat as he crouched defensively in the corner.

Tou-san was still gasping with laughter, hands on knees.

“You were crushing me!” I spat, wiping my tongue with a tissue and then instantly regretting it when a coating of fluff was left behind. “What were you doing?!”

Gleaming fangs flashed as the cat’s muzzle wrinkled in a snarl. “I was being vigilant~”
“Oh for the love of-” I threw my hands in the air, “If you're still going on about Naru-chan-!”

“-welcomed a demon into our home-”

“-scarcely stayed four hours-”

“-nightmares all night, kicking me-”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Tou-san stepped between us, hands held aloft like he expected a brawl and brows furrowed. I tried not to notice the wrinkles slowly emerging around his eyes. “Let's go back for a moment, hmm? Hitoshi, what do you mean ‘demon’?”

I flicked my gaze over to catch gleaming emerald and furiously thought ‘shut your goddamn trap’ as hard as I could. Evidently, my telepathy could use some work when-

“The cub came home yesterday with the demon kid.” Hitoshi...I'm going to shave you bald.

Chocolate waves, curling over his scratched hitai-ate, ruffled as dad whipped his head around to stare burning dark eyes into my own.

“What! Kiharu! You were talking to That Boy?”

My eyes narrowed dangerously.

Now, my folks had never scared me off Naruto. And neither had they done a Shikaku and told me to make my own judgement call. They simply...hadn't really said anything. The usual malarkey about avoiding strange people and never going anywhere dark and alone...but, judging by Hitoshi’s reaction, they probably figured they didn't explicitly have to.

Not only had my panther responded....a lot , but my own senses should have been tingling.

To be honest, they were. Naruto stank of homelessness, dirt and fox. And I was pretty sure, if my chakra reserves were more used, his presence would fairly burn .
If I'd never known any better, my parents wouldn't have had to worry a single jot. Even without my furry companion, I would've run for the hills. Well, if I hadn’t witnessed that disgusting abuse yesterday. I prayed I’d have been a decent enough fucking person to stand up to that, even without my old life.

Tough shit that I knew better than that.

And, honestly, it only made me admire Kiba and Hinata more. Those two, I figured, would know, more than most of Naru’s future classmates, how malevolent the young blonde felt. And those two had been close to him! (Well, Kiba had been a good friend and Hinata had crushed hard, so?) And all without the knowledge I had! I was fucking impressed.

“What's wrong?” I blinked blue eyes, channelling innocent Bambi as much as possible. “He was just a little orphan! They were beating on him!”

Dark eyes stared down at me, expression incomprehensible, so I decided to go for broke. Pale, calloused fingers curled around the collar of my sleep shirt and pulled down.

Dark bruises, sore from Hitoshi’s well meaning crushing, crept up my clavicle, over my shoulder and to my developing boobs. However, due to layers of medical wrap and my shirt, dad only got a glimpse of my shoulder.

And promptly turned white.

“What-!?"

“Three men were beating him up!” I gritted my teeth at the memory, still fuming. The day I stopped caring would be the day I died. “And then, they punched me! Almost broke my collarbone!”

Tou-san stepped over to me, pulling my shirt from my fingers and grazing his own over the nasty bruising. He looked pale, stressed, and I felt a hot knot of guilt nestle in my chest. Didn't he have enough to worry about…?

Without conscious thought, my own eyes wandered up to the angry burn scars just visible at the
collar of his flak jacket. *It's all Hitoshi's fault for being a snitch…*

“You wouldn't have been hurt, hime, if you'd stayed with Hitoshi…” Dad fretted, face pinched with worry as his hands came to rest on my arms.

I lifted said limbs, letting dad's hands slid down the skin until I could catch them in my own. With a squeeze of encouragement, I softly refuted that bullshit. I could only hope he was only speaking out of fear…

“And let a baby be hurt, especially for nothing? He's done no wrong except be an orphan and that's not a crime, Papa! What if it was Ino or me! Would no-one do anything?”

Dad sighed deeply, eyes falling shut as his head lolled back, face tilted to the ceiling. Hitoshi was a silently fuming shadow in the corner.

“...a baby?” *You sensed nothing wrong?*

“Yes, Tou-san. He's just so...lost.”

The older man's hands slipped from mine, only to curl around my shoulders and pull me into his arms. A quick hoist and low grunt, and my dad had stood up, cradling me to his chest.

I yelped, throwing my arms around his neck and cringing at the sharp throb in my shoulder, as he started for the door.

“Breakfast time, then,” dad proclaimed, letting things be for the time being.

Tucking my head into the crook of his neck, I breathed in the scent of soap and *dad*. It had been a long while since I'd been carted around like a baby. I'd spent so long, one of my first memories here, in my dad's arms...my throat throbbed without permission.

I was fine...it had just. Been a while.
By the time breakfast was over (feeling mushy and affectionate, I'd made strawberry pancakes and delivered them with a soft kiss to dad's cheek - he'd been tearfully beaming ever since. Hitoshi had milk. I didn't care if most cats were technically lactose intolerant. Bitch could drink it of his own violation and deal with the cramps), it was almost lunch time.

Naruto had left as I was preparing dinner, fleeing at the idea of a parent appearing no doubt. I'd not tried too hard to stop him, not wanting to push and either look like I had a suspicious motive or make him uncomfortable. But I *had* pressed some groceries on him, insisting that, if he couldn't stay for dinner, he could at least have a nice one of his own.

Now, I was in a mission.

Dad had left pretty quickly, a dangerous look in his eye when they lingered on my wrapped neck, and I wondered if he was calm enough to respect my requests for no retribution outside of the law. Beating people was illegal, if if he was a ninja and they were abusive fucking assholes.

Hitoshi prowled off, probably on another patrol (He really hadn’t learned his lesson from Tobi) and I was quick to follow their example, locking the house up and setting off down the street.

Shisui had been getting progressively better as the weeks dragged on. Physiotherapy seemed to really help him, even if he wouldn't *stop* complaining about his nurse or The Wheelchair of Doom™. Anyway… I was feeling *shit*.

I'd been chasing Itachi down for weeks and, between that distraction and the mania of *Nekki's*, I'd not been a stellar best bud.

Ensui was working at the Station, trawling his way through bigotry and prejudice alongside the cases. He'd been gone a lot, a very different kind of absence when he was on missions, and it had been a bit of a shock to the system to both Shi and I.

I mean, it was most obvious at this age (the gap would scarcely matter in a few decades), but Ensui was at a completely different part of his life than us. We all had full time jobs, yes. I'd been running a business since I was seven and Shisui had been the highest tier of ninja, short of a commander, Head or Kage, for a good while.
But...Ensui was older. I'd not even entered my teens and Ensui was already starting in on his 20s. I mean, he'd be 21 by winter! (Just one more year and I could finally sing that Taylor Swift song to him!) He had different shit going down, like alcohol and rent and stuff. God, I wasn't looking forward to that crap again..

But, anyway. I'd been distracted and busy. Ensui had been doubly so.

And Shisui was left with no training, no missions, wheelchair bound. He'd got around fine, a bit of chakra to the wheels and he'd got himself coasting, and Itachi had never spent so much time with him.

But. But.

That wasn't any excuse.

So, here I was, laden with ingredients for lunch, dessert, and a fucking excellent mood.

“Yo!” I called, sliding open the front door like I owned the place. Shisui's asshole Aunt would be out around now, so I wasn't worried. As for Shisui, he was in the front room, slaughtering his poor ukelele.

“Kami, we need to get you a new hobby.” I smirked, enjoying how my best friend pretended to whip around in surprise at my entrance. As if he hadn't heard me coming up the path, despite the racket. “I gave you that instrument so that you could make music, not kill the wildlife and traumatise babies!”

“Ki-chan!” Shisui grinned, expertly swinging his chair 'round to face me. Dark eyes immediately latched onto the picnic baskets in my arms, one hooked on each elbow. “And you came with food! Have I told you recently you're the best?”

Laughing at his apparent good mood, I leaned forward to pick the poor guitar from his grasp and led the way to the kitchen. “It's always nice to hear!”

The basket of groceries were deposited on the table as I went passed, setting up the kettle for tea and plonking myself in a chair. Shisui, just behind me, expertly swung his wheelchair to sit on the same sid, a few feet away and slanted towards me. “Any reason why I’m not being piled with goodies and you’re holding my guitar hostage?”
“The greater good!” I laughed, running my fingers down the taunt strings in a random ‘thrum’.
“Even my songs can’t make you a decent musician, apparently. I think I saw several dead birds on the porch—”

A pale hand lashed out and snatched the, er, long bit of the ukelele (the neck? Fuck, I dunno) and a brief tug of war assumed. After a moment, I conceded defeat, being the greater sport and knowing that Shisui was probably going to break it before he surrendered. Wow, I was mature!

I stuck my tongue out. Shisui pulled down his lid like the fucking anime he was, cheeky little-

“It would help,” the injured teen snorted, holding his gift with great dignity like the huge dork he was, “if you even knew what you were doing, creating this thing.”

“It’s like a harp!” I argued, liar that I was. I really, really didn’t know how to play the damned thing. They always made it look so easy.

Shisui cast a dubious eye between the stringed-monster and my earnest face. “Harps don’t sound like that.”

Plushing to my feet, I turned away with a sniff and grabbed the abandoned food basket. “You’re the genius, you figure it out!” (“You made it, Ki!”). I didn’t waste time dignifying my best friend with a response, popping on the rice cooker and setting about making the tea, now that the water was ready. And no, I didn’t bother with the proper technique. “Curry alright by you?” my eyes flicked over to check.

Shisui had his cheek propped up on a fist, ukelele abandoned at the end of the table and a fond, grateful smile softening his recently-frustrated face. I was glad. “Sounds good, Kiharu-sama.”

My grin was starting to hurt my cheeks, it was stretched so big. “‘-Sama’?” I teased. “That’s the proper respect! Extra big serving for you, loyal sir!”

When the older boy chuffed out a laugh, I turned back to the wok.

“What’s the news today, then?” Shisui rolled around the table to watch me work (like always) and reaching to snatch an apple from the fruit bowl. A if I wasn’t cooking us a meal right this second!
I turned around to quirk a brow. “And what makes you think I have news?”

A deadpan expression was the reply.

“What?” Defensive? No, I wasn’t!

“You have that…” Shisui waved a hand around, as if he could physically pluck the answer from the air, “that look.”

“Look?” I frowned. “I don't have a look.”

“Yeah, you do. It's like you know more than everyone else and are dying to tell someone before you burst. You either spill the beans or-” Shisui smirked and stabbed a finger at me, taking a huge bite of apple. He continued with his mouth full, juice running down his pale chin, “-cause trouble.”

“I take it back,” I sniffed, stirring the vegetables in the wok. “I'm eating all of this.”

“ What?!”

A tantrum later, which involved me only setting the table for one, and a nice meal (Shisui whipped out the puppy eyes, fluttering those unfair lashes, and got his serving), and the topic came back around.

“What's with the bandages, then?” Shisui asked around a mouthful of meringue. He had manners. He just liked to piss people off. I was so proud...when he didn’t do it to piss me off too. He gestured to the wrappings (pulled higher to cover everything) that were up my neck with his fork. Honestly, my yukata didn't do much of a job of covering them up.

“Fist fight,” I dropped the bombshell, innocently digging into my own brownie as he choked.

“Fis- fist fight?!” Shisui’s shriek rocketed up a few decibels before cracking at the end. I dropped my own fork and gaped.
Shisui was bright red. “Did...did your voice just *break*?”

“*Don’t change the subject!*” He yelped. “What fight was this?”

“Oh my god, it *did*!” I breathed, a slow, evil grin creeping across my face. “Oh, you’re becoming a proper *teenager*!”

“You sound like Mikoto-sama!” The dark haired boy complained, grimacing. Holy shit, that was a story I need to suss out. ASAP. Call it karma and revenge for the nightmare that was my first period.

Then, all humor dropped from the Uchiha’s face. “Seriously, Ki. Who hit you?”

I set my fork down again, abandoning it for a quick gulp of lukewarm tea. “I had lunch with Iruka-kun yesterday, at Ichiraku’s. A fight broke out outside so we went to go see...there was these men.” Shisui’s jaw popped as I trailed a finger over the wood of the table. “A little kid, imouto’s age, was being beat up and the crowd...noone was doing anything.”

“You stopped them?”

I nodded. “Yeah, the Genin took a swing and clipped my jaw and shoulder. Some Officers swung by to split everything up at that point and took them down to the Station. Teuchi-san sent Iruka-kun to fetch Akane-sama from Yuri-oba’s and she sorted out my arm as best as she could.”

A glance up showed Shisui had turned his face away, staring out into the garden with a frustrated expression.

“Hey…” I frowned. The Jounin flicked me a glance out of the corner of his eye. “I wasn't gonna stand by and let some baby be hurt!”

“It’s not that, Ki-chan!” Shisui argued, voice rising. “It’s that I wasn’t there!”

I pursed my lips. “What? So you could protect me?”
“Yes!”

“I’m not a damsel in distress!”

Shisui finally turned back, whipping his head around so fast I was sure it must’ve hurt. “I never said you were! Don’t be horrible, Kiharu! I said I wish I could protect you because, as you said so yourself, you hate fighting!”

I clenched my fists. “Fighting solves nothing.”

Shisui clenched the ends of his armrests and leaned over, furious. “It certainly would’ve yesterday! And, face it, Kiharu! This is a Shinobi village. We fight.”

“And what good does that do anyone?! War after war, if you fight fire with fire then everything burns. *An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind!*” On a roll, I found myself pacing the length of the kitchen whilst Shisui watched with dark eyes. “Why must we fight? We can’t—”

“Ki-chan.” Shisui interrupted, casting nervous eyes around and I abruptly came back to myself. I...said too much. “You don’t wanna fight, fine. But I do fight. And, what I was trying to say, was that I’d fight for you. So that you wouldn’t have to.”

The kitchen was deafeningly silent after that brief shouting match.

“Oh.” *It's not what I want, for others to fight my battles for me. I don't want fighting at all.*

“Yeah. Oh.” Shisui unwittingly quoted my summon. “Just listen, would you?”

Arms falling limp from where I’d defensively crossed them, I moved to lean over the back of my best friend’s chair, wrapping my arms around his shoulders and squeezing when his hands came up to hold my forearms.

“...sorry.” *I know you mean well. I shouldn't...take it out on you. You can't help it, it's all you've ever*
“Yeah. Well.” *Was this dork blushing?* Unwittingly, I felt myself soften again. “I'm glad we got that cleared up. What...what happened after that?”

“Oh,” I smiled hesitantly, relieved for the change in topic. “I took the cutie home. He was so lonely and shy. ‘Toshi didn't like him much, but Naru-chan—”

“Wait!” Shisui's curls tickled my neck as he threw his head back with a quiet chuckle, grinning at me upside down. “Naruto? The kid from the woods?”

“...yeah?” I drawled curiously.

“I completely forgot to tell you! I found the little guy when you were, er, *gone*. Took him out to ramen...let me tell ya, for a brat Sasuke’s age, he sure knows how to eat…”

My expression, mouth gaping and eyes popped wide, must’ve been hilarious as Shisui immediately started roaring with laughter.

My dream from the previous night was long forgotten...for quite the while.

Ensui was... *exhausted*.

His new job was draining. There were very few other words to describe it, synonyms notwithstanding.

Detective Osamu-senpai was a good man, fair and just. The Nara was certain he wouldn't have lasted a week without him.

As it was, with one outstanding ally in the entire Force, he wasn't too sure he'd make it to the 3 month marker.
That's not to say he was fucking giving up but, rather, things were getting so out of hand, everything was going to come to a head. And soon.

Like this, for example.

A witness report, an assault early this morning, with pages suspiciously missing. Osamu-senpai was out all day, looking into another missing person's file, so he couldn't go to him for a hint.

Osamu was an interesting man. Only in his late twenties, he'd shot through the ranks to be, essentially, Fugaku's right-hand man. Despite his nervous tension, he was a pretty good leader and very observant. When Ensui had arrived, he'd been hesitant to openly support the 'invading' Nara, merely pointing him in the, vaguely, right direction. But, after Ensui had successfully arrested that tricksie burglar, the older man had started to warm up to him. Just a bit.

It had started off small. And, honestly, stayed that way.

Cups stopped disappearing whenever Ensui went for some coffee, the archives were slightly more accessible. The older Detective, he couldn't have been thirty, started tossing in a few tips, pointers for interviews or writing up reports, whenever he checked in on Ensui. Small stuff. But...Ensui noticed all the same.

Unfortunately, that wasn't going to be happening today. Shit.

But...this time it was different. He'd been here a while, worked most cases by himself because, fuck, no-one wanted him on their team, so his track record was already much stronger than it should have been. Sure, his teamwork/squad skills must've looked abysmal but it couldn't be helped. He'd be forced, or, rather, the Force would, to rectify that eventually. But, the difficulty of this case wasn't because of experience or poor data.

The file had been tampered with. It wasn't just desolate. Someone within the Force had stolen from it.

And Ensui could actually do something about that. The case, as things stood at that moment, was fucked. But...the circumstances themselves allowed for action.
The young Sergeant rapped a single knuckle to the wood of the door, hyper aware of the eyes burning into his spine.

“Come in.” Uchiha Fugaku, the man who had enlisted Ensui in the first place and Chief of Police, called from inside his office.

Ensui straightened his spine and went inside.

“Sergeant.” Mikoto's husband, sat stiffly behind his desk, inclined his head. “What is it?”

Cutting straight to the chase? Ensui could do that.

The *slap* of the folder on the desk echoed in the spacious office.

A tolerant expression in those dark eyes (Ensui was certain Kiharu and himself had been spending far too much time around the stoic Clan to read them so easy), Fugaku flicked the file open and barely scanned the page. “An assault? Why is this being brought to my attention?”

“It's been tampered with, Chief.”

The smallest furrow appeared between Fugaku’s brows. “Your proof?”

A tan finger traced how the report jumped between pages, sentences half finished. “It's hasty work, nothing like the others I found.”

Black eyes snapped up. “Others?”

“Five cases of assault, all targeting women, in the past six months. It's much more subtle there, this one is from this morning and, so, undoubtedly rushed. They altered sentences, the ink only slightly different. The Sharingan would pick it up but...they were ‘simple’ cases, nothing worth such a perusal. They were banking on that, Sir.”
“If so...why risk such a sloppy job as this?”

Ensui grimaced. “I'm still a newbie, Sir. Most case files that come my way aren't the most...helpful...they probably reasoned I was so used to the lack of material, they could risk such a two-second snatch.”

The Chief leaned back, tucking his hands into his sleeves and scanning Ensui's eyes for something. “I see,” he mused. “An internal issue…”

Ensui carefully clasped his hands behind his back, stood comfortable but ready.

“You have…” Fugaku reluctantly started, “made good progress here, Sergeant. Your file is strong, you have proven to be smart and resourceful,” he dipped his head at the incriminating file, acknowledging the difficulties Ensui had faced with the resources made available to him. He'd been aware, perhaps. Ensui wouldn't have put it past him. But...if he'd interfered...would that have not made it worse? Begging for attention or needing to be protected, from the perspective of his fellow Officers. Bullshit but still relevant. “The ramifications of that file are not to leave this office without my say so.” Ensui didn't so much as twitch. Fugaku's eyes turned somewhat droll regardless. “My wife is an exception unto her own.”

Well. That was embarrassing.

“I will fully examine the background and possible guilt of my Officers before bringing anyone else in. Until then...you have a witness to interview. Dismissed, Sergeant.”

----------------------------------------

An autumn chill had settled over the village, late in coming, as the last of summer stubbornly held on in the form of blue skies and sunshine. Amber leaves surrounded Konoha; the Will of Fire, Fire country itself, burning in all its splendor.

He'd never had so much time to appreciate it.

The last few weeks, months really, had been...turbulent. His father had been incensed when Hokage-
sama rejected his petition to allow Itachi to compete as a solo competitor in the exams.

Training had kicked up several notches and Itachi had found himself sparring with, what felt like, Uchiha from all walks of life. The Gate Guards, the Officers at every rank, the retired, and Elite...Itachi had fought them all.

He had not won every match. Less than two thirds, with luck and resourcefulness. Some could say they were just luck. But that in itself was a powerful factor in a Shinobi’s success.

His father had been gravely disappointed and, Itachi would admit, he'd thought his success would have been higher. Especially for those who had retired.

It wasn't though. He'd faced Danzo and lived but that had been completely different situation. He's been desperate then, to save his cousin and against a superior foe. One who'd been toying with him. And Itachi had…

He couldn't even think of it.

Ninja always had new tricks, to survive and progress, and it was only the lower ranks, Officers and Chuunin, that had given Itachi the easiest time. After all, there was no such thing as dirty fighting with ninja. They weren't samurai.

But...he still had a lot to learn. Even if he was just...there. A Genin with no team, no true sensei. Not part of the corps, not really part of anything.

He couldn't even train with Shisui, their little lessons cut short before they'd even really began. Sure, his cousin could still help him with his forms, throwing kunai and teaching him tricks, but it wasn't the same.

His progress, which had always seemed so fast (and yet, never enough for the Clan), felt like it had faltered. He...didn't know what to do now.

He had no goal. There wasn't an exam to prepare for. He didn't have a team to train with, grow with. His cousin was on sick leave and unable to really help. His mother was busy at the shop and, in her spare time, hesitantly guiding his otouto. Sasuke...was happy, glowing in the attention, and Itachi could never intrude on that. His little brother had been sidelined already, far too much.
But...what now?

He'd finished that morning's exercises early and found himself wandering the village. He'd swung by Shisui's place but, from the laughter he'd heard even from the street, it was obvious Kiharu was over.

It wasn't that he was avoiding the older girl except...he was.

That night Ensui had confronted him...he’d wanted to talk to her, have her on side. But things had changed. There were new factors involved, things she couldn't know, and it was hard, harder than he'd anticipated, to keep quiet. Kiharu was, above all things, clever. There was something there, he could see it now he was older. A knowing look in her eyes, familiarity when she met someone.

It made him wonder.

Was she... involved...in something? It seemed strange that some little, albeit prodigious, civilian girl could garner so much attention. She'd personally known the Yondaime, her business almost built around the man, and had been involved in so many plots.

He'd known something was up when his mother started stretching out, forming bonds within the village like no Uchiha had bothered with in years. Elder Akane had gone from a distant, virtual stranger, to a common visitor in both the Dazai household, the civilian district, and his own home. And with Danzo, the mysterious intruder at the shrine who had attacked Hitoshi...everything had some form of connection to Kiharu. Whether that was because she was involved or had involved herself.

It made Itachi...pause.

She couldn't be a spy, too involved with Inoichi-sama and the Yamanaka. He...hoped. But, that didn't mean she wasn't involved in something.

Considering everything he'd gone through, Itachi felt it was improbable that she’d evaded every attempt to snatch her up. Surely, she was part of something. Maybe her shop was a cover, part of her job. Maybe she was supposed to watch-
“Itachi-kun!”

“Genma-san,” The Heir turned and offered a pleasant, if nigh-invisible, smile.

The Tokubetsu, hands casually stuffed into his uniform’s hip pockets, took his time strolling to catch up the the Genin. Itachi didn’t mind the wait. Genma was his superior, extremely well earned...and Itachi didn't really have anywhere to go now, regardless. “What's up, kid? You've been busy.”

_You've not spent any time with my little sister recently. What's your excuse?_

“Otou-sama has increased my training since the Exams.”

Genma nodded and Itachi abruptly remembered that his own ward, Iru-ka (?), had passed and received the promotion.

A sharp brow was quirked. “Oh?” Genma's teeth clicked slightly as he rolled the senbon to the other corner of his mouth. “Thinking about specialising?”

His father wouldn't let him be anything but a weapon for the Uchiha. There wouldn't _be_ a specialisation to choose from. As the older ninja herded him down the street, Itachi found himself answering anyway.

“Yes.”

_Why...did I say that?_

Something in Genma's eyes made him feel as if he was being laughed at. It really was bizarre to think Kiharu and him weren't _actual_ siblings.

Absently, Itachi wondered if this man was to blame for Kiharu's snarkiness or if she'd been born that way. And if he'd trained his two wards, Izumo-san and Kotetsu-san, to be _that_ incorrigible.

“Medical, weapons, Taijutsu...?”
Oh, Genma-san was most definitely laughing at him. Itachi hadn't known Hazel eyes could be so sharp.

...that was a lie. Seiichi-san and Ensui had proven otherwise. Many times.

“Genjutsu and assassination most likely, Genma-san.”

Itachi had known for a long time his father wanted him to enter ANBU extremely early, had expected him to awaken his Mangekyou since his Sharingan had activated so young.

The older man steered them towards a dango cafe. As one, although they didn't realize it, Itachi and Genma glanced around, half expecting Kiharu to jump out behind a stall or plant, screaming about betrayal and poor taste. Their fear was not unfounded. She'd done it before, once even going so far as to ‘sob’ loudly, pulling on Genma as she wailed how he was sick of her.

Nineteen at the time, Genma had been sent into a panic, terrified that Seiichi was going to appear, see his daughter in tears, and scalp him. Father and daughter were scarily similar like that. Also...he really did care for the younger girl.

The dango stall was, mercifully, Dazai-less and not too busy either. Itachi hadn't even been able to open his mouth before Genma was ordering for them both and paying. Ninja, as a general rule, tended to pay before eating, lest they be summoned whilst eating and rush away without settling the bill.

Well. For the most part. Itachi was pretty sure he'd seen ANBU tuck cash into the till at Nekki's at seemingly random times. Paying for old bills, the Uchiha had dubiously reasoned. Unless it was all connected-

The dango, two sticks of heaven each, arrived quickly. A pot of cool peach tea was also set down between them and, this time, Itachi was quick enough to serve them both.

“Genjutsu, eh?” The bodyguard picked the topic straight back up. “Bit...boring, right?”

Itachi sipped his tea. Hmm, it was good. He nodded.
Then paused.

“Ah,” Genma huffed, smug. “So you admit it's boring…”

“I meant I will be specialising in Genjutsu, Genma-san.”

The grin did not abate. He obviously wasn’t going to let that little slip go.

Itachi was a genius, yes, but he was still pretty young and there was something extremely disarming about the older assassin. He was affable and relaxed...it was very easy to reply without truly thinking his answers through. Undoubtedly why he was so good at his specialisation. If it was someone like Genma asking questions instead of everyone else...

His father would've been appalled.

Absently, Itachi remembered that Genma's Jounin-sensei had been Chouza-sama. The Uchiha Heir wondered if the Akimichi Head had ever asked his best friend, Yamanaka Inoichi, to help with the brunette’s training...

“Who's taking you on, then?”

This time, Itachi was careful about revealing too many details. His Genjutsu would, after all, originate from his Sharingan.

“Otou-sama has been training me.”

Another raised brow. “Fugaku-sama, who's been running the Station with an iron first every day for a decade?”

Itachi bit into his dango, eyes falling half-lidded from pleasure. It was excellent, had been far too long since he’d last been able to indulge (yesterday)...mouth full, it was unfortunate he couldn't answer.
“Why not ask Akane-sama for some extra training, then?” Genma showed no signs of dropping the topic any time soon.

“Elder Akane-sama?”

“Yeah,” Genma bit into his second stick, tearing off the first ball in a blink. “She was famous in the Second War for using her Dojutsu during delicate surgeries. When she lost her hand and the nerves in her other arm were damaged by a lightning jutsu, she retired to a consultant position. She can still do the healing techniques but her steadiness is long gone.”

Itachi...hadn't known that.

Uchiha Akane was simply known for being one of the few Clan women to never marry or bear children, an ex-healer who cut an intimidating figure as an Elder. She was his mother's godmother but had always been distant. No-one dared gossip about her.

Except Shiranui Genma, apparently.

Regardless...it was food for thought. After all, Elder Akane-sama could intimidate even his father and, surely, her expertise would only help his Sharingan. It...wouldn't hurt, would it?

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I was singing again.

I noticed I'd gone through stages over the years, when translating old songs from before had been all I'd really wanted to do. Other times, I'd barely hum a tune for months.

I'd once been desperate for technology again, itching for electronics and pop music and everything I'd once taken for granted like that.

I'll be honest. I still wanted it all, badly.
But, I'd come to appreciate the charm of a life away from such consuming things. Our house was TV-less and it wasn't so unusual for being so. I mean, there are only a handful of shows and very shit films.

My wireless radio wasn't very often used, the songs weird and not very good, so I often filled the silences with my own music.

Shisui still had that ukulele from his promotion and, god, if I didn't pity his neighbours. He'd only continued with renewed enthusiasm with every complaint, especially since I'd laughed at him a short time ago. Dork probably took it all as a challenge. Sharingan or no, that boy was not musically talented. At least he wasn’t annoyingly perfect like that.

Out of the three of us, I'd have pegged Ensui as having the nicest voice. Where mine was reedy and Shisui had a habit of freestyling a tune when he couldn't hit the right note, Ensui’s smooth tenor wasn't anything awe-inspiring but nice nonetheless. He could hit all the notes, aside from the super high ones (which I was convinced were only included to troll everyone), and he never lisped or sounded out of breath. He didn't sing often, especially in the past year, but even his humming was a pleasant sound.

But, anyway. The reason I was reminiscing over music?

Some kid in the street, when I was walking back from the usual delivery to Teuchi's (and customary lunch, of course), had been humming a nonsensical tune.

The issue?

*I could swear to fucking god I knew it from somewhere.*

That's not to say he was somehow singing a song from *before*, otherwise I’d have fucking entered the *Twilight Zone*, but, rather, it reminded me so strongly of one. But I couldn't remember! It was on the tip of my tongue, a memory just out of reach! Gah!

“Dum, dum, dumm…” (I'll admit, this is lost in translation but bear with me.)
My pencil tapped impatiently against my song book, loud and persistent as a woodpecker. “Dum, dum-dum, dum dum duhhh…”

“If you keep up that incessant humming and tapping, you're dead to me.” Hitoshi rumbled from behind me, spread out like a throw on my bed.

I responded without missing a beat. “You love me too much, liar.”

The panther yawned obnoxiously loudly and, when I turned to shoot him a smirk, he licked a slow, wet stripe up the middle of my pillow. No, not my baby one. If it had been... blood shall be spilled this night *.

I still lunged to snatch the now-wet pillow away, ripping off the linen cover and throwing it to the corner to be washed. “You're disgusting!”

Hitoshi's nostrils flared. “Says you-”

My mouth dropped in undisguised affront. “What! Are you still going on about that nose thing? It was a month ago and completely justified-!”

“-a cat’s nose is extremely delicate-”

“-strangling me-”

Needless to say, the aggravating tune was long forgotten.

By October, I'd met up with Naru-chan a grand total of...*drum roll*...three fucking times.

I didn't know if I'd come on too strong, if he was just shy or something else was going on. Maybe he just didn't like me! Maybe five-year olds were just super busy!
Come to think of it, I'd been a pretty busy five year old. Not that I was the best example of course.

But, anyway. Naruto was pretty scarce. Sure the kid had met up with Shisui and I for ramen (two days after I'd gone over to Shisui's to make lunch, after I'd closed up Nekki's for the day) but it wasn't the contact I was looking for.

Shisui and I were just down the street from Ichiraku's when a blonde head popped around the corner.

Far from his boisterous appearance and attitude from the academy, Naruto was dressed in a simple shorts and tee combo, stuff that was a couple of sizes too big for his small frame. He was quieter too, still loud and eager when he was comfortable but, out on the street, he was almost eerily shy.

“‘Evening, Naru-chan,” I smiled, lips widening into a grin when blue eyes flashed over to us. In front of me (I'd browbeat Shisui into letting me push), my best friend mirrored my friendly greeting, albeit a tad louder.

“Naruto! Long time, no see, kid!”

I rolled my eyes. Way to not scare him off, Shisui.

I ate my own words when Naruto abruptly grinned back, scampering over to Shisui. Was...Shisui...his favourite?!

“Hiya, Curly!”

How. How in the ever-loving fuck was that fair?! Oh, my god, I was the fan here... Naruto, do you have any idea how much I'd loved you, you orange idiot, in Canon?! (Boruto didn't exist. Nope, not listening~!) I didn't give a flying fuck that Naruto was an innocent lil tyke and Shisui had probably gone and been adorable and given him one of his famous piggy-backs and...

Naruto and Shisui were having a great time. I was internally wailing.
The evening had been nice, filled with laughter and Shisui had ended up pooling his money with mine to cover the ridiculous amount Naruto had packed away (I wasn't going to use up my tally in one evening!). Thankfully, Shisui was still as sensitive as always and hadn't let the conversation linger too long on ninja-stuff. We talked about food quite a lot and I'd told Naruto about my imouto, not wanting to linger too long on family but I'd also...well...I wanted Ino to be his friend this time.

I was pretty sure I could throw them together enough that they'd _atleast_ get on, but you couldn't _make_ people like each other. Personalities clash or whatever. However, Naruto was a little ball of sunshine and Ino was extremely protective. I really, _really_ wanted to make an awesome trio out of them, with Sakura, of course.

Huh? Playing God, little ol’ me? _Pfft._

All week I'd kept a sharp eye out for the little blonde, jumping whenever golden hair entered my vision (Ino had been annoyed when I'd seemed disappointed to see her. I'd spent all day making up for that slip). But, the days had dragged on. And no Naruto.

It hadn't been until Saturday evening (the last day of September), when I'd been coming back from playing cards with the boys at Nee-chan’s. Nekki's had been busy again that day, as it was wont to be on weekends, and Mikoto had been just as glad as me to call it a night. She’d been training Sasuke even more recently, probably due to the weird situation Itachi was in. Shisui had started trying to walk again in his physio sessions, using the bars to stagger a few steps. The slow progress had...unfortunately, _predictably_...sent Shisui right back into his grump mood swings. _Joy_.

Dad was back on his normal missions again, hesitantly (for me, for himself he couldn't have been more grateful to get out and about again) assigned an escort for the end of the following week. Just after the Kyuubi anniversary.

My shoulder was pretty much back to normal, the purple bruises fading to the vaguest yellow. I was grateful; alongside the pale white scar, where ROOT had tried to kill me, I'd looked a bit like an attempted strangling. _Fuck_ my life for my bruise-easy skin. At least Shisui and dad had stopped staring at my throat like it had personally offended them.

Come to think of it, it had.

It was then, lost in thought (as per usual), that I'd spotted the much sought-after Uzumaki.
“Naruto!” I cried, blinking in surprise.

The kid in question swung around to look at me. “..Hi Ki’aru,” He smiled, nose crumpling adorably when I walked over and flicked his button nose. Lightly, of course.

“How have you been?” the market street was pretty empty, it was after 8pm and pretty dark out. Hitoshi was on patrol with Papa tonight - not that I’d told the boys that - so I was walking home alone. Well. Until that moment.

(Paranoia was a downward spiral into distrust and a fuck tonne of issues. I was shitting myself, staring into the night shadows and feeling ghost-eyes stare back, but I was determined to move on. It wasn't the best way but I'd never been the most patient. I was far from perfect.)


So, somehow I'd ended up being escorted home by a five year old. One who'd promptly scampered off before I could ask him to come in, where he lived, his emotional and physical well-being-

October had arrived and my third, and most recent, meeting with the protagonist had passed in silence.

Jeez, maybe he really didn't like me.

These days, it felt like I could count the people who did on my fingers.

With some left spare.

.................................................................

The day the Kyuubi attacked had been the worse of his life.
It eclipsed every terrible moment in battle, his father's death, the loss of the Pride.

Dazai Soushi had been a strong man. Proud. To see him fall...his body pierced with countless senbon...it had been terrible. One of Seiichi’s first real losses in war.

It hadn't been his last.

One by one, the Tigers had fallen. Ko, the only Lion and with the first tufts of his mane only just coming in, had been point on a Hunt (when the Pride, Seiichi in the middle, would spearhead an attack into the enemy camps and massacre-) when he'd been bisected by a chakra-powered enemy katana. One second, he was fine. The next...dead.

Things had fallen apart so quickly.

The final stand, a tiny panther cub in his arms, had been when Seiichi had staggered back into the village. When they were the last.

Hitoshi had been so small back then, an armful of shivering black fur. Old enough to understand, to insist on helping his Master, but young. Far, far too young to witness the harrowing gore of his Pride, as species-mixed as it had been, cut down before him.

He'd not left since, after all those years.

It had been a time of peace, when Seiichi had finally allowed himself to relax. When a waitress had swung at him (and hit) for being an asshole and the only thing Seiichi could think, staggering back a few steps, was that she was a beautiful kind of terrifying. She was a civilian, had never learnt to fight.

Seiichi hadn't really thought about the red of her dress or her blonde hair or her long legs. He'd been mesmerized by the pale clench of her fist, the righteous rage in those blue eyes. Her casual quitting. How she'd seen two rowdy drunks and stepped up to deal with it. Regardless of how everyone, himself unfortunately included, had told her it wasn't her place to.

Her eyes had stayed with him for weeks.
And the rest, as they say, was history.

(It wasn't, really. It had taken years of slow-building friendship and mutual friends until Aki had grabbed him by the collar of his flak jacket and shoved him against a wall.)*

And they built a life. In Aki’s parents’ home, silk merchants caught out by disease in Wave, they’d started anew. A redecoration, done almost completely by Aki herself and a few Genin teams (Oh, to think Aki had hired the future Yondaime to retile her bathroom pre-wartime and now she wanted it redone ?!).

And then, a baby.

Seiichi hadn't known he could be this happy.

Their baby was beautiful, so like her mother but with his hair. No matter how much Aki insisted Kiharu was his split, except her eyes.

But Seiichi, all he could see when his baby-girl giggled or smiled was his beloved wife.

And Kiharu was clever. Her personality was so strong, unapologetic, it was almost a shock. To think that their love had created another person, one who made her presence so well-felt, in ways other than the usual baby things like screaming and sleeping odd hours.

She'd grown, shining and lovely. With a wicked humor from her mother. With a warm gaze from her mother. With open arms and a mischievous streak three miles wide. Just. Like. Her. Mother.

And then the air had burned with Chakra, terrible and poisonous.

And, suddenly, Seiichi was in the dark.

He'd come back eventually, cradled Kiharu and Hitoshi so carefully close in his heart. He's not lost everything. He still had his daughter, his partner, his brother and friends. A niece and comrades and the Village.
There was so much to live for.

But...Aki had been the cornerstone of his world.

What do you do when the ground is gone? When the world moves on, passing you by and shining so unbearably bright as you flounder and fall?

Seiichi was never going to move on. And he was never going to love again. And that was okay.

Because he'd been blinded by the sun. He wasn't going to be the same and the world would never be the same. But he'd still live and love, if only for his precious people. But grief and loss, when one had known Heaven and lost it, stayed with you.

The day he'd lost Aki had eclipsed all others.

Five years. *Five years.*

Her grave was still flawless, well maintained between Sora, Kiharu, Yuri and himself. Flowers would barely be touched by a whilt before they were replaced. Offerings were replaced every few days and the smooth stone was polished until it shone.

Yuri came here every Sunday, oftentimes with Akane stood a respectful few feet back. Sora came every few weeks, stopping by with an armful of fresh blooms for her friend and her niece, who’s empty grave rested in the next row.

Seiichi had restricted himself to a single visit a fortnight. Any more and he'd feel like he was living there, like that poor Hatake kid at the memorial stone. Any longer...and he was back to square one in his cowardice.

Kiharu came weekly, staying for hours with Hitoshi dozing in her lap as she carded fingers through his fur and chattered on about the rising price of sugar.

At Inoko’s grave, Kiharu was silent. Like a memorial Statue of her own, she'd stare down at her childhood friend's plaque without any expression. She'd barely stay more than ten minutes.
And, every time she turned to leave, she'd run her fingers over the cluster of faded glass beads she'd strung there, the day her Noko had been ‘buried’.

On the fifth anniversary, Kiharu did the exact same thing. Except, this time, as she turned to leave, she pressed a single kiss to the middle of the cool stone. As one would to a sleeping forehead.

Seiichi was sure Sora hadn't been crying until that moment.

Two days after the memorial, Seiichi found himself in Inoichi's office in T&I when he was supposed to be preparing for his mission in a couple of days’ time.

“And they're sure? Absolutely sure?!”

The messenger, a young Chuunin Intern, swallowed hard and somehow bowed even lower. “Yes, sir. There was no doubt. Hokage-sama has already sent out a squad to search for evidence of foul play.”

Foul play aside from the fact he'd been murdered? Then again...such was the life of a Shinobi.

A wave of a hand. Seiichi was absently impressed to see it was steady. “Dismissed.”

The intern fled.

“Dammit.” Inoichi scrubbed his hands over his face, skin pale and eyes bruised purple from exhaustion and stress. Helpless, Seiichi could only clasp a hand on his ‘brother’s shoulder. The blonde leaned into the support slightly. “I knew it. I fucking knew it. That idiot. ”

The KIA file hit the closed door with an almighty bang. It was thin, Inoichi having thrown it with all of his pent-up emotion. Anger, grief, helplessness…

The file fell the the ground and the single sheet inside slipped out.
The dead face of Inokumo, his Genin teammate, stared back at him.

“Will she...is Natsuko-”

“She's all but comatose, Seiichi.” Inoichi bit out, teeth clenched and eyes screwed shut as he buried his face in his hands, elbows on his desk and shoulders hunched. “She only responds to Sora now. Inokumo hasn't seen her since last winter.”

When Inoichi started to weep, silently, Seiichi could do nothing but wrap an arm around his shoulders.

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The Saturday after the anniversary, *Nekki's* was having some down time. Mikoto was off that day so I was grateful for the lull. She was spending time with her sons; Itachi had taken to loitering around Akane, I'd noticed in recent weeks, but nobody was saying anything on the matter. I was glad though, that Itachi seemed to see a role model in the older woman. I'd not really seen much of the two Uchiha boys recently, Sasuke having always been a bit reluctant to indulge his brother's 'weird civilian friend'. Now that Itachi was busier and spending less and less time in the stall, Mikoto's youngest had naturally come around less too.

I'd been a bit sad but, well, not everyone stays thick as thieves forever. And Sasuke had never been my BFF to begin with.

As the days shortened, I swapped up the menu a bit too, dropping most of the ice-cream options and up-ing the emphasis on hot desserts and cake. Ever faithful, Nee-chan and Raidou-nii still came in for their regulars whenever they could, whatever the weather.

The colder weather was firmly gripping Fire country, the mild days becoming less and less frequent. The Village had been settling down, the reopening frenzy long gone and the paranoia A.D. dropping a few notches as the months passed and nothing else happened. All was quiet on the roads, besides the usual, and Danzo appeared to have just...vanished.

Now accustomed to my new edge of awareness, I wondered how it was that a village of murderers, assassins and child-soldiers could be so naive as to think it was over. (and if I slept with a carving knife I’d never have the heart to use under my pillow, that was no-one’s business but my own.)
So, the Village was quiet.

Ensui was off for the day, holed up in the corner of the stall with Shisui and ducking his head low every time someone came in. Honestly, Shika was here because Yoshino wanted the day off, no need to skulk around like a criminal because you'd avoided her dinner invitations one too many times.

Speaking of, the future InoShikaCho were crowding around the bar, Ino on the stool directly across from me with a tub of rolled strawberry ice-cream (despite the menu change, I was a sicker for the little demon and she well knew it). Chouji, the adorable cherub, was rolling out some pretzels for me behind the counter. I'd yet to move on from the soft version, unable to find any non-toxic brine that I could use to coat them before baking. That's what made that gorgeous dark shell on the traditional German ones. Regardless, Chouji was always such a willingness little helper and a ray of sunshine to boot. Have I mentioned recently that I loved him?

Shika was asleep, sprawled like a ragdoll over Hitoshi. You'd have thought the boy was nocturnal, jeez.

I was in the middle of flipping a pancake when ANBU Neko stepped into the stall and my wrist jerked in surprise.

The pancake stuck to the ceiling.

Sarutobi entered behind them and, by now, I was pretty sure the pancake was going to choose that moment to land on my head. When a blonde head peeked around the flowing white robes of our Kage and the pancake started peeling, I was just. Done.

I mentally threw my hands up into the air when Shisui coughed on a snicker. Just to spite him, I side stepped the ruined dessert as it fell to the floor next to me. He had no business looking so disappointed!

“Good afternoon, Kiharu-chan, Ensui-kun, Shisui-kun, children.”

I plastered my best smile on as Ensui rose to bow and Shisui dipped his head from his chair. “Good afternoon, Sandaime-sama! This is a pleasant surprise…”
The old ninja smiled genuinely, moving further inside and resting a hand on the back of Naruto's head to guide him along. Absently, I wondered just how many ANBU were stationed around my shop.

Remembering those assholes who’d beat on us, not enough. Either that or they were just neglectful dicks. But that thought just left a nasty taste in my mouth.

“Hello to you too, Naruto-chan,” I smiled down at the small blonde as Shisui wiggled his fingers eagerly.

Ino had twisted around to watch what all the hullabaloo was about and blinked faux-innocently up at me when I rested a hand on the crown of her head. “This is my imouto, the one I was telling you about? Ino, this is Naruto!”

Pupilless aqua met sapphire.

“You're not as pretty as me.”

I facefaulted.

_Dammit, Ino!_

Any shyness in Naruto was annihilated. “Oi! Am too! At least my eyes aren't creepy, like yours!”

Tiny nostrils flared as Ino puffed up like an offended cockatiel. A small, fluffy baby one. The boys all leant forward as if watching a good action movie. Even _Shika_ cracked a curious eye.

“Creepy!? Papa says they're be-beautiful like gemstones!”

Naturo's face scrunched up as he squinted up at his adversary and he let go of an amused Sarutobi’s robe to scamper even closer. “Gems?” I could practically _see_ the question mark above his head. “Why would you want hard eyes, then you can't see or anything!”
Only just recovered, I facefaulted for the second time. God, I was becoming my dad-

“Now, now, Naruto-kun, you should be nice to your future classmates,” The Sandaime attempted to intervene, patting his ‘charge’s head with a grandfatherly demeanor. Palms flat on the counter as I pulled myself upright, I tried not to glower too obviously.

Judging by the way Ensui was deadpan staring at me, I wasn't 100% successful. It was a learning curve, okay.

“Her?” The recently-turned five-year-old jammed a finger at my sister. I mentally waved away the possibility of those two becoming BFFs from the get-go. Insert frowny face.

Ino looked about a second away from skinning the legacy of Minato and Kushina so I quickly intervened, all but jumping over the counter to shove Shisui's chair at the jinchuuriki.

“Cake!” I shouted, desperate. “You turned five a few days ago, right, Naruto? Let's all have some cake!”

Naruto stared at me like I had antlers, Ensui had his face in his hands with shaking shoulders, and Ino looked like I'd disowned her.

Vaguely, I got the impression Neko wanted to laugh.

Sarutobi, however, smiled. “What a thoughtful idea…”

Those dark, beady eyes were uncomfortably knowing. I turned away, reaching into the back storeroom and grabbing the Victoria sponge I'd baked last night, incase we'd run out of the brownies today.

“Ensui, can you grab that jug and get some juice? Shisui, everyone gather around the counter!”

Mercy of mercies, there were a handful of candles under the till, from when a few customers had admitted to it being their birthday and I'd decorated their order (free) with the things. I popped them into the soft sponge, disturbing the icing sugar dusted over it. Internally, I rolled my eyes that the
candles, a complete mash up of different types, just happened to include a frog-shaped one. That one I popped in the centre before lighting them all.

“Happy Birthday to you~” I started slowly, narrowing my eyes until Shisui and Ensui awkwardly joined in, and we massacred the simple tune.

Naruto, sat in the middle with a beaming Shisui on one side and a huffy Ino on the other, stared like my hurried creation was the most wonderful thing he'd ever seen. The candle flames flickered in his blues eyes and I wondered if I'd imagined them shinier than normal.

“Happy Birthday...to...youuuuu!~”

Sandaime-sama careful guided Naturo's small hand to cut the cake, a huge slab for the birthday boy himself. Despite the fact he'd been in since opening time and had eaten enough that I was sure I was giving him diabetes, Shisui quickly swallowed his own monstrous slice.

When Ino got one that was just as big, stuffed with whipped cream and the homemade strawberry jam we'd made together a few weeks previous, I could almost see her soften towards him. Crikey, was that hope on the horizon?

Ensui didn't even get a slice (I saved him one for later) as I frantically waved him out of the door, the motion of my hands hidden under the counter.

He came back a few minutes later, when Chouji was hesitantly contributing his own favourite foods to the conversation, with a jacket.

It was bright blue and cut like a bomber, with ribbed elastic cuffs and a rounded collar. The material was pretty plain but fleece-lined and well made. God, Ensui was a godsend. If I'd sent Shisui? He'd have either come back with food or weapons.

He was such a hopeless, endearing dork-!

“Naruto-chan,” I grinned, nodded my chin to the approaching Nara behind him. Sarutobi, calmly sipping his way through a pot of tea in the corner, smiled into the rim of his cup. “I do believe it's present time.”
The boy in question blinked up at me, uncomprehending. Heart? What heart?

Ino, forever with an ear out for gifts, twisted in her chair and her eyes widened at the blue fabric in the Chuunin’s arms. “Hey, you got a present, idiot!” an elbow was jammed into Naturo's ribs and I rattled a knuckle on Ino’s skull. I'd told her that stuff like that wasn't nice. Her arm dropped. “Sorry-”

But Naruto wasn't listening anymore. Because he'd finally turned to see what we meant and, now, had thrown himself off his stool.

“What is it? What is it-!” he chanted, eyes popped wide and hands half-raised to reach. Ensui, grinning wryly, dropped the coat over Naturo's head.

“Happy Birthday, kid.”

Small fingers curled, hesitant, into the strong fabric. Marvelling for a moment before arms slipped into the sleeves and fingers dug into the fleece lining.

I flicked my eyes around the room.

Shisui was grinning, smug as anything, but I saw my own sadness echoed in his eyes. Ino was frowning. Chouji looked quietly happy, a sweet blush on his cheeks from his earlier laughter.

It was Shika my eyes stopped on. The young Nara was frowning, eyes far too intelligent as they took in the way Naruto touched his new gift, as if it was going to disappear before his eyes. I slipped an arm around his shoulders and smiled when dark eyes flicked up to meet mine.

I felt Ino move to my other side and lowered my voice, so that the others wouldn't overhear.

“Naruto is an orphan, guys. I don't think he's had a birthday party, cake and presents before.”

Shika only looked like I'd confirmed his thoughts. Ino, rather, stared down at the glass-bead bracelet I'd given her for her own fifth birthday a few weeks prior.
Teal met navy and I smiled in approval.

“Oi, Naruto.” Ino called, only tearing her eyes from mine when the boy in question jerked around to look at her.

Small fingers undid the knot of the simple leather bracelet and the beads, ranging from white to the deepest blue and lily-pad green, clattered softly against each other.

“You don't look right.”

I rolled my eyes skyward when Naturo's face crumpled. However, before the other boy could react further, my little sister was already reaching for a strand of spikey golden hair. The first end was tied near the his temple and, when Ino struggled to get the leather to hold, Ensui moved to help.

Naruto was shock-still frozen.

I popped Shika back into Hitoshi's side, who'd been passive aggressively sulking in the corner since the other blonde's arrival, and moved to lean on the back of Shisui's wheelchair.

“There,” Ino declared, scarly like Hitoshi with her prideful tone. She leaned back, allowing the rest of us to see the string of beads, looping from Naturo's left temple to tie near the crown of his head, almost like a line of bunting. The beads caught the afternoon light, lovely aqua shades that picked out the blue of his new jacket and those incredible eyes. “Now, you look better.”

Naruto hesitantly raised a hand to touch his new accessories and his eyes seemed to pop even wider. “My Nee-chan gave me them for my birthday and Ensui-nii made them with Yoshino-obaa. That means they're special, okay.”

The Uzumaki's mouth flapped open helplessly. “Wh-wh-why are you giving it to me, then? If it's so important!”

When Naruto raised a hand, face screwed up in determination, to rip the beads from his head, Ino unapologetically slapped the hand away. “Baka! Don't touch it, we just got it perfect!” Naruto looked dumbfounded. I knew the feeling. “I told you that so you'd look after it, idiot, not to get it
Work apparently done, Ino sniffed and turned up her nose, spinning around to leave. And was promptly stopped by the hand on her arm.

“If your sister made it you shouldn't just give it away!”

As the two blondes descended into another fight, I smirked down at Shisui, who tilted his jaw to grin knowingly up at me.

Another slice of cake in hand, the Uchiha scooped up another bite. “See what I meant? You had that look-”

I grabbed the fork before Shisui could raise it to his mouth, shoved it into my own and grabbed the plate.

Shisui looked devastated. “500 they get married!” he blurted, eyes on the stolen cake.

My own narrowed. I didn't think Ino and Naruto would mesh like that. Like candy from a baby… “Deal!”

It took two weeks for me to realise what had changed.

In the days following the anniversary, the entire village had been subdued and rightly so. Five years was a significant milestone. It felt...both too long and too recent.

I could almost see that night behind closed lids and it felt almost impossible to think that I'd been without Kaa-san and Noko for so long.

At the same time... so much had happened . And, the most terrifying part was that I'd been so young when it all happened. Another few years and I'd have lived longer without my mother than with.
And those years would only continue to grow, until my mother was nothing but a distant memory.

I prayed that there was an afterlife and I wouldn't be reborn again. I had so many people to see and I'd be...scarily unrecognizable after so long.

Regardless, Inoichi-oji had been extremely grey, in both demeanor and complexion, for the rest of the week. Sora-oba’s eyes had been red-rimmed for days and Ino, poor, poor Ino had looked so confused.

I'd tried to explain it to her but I wasn't sure she'd completely understood. But she'd been good, recognising that we were all very upset and now wasn't the time for tantrums etc.

I'd taken her to see Noko’s grave the following week, explaining on the way that her oba-san was very tired after our cousin had ‘gone’ and that's why she'd never met her. That her uncle was busy outside of the village.

I'd rather have pulled out my own teeth than tell her that she had met Natsuko-oba. Once. When she was just a baby.

But...I hadn't been exaggerating when I'd noted how similar Noko and Ino had looked, especially as children.

One look at her niece and Natsuko had started screaming.

Ino hadn't been allowed to see her since.

“Here's where Noko sleeps,” I pointed, fingers entwined with Ino’s as I led her between the rows of graves. I hadn't told her that the grave was an empty one. There wasn't much point and the explanation would only prove painful.

“Beads!” The small blonde noted, smiling as she trailed her fingers over the strands I'd hung.

“Uh-huh,” I nodded, fingering one too. “Noko was the one who showed me how to make them and that's why I still make them, so it's like she's still giving gifts too.”
Blue flicked up to meet mine. “Does that mean the beads I gave to Naruto were from Noko-nee too?”

Noko-nee. God, if only she'd been around to hear those words herself. Ino had been all Inoko had really cared about in her last few months, ecstatic beyond belief that she'd finally have a cousin who was both younger than her and a close relation. “Sisters!” The cheerful rosette had giggled. “We'll all be sisters!”

“That just means it was from both of your sisters and Ensui, yeah?” Yeah, Noko. Sisters.

“Okay, I guess it's okay then,” Ino rolled her eyes. Was I that sassy that age? Wait, that was a moot point.

“And who's that?” Ino pointed.

“Hmm?” I dragged my eyes from the white stone to follow the smaller blonde's finger.

Yamanaka Inokumo.

I went white.

“I...I've just remembered that Sora-oba wanted you back sharpish, Ino-chan. We'd better...get going.”

Ino's surprise fell on deaf ears, my head ringing with strange, buzzing white-noise.

Somehow, somehow my feet carried me out of the graveyard and back towards the Yamanaka Compound.

“Girls?” Oba-san called from the Kitchen. “Back already?”

Ino ran off, shooting me a weird look over her little shoulder as she scampered around the corner
towards her mother.

I left without a word.

When? When had my Uncle died? And why had no-one told me? Fear shot like a spear of ice down my spine. Did...did Natsuko-oba know? I mentally slapped myself. Of course she did, they were married. She was probably the first person to find out.

Absently, I tried to remember the last time I'd seen the two of them and struggled to bring up anything.

But. But life didn't only exist where I could witness it. They had probably lived their lives together, Natsuko-oba still unwell but living for her equally-devastated husband.

I'd like to think I was an honorary Yamanaka. Had I really not noticed when Inoichi-oji had lost his younger brother? When my own dad had lost his Genin teammate?

My feet had taken me to T&I. I ignored the receptionist, as per usual.


A long moment later, the door was pulled open to reveal a tired Inoichi.

I know he'd told me to never let my emotions show if I ever was to enter his building. Not to show weakness or cry or laugh or chatter. Anything. But…

Without meaning to, my eyes grew itchy as tears started to gather along my lower lash line. Pupilless teal eyes closed in resigned pain.

“Why didn't anyone tell me?”

My uncle rested a scratchy, calloused hand on my shoulder and pulled me inside, closing the door behind me. I fell against the familiar chest, inhaled the scent of tea and roses. Noko’s beads,
Natsuko’s wails and Inokumo-oji’s pinched expression of denial flashed through my head. My neck felt as weak as a pipe cleaner and the tears finally spilled over.

I wept.

The barely-there shudders that trembled Inoichi’s frame told me I wasn't the only one.

..........................................................

In the weeks following Inokumo’s death (I wasn't told the circumstances but I was betting on a mission gone awry), the Yamanaka Compound felt terribly still. Held in a state of suspension.

Noko’s house, now empty of everyone besides Natsuko-oba and her friend Haki-san, was in the middle of the cul-de-sac. A pretty home, summer-y with a generous lawn like all the others, I'd spent a lot of time there as a kid.

I hadn't been in there since a week before Kyuubi attacked.

Natsuko, Sora had reluctantly told me over tea, was extremely poorly and had been bed-bound for a long time now. Sora was the only one, besides Haki-san, who could get a response from her. She's just...lost the will to live.

(I hoped, so much it hurt, that my own family before had handled...everything...better.)

Sora went ‘round whenever she could, even if she ended up drinking all the tea and basically talking aloud.

In the stillness of the Compound, I found myself taking Ino to visit a now-showing Kaiya more and more often. Sometimes leaving my little sister to play with Chouji whilst Sora ran the flower shop and I was at Nekki's, sometimes on my days off. Those times often ended up being either a strange girls-day with Ino, myself and the InoShikaCho mothers or as a babysitting gig for the terrible trio.

‘Terrible’, pfft. As if I wasn't whipped. So much so I probably should’ve felt embarrassed to be so thoroughly wound around the fingers of three five-year-olds.
I was shameless though. *Beat that, Fandom!*

“Alright, guys!” I clapped enthusiastically, feeling about like an overly-preppy councilor at those summer camps kids would rather die than attend. “Today we're making...bread!”

Ino shot me a look of disappointment, Shika just wanted to sleep and looked profoundly betrayed that, for once, I wasn't going to just let him. Or, better yet, let him cling to my back like a baby koala and purr him to sleep. Better than a lullaby and warm milk, he’d once admitted. Sleep deprived, of course. *Taciturn little grump.*

Chouji nodded eagerly, clambering up from where Ino had been showing off her colouring book on the living room carpet, and toddling over. Soft baby fingers shyly slipped into mine and, beaming, I clasped his hand more firmly.

Chouji was *so* my favourite!!

We were in the Akimichi Compound again, Kaiya having taken the afternoon to indulge in a long soak at the onsen. The new baby was absolutely *brutal*; I'd never seen someone so sick, even Sora-oba at her worst hadn't been so bad. Maybe it was because Kaiya was always so intimidatingly On Point or because the first part of the pregnancy had been such smooth sailing. Whatever it was, I really hoped it passed soon.

Kaiya on a normal day was scary enough to make Shinobi wet themselves. On a Bad Pregnancy day? Fucking duck-and-cover, run for your lives.

“Now, now, Ino,” I wagged a finger at her mullish pout. “Bread is a girl's best friend!”

Her little button nose crumpled adorably as Ino slowly moved closer, curious despite herself. “Why?”

*Er.* I'd never had to clarify the love between a girl and carbs before. It simply *was.* So I fucking dodged that bullet as best as I could. “It's a Big Girl secret! You'll know when you're older!”

The angry glint in Ino's eye did not bode well for my peace of mind but, seeing how her interest was
most definitely captured, I decided that small losses were always part of a larger victory.

Outnumbered, Shika found himself hounded into actually actively participating (unlike just enjoying the show from the sidelines, as I could tell he'd intended from the glint in those clever eyes) and, half an hour after introducing the activity, the kids were finally gathered in the kitchen.

Hands were washed, ‘apron’s (neither Kaiya or myself owned any small enough so I'd just tucked a teatowel into each of their collars and secured with a piece of string around their little waists) tied and hair secured back.

“Right!” I chirped, showing them all the line of ingredients on the counter. “Today we're making honey bread! It's sweeter than normal bread so it's nice by itself for a snack. I'm sure,” I cast a sly eye at Ino, “Ensui and all of our parents would appreciate them at work…”

Stars ignited in three sets of eyes and I mentally tooted my own horn. Ka-ching!

(Ino was at an age where she was desperate to sneak a peek into her dad's mysterious office. If a delivery at lunch time could get her past the front desk…bread was sticky and bothersome. But… for a ticket to her Papa’s secret-spy-lab, she’d do it! )

(Chouji was actually a nice kid. He just wanted to be the one making a bento for his parents for once, not the other way around. And his Kaa-san had been really sick recently! Kiharu-nee always said honey was med-icinal, healing! He didn't know if it would help his mama but the older girl always said she felt better after licking the spoon-!)

(Shika knew his mother had a weakness for carbs, just like his older sister. Maybe an offering would smooth over any of his neglected chores…)

...his father was also easily embarrassed. Kiharu would be ecstatic to know that, while she hadn't passed down her exuberance for mischief-making, Shikamaru did take a droll satisfaction from seeing his old man rattled. And leaving a sticky roll in the middle of a pile of documents, hopefully taken into an important meeting, was the easiest way to do so. Minimal effort, too.)

I didn't mention that they weren't, as they no doubt imagined, rolls filled with honey. I loved honey but, jeez, that was a bit extreme. Not to mention that straight out of the oven, when bread always tasted it's best, the center would be like soul-scalding lava!
“Okay! Ino-” I pointed, “-you measure out the butter. Chouji, can you sieve the flour, sweetheart? Shika…” my fellow brunette rolled his head around, lolling in his propped up hand, to face me. “…2 eggs from the carton, please.”

I grinned when my little minions—er—helpers did my bidding without complaint.

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“Urgh,” Shisui groaned, wiggling his toes as he plopped himself onto the grass. “I can't wait until I'm free of that stupid chair.”

Behind him, hands dropping from where they'd helped Shisui lower himself from his wheelchair onto the meadow floor, Itachi allowed his lips to soften into an amused smile. “Hmm.”

“Then we can practice in the woods again, catching fish, tracking animals. Sounds good, right?” Black eyes sparkled as Shisui twisted to grin at his cousin.

“Ah,” The Heir lowered himself to sit beside the older boy and tucked a long strand, that had escaped his low ponytail, behind his ear. “You're healing well, Shisui.”

The patient in question ripped up a handful of grass and starting shredding the sun-bleached lawn in his lap. “Heh, it’s not been easy. Itachi,” he glanced up to meet his companion’s eyes. “You've been awesome, so, thanks.”

The Genin’s smile became that bit more visible. “Any time.”

Shisui smiled back warmly but then a shadow seemed to fall over his eyes. In the low light of the late afternoon, his inky curls shone auburn and his eyes seemed more red than black. “Thanks...but something's been wrong, hasn't it, Itachi?”

The comfortable atmosphere suddenly felt cold.

Itachi almost opened his mouth to ask why but thought better of it. He might've been the one lauded as the generation's genius but...Shisui was a Jounin and smart. Smart enough not to show it, too.
“You've been on edge, twitchy, for ages now. Kiharu—” Shisui's eyes glinted when Itachi shifted minutely at the name, “—has noticed, Mikoto-sama has noticed. What does Ensui know that no-one else does?”

The breeze picked up slightly but, sat on top of ‘Kiharu’s Hill’/ ‘Shisui's Hill’ (privately, Itachi thought of it as belonging to them both) as the October evening drew in, neither boy shivered.

Suddenly, Shisui's eyes shone Sharingan red and Itachi automatically activated his own.

“I knew it,” Shisui breathed, lips parted in horror. “You—”

“Don't.” Itachi cast his eyes, now back to black, down the valley. “Please...don’t.”

At his side, his older cousin sounded helpless. “Don't you trust me? Why didn't you tell me?”

A beat.

“Ensui.” A warm hand, not much bigger than his own but far more calloused from years of service, grasped his. Itachi didn't shake him off. “Ensui knows, doesn't he?”

The 9-year-old’s chin dipped minutely in agreement, as if anything but the most discrete of answers would be broadcast to the world.

Inside, Shisui had never felt so...helpless.

“I'm here, Itachi.” Shisui spoke fiercely, his hands squeezing and face pinched. “I'm here. We’re in this together.” Slowly, slowly, the younger boy turned to look back at his cousin. Loyalty and resolve shone like a beacon in his eyes and Itachi released the breath he hadn't known he was holding.

“Tell...tell me everything, Itachi.”
And he did.

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“Tell. Me. Everything!!”

Hoshiko, her cheeks so red they practically steamed, sunk even further behind her sewing station and I internally marvelled that she hadn't completely disappeared under it yet.

Gin, beach-blond waves pulled back into an annoyingly-pretty-yet-messy top knot, slammed her palms on the table between them and leaned even closer so the older brunette couldn't escape her piercing gaze.

“What's this?” I drawled, moving from where I'd stopped in the doorway to watch and setting Yuri-oba’s knitting in her chair. She’d left it at mine when she'd been over for dinner the previous night.

“Kiharu!” Gin smirked over her shoulder - a sly look I had no problem returning - as Hoshiko seemed to melt even more at the audience. Of one. Who was the kid she'd known since starting her apprenticeship donkey's ago. Right. “Long time, no see, squirt. You've not been 'round in a fortnight.” A manicured palm, nails glinting orange, was pressed against her slim chest in faux-hurt. “Sick of us?”

I grimaced. Gin had always rubbed me the wrong way, patting my head like a puppy when I was younger and constantly filing her damn nails. She was good at her embroidery, Oba-san wouldn't have taken her on and kept her if she wasn't, but it didn't mean we got on.

I ignored her. “Hello, Hoshiko-san, how have you been?”

The shy brunette, who'd always reminded me a bit of Jane from Pride and Prejudice, exhaled shakily and picked her needlework back up. “I'm good, thank you, Kiharu-chan. How is the stall?”

Moving to the teapot, I opened my mouth to reply but Gin interrupted, evidently done with this tangent. “Hoshiko! Don't lie,” she laughed and turned to wink at me, “tell Kiharu about your Hot Date last night!”
Nevermind about the recovery, I think the older girl was on the cusp of fainting this time. Crikey, she looked mortified. I poured her a cup of tea in consolation because I was a bloodhound for gossip and romance, so yeah. Ha, there was no way in hell I was missing out on this.

“-I doubt Kiharu wants to kno-”

I flapped a desperate hand and told myself I wasn't a rude Bitch and would stop at the slightest sign Hoshiko was truly upset. “No, no! Don't mind little ol’ me, what were you saying?”

Gin hopped up on the desk and her brunette coworker finally dropped her stitching, resigned to an unproductive afternoon. “Hoshiko went out for dan-” my eyes sharpened like the glint of a knife, “-dessert last night with a handsome guy and she wasn't going to say anything, little minx!”

Gin spoke with a relish that completely undermined the description ‘insufferable’ but I was too intrigued to mock her for it.

“Jealous, Gin?” or not.

Violent pink burned her high cheekbones and Gin gnashed her teeth. Kraken distracted, I placed the tea before our tag-teamed victim. “So you had dessert? Was he nice?”

Hoshiko looked relieved I hadn't started grilling her on the nitty gritty and I honestly wondered why she thought a 12-year-old could be so crude. I mentally backtracked, thinking about everyone else my age. Okay, point.

“Yes, Kiharu-chan, he was very sweet.”

I waited a beat. Um...continue, please?

My expression no doubt revealed my mounting expectation and the 19-year-old giggled slightly. Kami, was there something on my face?
“His name is Jun and he's a blacksmith's apprentice…”

I abandoned all pretences when she shyly bit her lip.

“Age, height, eyes, dimples or no-”

Gin, apparently no longer in a strop, burst out into a loud cackle of laughter. It was a sound of evil. (It wasn't actually, in reality, a very nice laugh, but I never said I got on with everyone so surely I was allowed to be a little biased.)

“Like a wolf on the kill, Kiharu! Your Inuzuka friend would be proud!” She wouldn't actually, Hana isn't really one for gossip. I mentally stuck out my tongue and didn't even feel bad about it.

Gin and I demurely sipped our tea in a mirrored motion (Urgh) before fixing the other girl under our expectant gazes.

“Well?”

Hoshiko spilled.

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*Lord of the Rings quote

*The full story of Aki and Seiichi is available in ‘Tulip Fields’!
A/N- YOSH! 'Tis I! No, I didn't die, I was just on holiday, travelling around Europe with only my docs app, an annoyingly compelling muse and no laptop in sight. Ergo, plenty of writing but no updates. I can't believe it's been over a month since my last update but, well, I finally got back into my BNHA fic, so I'm not too regretful. This chapter was inspired by several things. I re-discovered 'Hey There Delilah' by Plain White T's and it's my current SHIHARU tune. Regardless of how musically inept Shisui is, shhhhhhhhh~

I also watched the new version of The Orient Express, that Poirot detective my folks adore with the actor who played Lockhart (never forget, I'm sorry to the rest of his accomplishments), and #spoilers, but I felt like Noko's 'death' was rather like that of the girl it in. Don't know what the fuck I'm chatting about? Google it, sweetie. Long story short, a little girl is murdered and her loved ones never recover. It's not that serious here but I feel like Noko's 'death' really broke Natsumo and Inokumo (and, to a subtler degree, Kiharu). Not everyone can recover from a loss, that's just the way it is.

Third motivation? I've reread this chapter so many times simply because I've been jumping between WIPs so much I need to remind myself. I was getting rather sick of it and, as much as I love it, I'll be glad to see it laid to rest. So, yeah, the editing was like blood from a stone and, boyyyyyyy, can I procrastinate. BUT THEN. LAST NIGHT (whilst I was actually on a night out and drinking, Friday night so no judging), I received the most gorgeous SHIHARU fanart ever!!!!! SQUEEEEEEEE

I don't know your pseud on here but check out my Tumblr (x-authorship-x) for @a-terrible-person-honestly's gorgeous work! Ask the Discord chat (message me on Tumblr if you want an invite), but I was a squealing wreck. I say it was the vodka, they'd probs say I'm just that excitable.

Anywho! Enjoy the chapter and, because I was so productive on holiday, don't be too surprised if the next update follows very quickly <3 <3 <3

P.S. Itachi activated his Sharingan before he met either Shisui or Kiharu, officially for the former. It's insinuated that he wandered upon wartime fighting when he was a small child and that's when it activated. It is also the reason he calls himself pacifistic.
Chapter Summary

Hitoshi was a pillar to me.

(This didn't mean he wasn't a dick, btw.)
(persimmon, anyone?)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I greeted the end of October in the only way I knew how.

(Or, rather, \textit{wanted} to.)

\textbf{“You want what?”}

\textbf{“A cookie cutter!”}

Ensui rolled his eyes so hard it \textit{must've} hurt. “Yeah, I got that bit. But why do you want it \textit{pumpkin} shaped?”

I shrugged a shoulder and continued shaking flour onto the scales. “Seasonal novelty?”

The Nara quirked a brow and slumped forwards, cradling his head in his hands and puffing out his cheeks. The effect was actually rather endearing so I reached across the island and pinched a cheek. His skin was a bit scratchy. “Too lazy to shave? Or have you decided that the bearded life is for you? I think my fingers are raw-”

“Serves you right, if so.”
“Anyway,” I sniffed. “I thought it would be a nice thing to decorate the stall according to each season. Jewel tones and harvest stuff in Autumn, snowflakes in Winter, Cherry Blossoms in Spring and other flowers and stuff in the summertime!”

Dark eyes stared at me shrewdly when I started beating the sugar and eggs together in a big, terracotta bowl.

“You’re bored, aren’t you?”

I creamed the yellow mixture of butter and sugar like it had personally wronged me. “No…”

Ensui wordlessly passed me the bowl of cracked eggs. “Liar…”

The eggs were beaten with brutal efficiency. “I resent that accusation.”

“Resent, not deny.”

I attacked the eggs with increased vigour and held out a hand for the sieved flour. Ensui did his duty as a good gofer and slid it over.

Hazel eyes lingered on the abused batter. “Who’s the cake for?”

I split and deseeded a vanilla pod like it was being hung, drawn and quartered. “Kaiya-hime. The new baby is making her miserable so I figured a cake might tempt her. She can barely stomach the scent of savoury this past week.”

Ensui ‘hmm’-ed politely and started twirling a spare spatula between his long fingers. “What flavour?”

“Vanilla.”
“Icing?”

“No.”

“Why are you bored?”

“Beca- ooh,” I trailed off with a whistle and turned to pierce my friend with a knowing glare. He waved the spatula around randomly with a bland smile. “Oh, very nice, Ensui. New interview technique? Get them answering fast enough and they start blurring things out?”

“Picked it up when interviewing a boy for petty theft,” the Chuunin shrugged unapologetically.

“And your best friend warrants the same treatment?” My voice was deceptively mild as I poured the entire bowl into a single cake tin. Kaiya probably wouldn't be able to handle a filling.

Ensui flashed straight teeth in a teasing smirk. Annoyingly enough, the stubble only made him look prettier. “Only when she's being evasive.”

If the oven door was shut with a touch more force than necessary, I'd fucking dare someone to say something.

“Are you going to help me or not, Ensui? I'm not in the mood.”

Automatically, Ensui’s eyes dropped to my lower abdomen and I immediately tossed the tea towel at his stupid head.

“No, I'm not on my period, you-!”

Pale palms were raised in submission. “Okay, okay! Sorry! Help you with the boredom?”

To my later mortification, I was this close to storming out of there. The mercy of mercy, I thankfully remembered the horror of puberty the first time around. I wouldn’t be screaming “I'm a woman!” any time soon. Hopefully. (Never again-!?)*
“The cookie cutters,” I growled, literally.

Ensui’s nails made an annoying ‘scratch’ ‘scratch’ sound as he rubbed his 5 o’clock shadow. “Why not get Old Kenshin to do it?”

On my side of the island, my own fingers curved into claws. Calm, calm, I internally chanted. Anger gets you nowhere, neither does violence...you’ll cringe later!

By god, I was right.

“The blacksmith charges extra for custom builds and, just because Hoshiko-” (“Who?”) “is dating his apprentice, doesn’t mean I’ll get a discount either.”

Grumpy old geezer was an asshole to deal with anyway. Why in the fuck he'd been called ‘modest-truth’ I didn't know (not that parents could predict how their kids wound up) but that was a contrast. Fucking old swindler-

A thought struck me and I leaned across the island with a sudden smirk, watching as Ensui’s guard automatically rose. “Anyway, you couldn't be more thrilled for another side job.”

Now it was his turn to scoff, tossing his head carelessly. His hair, down for once, flicked over his shoulders. It wasn't as glossy as Itachi’s, who was still in my bad books, and I made a mental note to give him some of my homemade hair masks before he left. Like he was allowed to let the side down, non-Uchiha that is, at the Station. Pfft, I don't think so!

“Ha! Not likely; work has been sucking away all my free time-” (“I noticed.”) “- don't be hypocritical, Kiharu - so I doubt I'll be able to make it for you.”

“Them.”

“What?”
“Them.” I started filling the sink with hot water and wondered if I could guilt trip Ensui into doing the cleaning for me. “Make them.”

The older boy kissed his teeth and I wondered why he even bothered to argue when my argument had come so far. If I didn't win this round, did he really think Yoshino wouldn't? “Fine. Them. Regardless, I'm too busy!” He stood to help me wash up and flapped the dishcloth in my face to emphasise his point. “You hear me? Busy.”

“Sure, sure. Busy.”

...c:

The cookie cutters, a seasonal selection of 15 in their own cases, were unceremoniously dumped on the counter at Nekki's three days later.

And to think I didn't even mention it again!

Rushing through the trees, Seiichi wondered if the B-Rank Missing-Nin he was hunting couldn't just keel over and die. Then, he'd probably make it back in time for dinner and he was pretty damn sure his Kiharu was making dumplings tonight and she had her little party the day after tomorrow-

Beside him, Hitoshi growled out a warning just as three more chakra signatures entered his range.

Dammit...nevermind.

“Affiliation?” the Chuunin grunted, ducking under a low-hanging branch and swerving left to avoid a fallen tree. His summon flared his nostrils and concentrated.

“Not sure, Seiichi-sama...I'll proceed with caution,” and then he was gone, splitting up to loop around and investigate. Well. If they weren't Friendlies, Hitoshi could always summon himself back
to Seiichi’s side...

He put the thought from his mind, narrowing his focus on the exhausted signature half a mile ahead of him and smirked as they only tired further. *Not long now...*

This job was a bit of a strange one, considering that solo missions to cut down on deserters were usually reserved for the Hunter Corps. Well, Seiichi *had* been put forward for that promotion, his skill set - alongside Hitoshi’s - giving him a completely different edge over their Inuzuka canine counterparts, but then Aki was *pregnant* and the *war* … he'd never got round to it.

He had motives, however.

After...after his old teammate was *found*, Inoichi had been like a man possessed, even more so after Kiharu had found out. Despite the fact that very few ninjas ever had a peaceful death, the Yamanaka Clan Head was *convinced* his brother’s had been out of the ordinary. Not merely because the crime scene had been so perfect.

If he'd truly been killed by an uncounted-for bodyguard, then it would've been so much messier. There would've been clues, a struggle. Inokumo may have suffered from crippling depression after his daughter died, but he was harder to take out than that.

And, despite some hesitant arguments put forward about how much he *wanted* to survive, Inoichi was convinced his brother hadn't been like that. Well, his best friend was the expert.

Seiichi didn't want to think that way either. To think that Inokumo, who'd always been reserved but dependable, like the calmest ocean, wanted to end it all. Surely, Natsuko...

But Seiichi had no right to judge. Because if Kiharu-

He was out here for two reasons, in reality. Inoichi had pulled some strings - they were ninja, no such thing as being unscrupulous - and Seiichi was scouting the forest. It was the same place Inokumo had taken multiple missions to or through in the past year. It was also the place he'd died.

Inoichi thought there was something here, his brother having been strangely fixated in his final few months even as he avoided his older sibling. Seiichi, not having seen his Genin teammate for longer than a few minutes in months, simply had to trust Inoichi’s judgement.
A few moments later, Hitoshi leapt back to his Master's side and Seiichi couldn't help but flick glances over his partner. No blood, no wounds.

“Suna ninja, the original squad set to get him. We could get him first but…” the panther growled, trailing off suggestively and the Dazai understood.

“Suna is resentful enough in the current financial and political climate. He was one of theirs originally...We're getting paid regardless and his bounty isn't worth ruffling even more feathers. Did you speak?”

Hitoshi dipped his massive head in a shallow, but distinctive, nod. “They thanked us for our consideration. Grudgingly, ungrateful bastards.”

Seiichi hummed thoughtfully, landing on the next branch and stopping. He didn't even bother with scolding his summon’s cursing (Kiharu's ears far, far away).

Hitoshi landed lightly beside him, paws silent on the bark. The forest wasn't as large as Konoha’s, and the branch dipped dangerously under their combined weight but held. Just.

A raindrop landed on Seiichi's hand, drizzles common for the area this late in the year, but the tracker prayed it would blow over anyway. Any more rainfall and any tracks would be completely washed away, even for Hitoshi.

That and if Seiichi had to get soaked and listen to Hitoshi complain, he was going to lose it.

“Are you sure you didn't plan this?” the panther drawled, emerald eyes blazing against the autumnal backdrop.

One hand already rifling through his pack for Inoichi's file, the brunette couldn't even manage the usual pout. “Har, har...how far away are we?”

A black ear twitched. “They're killing him.”
“How far?” Seiichi insisted, trying not to think how the villages differed.

In Konoha, a missing-nin was taken out with a single hit. Judging by what he'd seen in the war and Hitoshi's distraction, Suna was considerably less... humane.

“Another day's travel to the West. But, if this rain continues, how much there will be left to find is another matter.”

It couldn't have been later than four, but Seiichi could already see the sun descending towards the hills. “It's been over a fortnight, how much were you expecting?”

Muscles bunching under his dusty fur, the panther dropped down to the forest floor and Seiichi had to channel chakra to his feet when the branch bounced dangerously. “Have some faith in my skills, Seiichi-sama. I have cause to be insulted…”

He couldn't repress his grin, nor the rueful chuckle that followed. “Of course, you play the martyr very well, old friend.”

Said partner crumpled his muzzle in a silent snarl, light glinting off the smattering of silver hairs around his nose and eyes. The Chuunin was rather glad he'd decided to stay in the tree now...

“Old? Why-”

“We're losing sunlight! Let's cover some more ground before we lose it completely!”

The day of October 31st dawned clear and bright.

Not that I saw it, of course.

I'd been up late baking, the new cutters working an absolute treat, so was justifiably tuckered out.
You don’t think making biscuits is a workout until you start on batch number 25 and you wonder where the fuck you went wrong in life to deserve such torture. For myself? I figured it was just bad karma.

(Maybe Ensui’s exhausted energy had seeped into the metal, chakra could do the weirdest shit-)

But, regardless, I’d worked through the afternoon, calling in absent to Nekki’s and betting on the colder weather to dull down the customers to a manageable level for her. Mikoto, on second thought, was more than capable of handling an out-right onslaught. Fugaku may be known as ‘Wicked Eye’, but there was a reason Akane-sama had told me about Mikoto ‘The Dragon’. The Grand Fireball Jutsu was an Uchiha staple; Mikoto’s was in a whole other league. Or so I was told.

It wasn’t too relevant to the issue of managing a patisserie - Mikoto was hardly going to mass-cook orders by spitting fire, hm? - but she was intimidatingly competent. If I didn’t have majority shares, know all the recipes or have to intercept and wheedle the more ninja-cautious merchants, I might’ve been jealous. As it was, I could relax (just a bit) knowing that my pride and joy was in good hands.

I had a plan. As in, A Plan.

Our kitchen was filled with dessert, cookies on every countertop (some ginger, some flavoured with syrups and berries….honestly, they were more like macaroons in sheer versatility) and traditional Japanese desserts alike. Not to mention that our fridge was filled with hot puddings just waiting to be cooked.

I hopped out of bed, buoyant and excited. My shower was luxuriously long, steam curling around my sore arms and flushing my skin pink and I found myself singing.

What’s up with me today? I haven’t felt like this in months…

The answer hit me when I was getting changed, head stuck in the collar of my thermal under-shirt. Kiharu, you idiot- the difference is you’re not stressed! (Well, I was , but just in regards to my scheming for the day.)

For months now, really since the summer, I’d felt like a prisoner on death row. Not that I was expecting an execution but, rather...Danzo was a bitch. Tobi was a bitch. I’d existed in a perfect little bubble for a good few years, Minato and Kaa-san and Noko’s death has been so long ago and in such an impossible event...
Hitoshi's fight with Tobi wasn't canon. Danzo fleeing as a missing-nin wasn't canon. And they'd really knocked me out of it. I wasn't expecting any drama until the storm with Shisui and Itachi and the Uchiha…

But the village had moved on, the gossip moved on. Like a muscle, tensed against another blow, finally relaxing. As watchful as the ninja had been, I could sense a shift in them too.

My dad hasn't spoken of the ramifications, neither had any of my friends. It wasn't my place to pry, whilst I might have insisted before, but I was too involved as it was. Maybe in a while, once everything and anything had been dealt with, dad would tell me more of what had gone down with Sarutobi and ROOT.

As it was now, I felt like the storm was finally moving on. (Famous last words, but shit, I wanted it behind me. I couldn't jump at shadows for the rest of my life.)

After all...there was no rest for the wicked.

*Kaki or “persimmon”* is a sweet orange fruit that comes into season at this time. An explosion of vibrantly orange fruit (not dissimilar in appearance to peaches or tomatoes), they are extremely bountiful in Fire country. I'd gorged on countless when the harvest came in, sometimes eating them before they were fully ripe and gagging on the bitterness, and they were a staple around here. (I didn't eat them too often because, well, I had an affair with berries when I wasn't shoving down chocolate and cream, *shrugs*.)

I was taking advantage of that.

I'd always loved November *before*, what with Halloween and Bonfire Night...staying up late and twirling fire-crackers and eating delicious food… those nights had been real treats, an explosion of colour in such a bleak season.

There was no Hallow’s Eve here, no Bonfire night, and I couldn't justify a celebration of them to myself, nevermind everyone else.

So I'd done one better and created my own.
The Feast of Kaki, as I’d decided to call it, started off when Nekki’s opened late. Very late.

Whilst, on normal mornings, we’d be ready with pans hot and doors open by 9 am (in time for the late-breakfast rush), I held off until 2 pm.

The stall had had to be decorated, all the food organised (I’d made sure there was a selection but, justifiably, almost everything contained some aspect of Kaki fruit) and we were ready.

Yuri-oba had laughed when I’d told her my plan, pressing several yards of various fabrics into my hands and offering to help when the day came. She’d been good to her word, showing up at our house just after 10 with Akane on her heels. It was just the four of us that morning, those two along with Mikoto and me, and I thought we’d fucking rocked it.

My usual outfit of blue, white and red had been swapped out for something a little more... festive.

My legs were wrapped in cosy, knitted green leggings, the colour of fresh grass. My normal yukata had been swapped out for a gorgeous amber-toned kimono, albeit an altered one for comfort and manoeuvrability. The terracotta fabric was embroidered with tiny falling leaves that gathered in tasteful clusters along the bottom half. The thread, metallic gold and bronze and emerald, glittered in the sunlight and, paired with my fur-lined boots and emerald obi, I was feeling pretty fucking fab.

Mikoto looked lovely in bright scarlet, a pop of colour against her pale skin and dark features. In her ears, the earrings from Ensui and me glittered like droplets.

My hair was down, smoothed with a drop of Kaa-san's rose oil in an attempt to tame The Frizz, but pinned from my face with a collection of leaves, small and tasteful and nice. Ino had helped me collect them, choosing ones that were whole and without any disease or rotting. She'd been pretty fucking insistent that they were all imperfectly orange, liking the ones with green tips or yellow centres much more. Incorrigible little brat~

Mikoto's hair was pinned back on one side with a discreet but cheerful sprig of holly. She'd make the prettiest Mrs Claus I'd ever seen...

The clock struck two, the street outside our window filled with bustling shoppers and merchants alike, and I opened the doors with great flourish.
Silk and gossamer were strung from the ceiling in great, billowing banners, every colour of the sunset and blazing in the sunlight. The counter was filled with the desserts, many of them hot puddings to ward off the chill, and the delicate scent of slow-cooked persimmon and cinnamon and chocolate drifted out onto the street.

The customers came forwards in a small, curious trickle. Opening up the free-standing signs I'd decorated earlier, I couldn't help but grin at the murmurs of surprise.

“Happy Kaki day!

To celebrate the harvest of Fire Country's most famous fruit, Nekki's is having a party! Come and enjoy our warm menu, for this week only, and we'll be hosting late into the evening too:

2pm - 10pm”

(I hadn't been able to get my hands on any sparklers, they were already stocking up for new years and low at the moment after the Kyuubi festival, but Mikoto had argued that it was probably for the best. Children running around with fire on a busy street? Maybe not. But we could still have a lovely evening together and the shop was bound to look amazing in the lantern light!)

The children came first, babbling and curious about the redecoration and their parents followed after.

“Free taste of Hoshigaki?" I beamed, whipping out a tray and moving to stand by the door. It was (unfortunately, I know) nothing to do with hottie-Kisame, but sugared and dried Kaki, courtesy of Mikoto. In fact, most of the recipes here had been spearhead by Mikoto...I wasn't as good with the Japanese recipes (ironic, I fucking know) as the Uchiha Matriarch. After seeing me flounder last night, Mikoto having come straight over to help after closing, she'd smoothly taken over, showing me the confidence of each motion until I felt like I could replicate it.

("my mother," Mikoto smiled, a tiny and sad quirk of her lip, down at the Kaki jelly she was sieving. "My mother liked to cook, whenever she could...she'd learnt as a little girl from her Oji-sama."")

So, I'd decided to stick by the door for a while before moving to back up Mikoto at the counter. I was more approachable to the kids, and adults, for one...and Mikoto was doing fabulously well, for another.

Soon, the street around Nekki's was filled with curious villagers, most of them tucking into one of our orders.
Not long after, just past 3 pm, the ninja came calling too, familiar and unfamiliar faces alike. Nee-chan and Raidou were there, sipping tea in the corner and speaking in low tones. Thanks to my slightly enhanced senses, even the bakery couldn't hide their usual scent of attraction (the chemistry between them was the main reason I'd been so bloody persistent for so long). I didn't approach, however, deciding the play the waiting game for a while longer (didn't stop them from looking ready to bolt every time I opened my mouth around them. I'm not gonna lie, I almost died with laughter inside).

“Tou-san!” I grinned, bounding over and masterfully keeping my tray of hot *Kaki* tea from spilling. “You made it!”

The tray was dumped unceremoniously on the nearest surface (on a cart between the leeks and pak choy) and my dad swooped me into a hug.

“I told you I'd be back!” The older man laughed, swinging me round in a lazy twirl before setting me back down. He didn't let go, however, and I could feel Hitoshi rubbing his shoulder to my spine in blasé greeting. “Couldn't miss *Kaki Day*, right?” A chocolate eye winked outrageously but I didn't have the heart to pop his bubble, as usual.

I hadn't thought he'd be able to make it back in time, like with the other milestones at *Nekki*’s. Sure, it was a celebration of my own ulterior motive but...I was still glad.

After all, I was still just a little girl, missing her dad.

The tw- *three* of us Dazai then strolled back towards the shop, where Sora-oba insisted my dad sit down with tea and cake. Apparently, he'd only stopped to report and for a quick shower before coming over...but I wasn't blind to how he'd slipped a letter to his best friend's wife, smiling pleasantly all the while. *Food for thought, later.*

I mercilessly threw Hitoshi at the children and walked away as they pulled and tugged at the imposing summon, smirking all the while. *No regrets~*

By four o’clock, Shisui had come round too, reluctantly allowing himself to be pushed by Itachi and with Sasuke scampering alongside.

“Good afternoon, Itachi-kun, Sasuke-chan,” I smiled warmly, the tray of tasters extended like a
peace offering. *I'm not going to push, Itachi. I haven't pushed for months...we used to be friends.*

Sasuke, adorable little shit that he was, turned his nose up as soon as he realised that the vaguely-tomato-looking fruits weren't his beloved favourites. And, by ‘favourites’, I meant that I wouldn't be surprised if the boy ran off to start his own plantation. *Kami.*

Tension broken (slightly, er, I hoped), Mikoto's eldest offered me a tiny smile, reaching for a small *Kaki Yokan* (persimmon-flavoured *Kanten* jelly cake) and biting into it delicately.

Then Shisui had to pipe up.

“What, *Ki-chan*?” he gaped, looking for all the world like a clown...but I saw the sharp gleam of understanding in those dark eyes and nearly throttled him. *Break the tension, my ass!* “No greeting, no dessert for your best friend?”

I clamped down on my laughter before I lost the treats on my tray. “But *Shi-kun*,” I returned the favour, “Tetsu and Izumo are on Gate Duty today—” his eye twitched, “—and Ensui is still at work!”

Smug beyond belief, I turned to offer a hand to Sasuke-chibi. “I have some tomatoes hidden in the back from your lunch last week~”

The little duck-haired boy did a complete 1-80 on me, flipping from sullen to intrigued like masks of a mime.

The rest of the kids arrived an hour later, Ino (god, she'd dressed in gold, the little minx!) spearheading the advance with a hand clamped on Shika’s collar and the other looped through Naturo's. Chouji took up the rear, with the air of someone having dodged a nuclear missile (I didn't know how that would even work but, by god, it was accurate).

Absently, I wondered how the *fuck* my imouto managed to keep track of a boy I'd spent months looking for. Automatically, my eyes swept over the surrounding rooftops, although I didn't believe for a second the ANBU would let me catch a glimpse. *Sarutobi...what game are you playing?*

He let me throw a fucking *birthday party* for the boy but I couldn't find him on a day-to-day basis?!

Sure, I'd mentioned Minato just a *little* but his thought process was honestly bewildering me.
(I didn't like to think that, maybe, Naruto was avoiding me all on his lonesome. After all, he'd been perfectly happy to see me when we did meet-

“Nee-chan!” and the brats were upon me.

Have I ever mentioned how difficult it is to work with brats underfoot? On a normal day, I could manage because Shikamaru would just sleep with Hitoshi, Chouji was always in his best behaviour and willing to help when I had the time to keep an eye on him. Ino...so long as she was perched in the very centre of the counter and could talk all she wanted to a captive audience, it was all A-okay. Not today though! It was busy, the shop having essentially spilt out into the street, and I almost died when Shikamaru latched onto my arm.

I held my breath when the pack of brats caught sight of the Uchiha boys and Naruto and Ino-

Completely ignored them.

Holy shit, what the fuck-?

I checked my vision for a second, blind to Chouji taking a handful of tasters from my tray, but yep.

Uchiha Sasuke, future fan-girl killer, was being ignored.

The best bit?

He was looking straight at them.

I had to turn away before my howls of laughter frightened off the customers.

The children also received little autumn-garland bracelets I'd commissioned from Sora-oba (Kaiya had helped, swollen feet up and expression determined despite how ill she'd been, Ino and Chouji helping too) and-
Well, speaking of…”Oba-san!” I beamed, bent over to help a little redhead fasten her token around her chubby wrist. Behind me, Ino was shoving the warm Kaki crumble on the trio of boys, insisting that it was the best because she'd helped and they all had to try it. *I think the people in Suna haven't heard yet, Ino, Naruto, scream it louder?!*

The brunette smiled warmly, arms full of flowers and with a large wicker basket on her hip.

“Happy *Kaki* day,” I recited with a cheeky grin.

“Happy *Kaki* day,” she laughed back, glancing around the street and noticing the several curious onlookers (my fellow shopkeepers eavesdropping too). “*Yamanaka Flowers* has a gift for *Nekki’s*,” She continued, hefting up her armfuls as if they hadn't been eye-catching the moment she rounded onto the marketplace. “May you have an abundant winter, from our shop to yours.”

Well, fuck. If that didn't sound like a tradition starting or what!

My grin was reaching Cheshire cat proportions and I hoped I wasn't traumatising anyone. Fuck, but I'd forgotten how awesome the Merchant’s Festival was, haha!

“Well, fuck. If that didn't sound like a tradition starting or what!"

“Thank you for your kindness and generosity,” I made up on the fly, relaxing a bit when Sora dipped her chin in a regal little nod of ‘*go-on*’. “Please join our celebrations; all that is ours is yours~”

My aunt smiled delightedly as the street, cheeky eavesdroppers, buzzed quietly over our little show. Good god, I'd not asked Sora to do *that*.

Wow. Had I said anything wrong or-? I glanced up to catch soft toffee eyes as the Yamanaka Matriarch set her offerings on the counter behind the till.

“*Was that okay?*” I hissed, helping her find the flowers a nice jug for display, “*I didn't even know what to say…*”

Sora laughed lightly, whipping out two milk jugs (metal, litres-worth) and filling them in the sink. “Unorthodox but sweet,” she reassured me, smiling when she caught Mikoto’s eye. “Good afternoon, Mikoto-sama, the holly looks well.”
Sorting out the teapot, pale fingers reached as if to touch the sharp leaves. “I'm glad you think so, Sora-sama,” A laughing glint lit Mikoto's dark eyes, “you are the expert, after all.”

Both mothers chuckled, Sora moving to place the two bouquets in the window as Mikoto started on a mass-order of *Kaki*- flavoured tea. As for myself, I set about serving up the hot puddings, curls of enticing steam visible in the crisp autumn air, and smiling to myself at how well the mothers got on. It was a casual friendliness but, considering how (discreetly) nervous Mikoto had been when she'd first started helping out and had seen Sora for the first time (in a while) that wasn't a formal occasion...I was chuffed.

What with Mikoto's popularity at the stall, Akane's consistent presence in the clothing sector and Ensui's enlistment into the Force, I was feeling hopeful. More hopeful that I had ever really dared. *The proof was in the pudding*, they said, and, from where I was standing?

It looked pretty sweet to me.

Most people, when they turned 20, got absolutely wasted.

That's not to say Ensui didn't. Because he did. And he had a blinding headache to prove it.

Most people *didn't* get legless when they had work early the next morning. As a Police Officer. And had a 10 am meeting with the Chief too.

In his defence...Ensui hadn't been the one to suggest it.

Shisui was only recently turned 15 but he'd been allowed to drink ever since he'd graduated. That night, when Ensui turned eighteen and Kiharu had dragged a drunken Shisui back to her house to sleep off the alcohol, they'd not *technically* broken any rules. Well, besides the parents' ones.

This time, Shisui had dragged Kiharu around to Ensui's flat.

Even though it was a milestone birthday (no longer a teen...huh), Ensui hadn't actually planned a
party. He'd come straight back from work to find himself being browbeaten into coming over to his Aunt's.

Where she was holding a dinner party. *Fuck.* It had really been an event in itself with all the attending Clan members. Not to mention the Yamanaka and the Akimichi. The Dazai had shown up too, bearing three different desserts and dragging along Shisui as a 'plus one'. Seiichi-san had been in one of his playful moods, swinging Ino around when she raced to greet him and whining when Kiharu slapped his hands away from her offerings. *(They were so alike.)*

It had been utter chaos. Too many people squashed in the Nara house, loud and bright and *busy.* The kids had been underfoot, Ino insisting on riding his shoulders (honestly, Ensui just figured that she'd twigged he was the centre of attention and was riding his coattails) and Shikamaru going missing for a brief period. Well, until Kiharu, perched on the arm of Shisui's wheelchair, extracted herself and disappeared for five minutes. When she came back, she had a sleeping Shikamaru on her back and a secretive smile when asked where he was.

*“The roof, stargazing..”* She'd whispered into the shell of his ear when, during dinner, he’d shifted to pass her the rice.

He'd wondered how she'd even got up there. *(In the morning, Ensui would find angry scratches on a nearby tree and realise the little sneak had cheated, getting her panther to scale up, jump across and bring the wayward Heir back.)*

It had been an exhausted Ensui that had arrived back at his flat, already dangerously late. He'd face-planted his mattress, uncaring for the eyeliner that still traced his lids and his fully dressed state.

His eyes had closed for a minute.

Someone then started knocking on his door.

*Which led us, to here.*

With a sigh, that resonated from his toes to the tip of his ponytail, Ensui rolled out of bed and landed on his back with a muted *‘thump’.*

A staggering walk to the front door and he'd unlocked the safety chain, dismantled his traps and
swung open the door to reveal…

“What the hell are you two doing here?”

Shisui, one arm slung over the shorter brunette (whose eyes were rolled upwards, as if asking for divine intervention), shook a sake bottle in the Nara's face. From the half-empty sloshing, it appeared the two had already started. *Urgh, why did my friends have to be so much younger than me…?*

“You're 20!” *He was aware - “We're celebrating of course!”*

Something vaguely wrong tweaked at Ensui's exhausted mind and his eyes trailed downwards before popping wide.

“And where the *fuck* is your bloody chair?” Truly, the Uchiha was wheelchair-less. “Hitoshi!”

The panther in question, dangerously agitated at his current occupation of Steed, flashed his fangs in a silent snarl. Behind the trio, in the darkness of his building’s corridor, Ensui could just about make out the angry lashing of the carnivore’s long tail.

The Nara wisely took a step back.

“This idiot,” Kiharu jerked her chin at the curly-haired teen, who looked mortally affronted, “wanted to surprise you with his progress in physiotherapy. *Unfortunately*, he forgot that putting weight on his legs for a few minutes *doesn't* mean he can walk all the way to your place. *Idiot. ”*

“Kiii~” The dumbass in question whined but Ensui cut him off before he could pick up speed. Kami knew they could banter and bicker like they were the only two in the world if they were allowed to get going...

“Listen, you two…” Ensui scrubbed his face with his left hand, his right still barring the trio from entering. “I have an important meeting first thing and, Kiharu, you're *twelve!* And think about what happened last time you drank, Shisui!”

Kiharu, the most responsible of the two (and wasn't that a telling thought), seemed pretty undeterred,
muttering under her breath about cocktails and being good (Kami, she was a worrying girl) whilst Shisui resorted to fluttering his lashes.

It was obvious they weren't going to leave, at least not anytime soon, so he eventually sighed, slumping back from the doorway with a put-upon reluctance.

Shisui was dumped on his sofa with little ceremony and the aggravated summon slunk into the furthest corner. Hitoshi was a touch too responsible to leave his charge unattended but had absolutely zero qualms making his displeasure known.

His unhappy rumbles fairly vibrated the floor and Ensui prayed his neighbours were heavy sleepers. Complaints to the landlord, a terrifying retired ANBU, was the last thing he needed after today.

Kiharu was, seemingly, a little more sensitive. Making a beeline for his kitchenette, after making sure Shisui was fine, she pulled out a couple of glasses and started pouring the alcohol.

He had work the next morning, the Chief no doubt wanting an update on his tentative (awfully slow; he had to be so, so careful not to arouse suspicion or move too suddenly)-

Kiharu poured something that looked like juice - pomegranate or cranberry, he couldn't tell - into each glass before shoving it in his hand.

“It's dangerous to drink so young.” He said.

“The juice makes it easier to binge.” She replied.

He didn't ask how she knew, Shisui toasting him in the background as his terrible, terrible friends clinked glasses.

He downed the entire thing and it hit almost immediately. Well...Kiharu hadn't lied.

The night was a blur after that. Something happened with Hitoshi - Ensui thought he might've spilt the sake on him....that would explain the huge tear in his trouser leg - and Kiharu tried to ride his back at some point. Shisui egged her on...enabler.
The benefit of Shisui forsaking his wheelchair was that not only did it negate the chance of those two lunatics trying to go for a “drunken joyride”, as Kiharu had cackled, but it also meant that Ensui only had to police the girl of the group. Shisui was just a terrible a drunk, as proven at his 18th, but at least he didn't move.

Kiharu was, truly, insane under the influence and Ensui half-dreaded, half-anticipated when she was old enough to hit the bars with him. Her humour, usually so mischievous and tongue-in-cheek, completely devolved. She couldn't even make it through the punchline without doubling over in hysterics and Shisui was no better. Lolling on his sofa, what he lacked in sheer chaotic energy, he more than made up for with presence. Whilst Ensui had been happy to just sit and nurse his drink, Shisui was determined to talk.

He talked about everything, from arguing with Kiharu about whether she had curls or waves (she insisted his hair was nicer and they defended each other's styles so fiercely, Ensui had to beg neutrality lest tears enter the equation) to nattering on about what weapons he needed to practice once he was cleared for training.

When the sun started peeking through the village, dusky amber beams illuminating the living room, Ensui awoke.

His cheek was pressed against the floor, vision blocked by his overturned coffee-table, and he was so stiff it was like he'd died and been reanimated. Fucking Kami ...

The Nara Officer pried himself off the floor with a garbled oath, lashes sticking together in a way that let him know his makeup was smudged all over his face (nails ruined too, by the looks of it, fuck)...only to freeze at the bombsight around him.

The living room was empty but a mess. Had his sofa moved? The blinds were open and, fuck, that sunlight was bloody unwelcome.

A bare foot in the doorway let him know where Kiharu had wound up. How the hell did Shisui move from the sofa... oh?

Kiharu had dragged him to the kitchen so he could watch her next alcoholic experiment. (Ensui understood that she was always trying stuff with her baking but...since when did that extend to binge drinking? Hell, Seiichi-san was going to kill him-)
A glance at the clock and he was scrambling, ignoring the queasy rolling of his stomach and how his vision tipped slightly once he'd straightened up. Who cared that the alcohol hadn't fully left his system yet— he had work, dammit!

Which led him to this most recent clusterfuck.

Knowing that he looked like shit, felt even worse and that there were two hungover lunatics in his trashed apartment was migraine-inducing. The knowing look on Fugaku-sama’s face was awful. The topic? It only made his head pound all the harder.

“Sergeant Nara, this is Detective Uchiha Ryuu. He's been made fully aware of the situation regarding tamperings.”

Black eyes, set in a face that was uncomfortably pretty, glittered like an oil slick.

Fuck, it was one of the guys who'd hated him from Day One.

*Kami, I'm too drunk for this shit.*

After Ensui’s birthday fiasco of fun (memo to self: underage drinking is terrible - don't do it, you idiot. Shisui was a bad drunk...and even worse hungover), November passed with all the speed and excitement of Formula One.

Ergo, it needed to take a chill pill.

The Kaki day was a roaring success and the number of families visiting the bakery had never been higher. Despite the stress of having literally dumped a surprise festival on the village, I was buzzing from the success, especially considering the usual dip in sale in the winter.

Another winning point? Naruto had hovered around more, seemingly wary of me (fucking ouch )
but determined to argue about *every damn thing* with my imouto.

Some people might've thought it endearing or, like Shisui, a sign that they'd one day fall madly in love.

*I* was having serious regrets.

*Surely, Naruto could've just been playmates with Sasuke?? They could've got all the obsessed-not-hate over and done with before the academy and jumped straight to dating once they hit their teens…!*

I'd thought I was being so fucking clever, oh-ho. Get the social-reject best buddies with an Heiress, the popular girl in her class, and bingo! Naruto is socialised, Ino learns tolerance and true bonds away from vapid fangirls, and boom...I help both kids.

For once, I'd not factored my own *suffering* into the equation.

“Nee-chan, Nee-chan! Naruto says that toads are better than cats - he's so wrong, prove it-!”

“Toads rule-!!”

Eyes clenched shut as if willful blindness could block out the screeches too, I waved away any chance of a peaceful morning.

Tucked under my chin and perched in my lap (he was getting so big), Shikamaru let out a low whimper. It was muffled by my neck and the large shawl comfortably wrapped around us to ward off the chill, but I squeezed him tighter in understanding. I was pretty exhausted too.

“Ino….you shouldn't drag him around by his neck.” The small blonde turned, captive crushed in the crook of her elbow, and levelled me with a supremely unimpressed look. I really shouldn't have taught her that.

“It's the only way to keep a hold on him! *Duh!*”
I viciously suppressed mental comparisons between Mama Cats carrying their cubs and the duo before me.

I failed.

“Ino, sweetie, you're going to strangle him…”

“No, I'm not!” Ino gave her captive a rattle, arms still looped around his shoulders and neck as if to illustrate her point. “See! He's totally fine!”

I really think Naturo's bewildered smile wasn't helping my case. Sure, the boy had been playfully struggling when I first arrived - and no, I wasn't trying to gloss over a possibly hurtful scenario but Naru had been laughing, okay? - but, hearing Ino's unfailing confidence that it was all just for the bants, he'd looked pretty chuffed. Add on the jacket from his birthday, Ino's beads still in his hair and the oversized scarf around his neck, he really was a little too willing.

(I'd had friends from abusive families, who were so touched and overwhelmed by the simplest acts of kindness and care...they hadn't understood that they deserved that and more and I didn't want Naruto to feel indebted -)

I reminded myself that Naruto had never really played with other kids (and by ‘really’, I meant ‘at all ’) so Ino's very special brand of Tough Love, Shika and myself knew better than most, wasn't actually common behaviour.

Hand on my hip (the other keeping a grip on a certain sleepy Nara-koala), I surveyed the two of them for a long moment.

“Fine.” The younger blonde immediately started crowing, face still squashed as it was in my imouto’s pit. “But don’t be mean, Ino,” I sent her a quelling look, knowing that, being raised by her parents and myself, she was much more emotionally intelligent than others might have thought possible. Her expression didn't change but I could see the gleam of understanding in her blue eyes. “And no dying!” I winked.

They were gone before I'd even finished and I rolled my eyes upwards. Good god.
Sensing that his loud playmates had left, Shikamaru relaxed. He said nothing but snuggled closer, napping despite the disruption and the bustle of the park.

December was turning out to be just as bitterly cold as I'd feared. If I'd thought I could've managed it, I would have gone into hibernation.

As it was, I was, unfortunately, having to fully function. So, I'd never been fucking happier to run the hot counter, basking over the heat and avoiding the draft from the door as much as possible. And on my break?

Shika always seemed to know when I was having mine, skittering inside with as much hatred of the cold as myself. The huge, knitted shawl from Yuri-oba around my shoulders was opened in welcome and the little boy would crawl into my lap at the counter.

Unfortunately, I couldn't waste time like that was the month dragged on.

December arrived in a flurry of snowfall and my sales finally took their inevitable hit. Imported food from the warmer countries, seeing as our fields had frozen over, meant that people were spending less. Even my foray into more traditional foods (minus Dango because hiss, hiss, fuck no) couldn't keep the customers flowing. Whilst, arguably, this meant I surely did have more time to play with the kids, I had been right earlier.

There really was no rest for the wicked.

Investing in the help of Hana, I'd started making my own recipes, not just regurgitating the ones from before and...well...there was a fuck tonne of hit and misses.

After the second say of enlisting her help (after school), Hana was convinced the job of taste-tester was more of a punishment than any kind of favour.

Hana had actually been my first port of call for the help, with a much more refined palette than my gross male friends. I was also, so sue me, craving some girl time. Ensui was working and Shisui was with Itachi and Sasuke (he would legit eat anything so he's not a good opinion-giver) so it was perfect! The stars had aligned~

“It's... interesting ,” Hana allowed, mouth pinched after taking the smallest amount possible.
Across from her, I slumped like a marionette with its strings cut.

“What's wrong with it this time, huh?”

The academy student shrugged helplessly. “Are you sure beetroot makes a good pudding? It tastes like it looks...like dirt, senpai.”

Um...ouch. “Yes!” I insisted stubbornly, shoving aside the voice in my head that pointed out how I couldn't be expected to remember every recipe. God knows only common sense had seen my Churros turn out so well. Cheesecakes were the easiest, the basic recipe only expanded upon. It was when new techniques or very different flavours came into play that I really had to experiment. “I just need to work out the right amount of sweeter to counteract the earthy veggies!”

The Heiress still looked dubious but I gracefully ignored it, reaching to take back Number 5 of the mini-pudding samples I'd made and noted the issue down on my sketchbook.

I ignored the look of dread that passed over her face when I started making beetroot, cherry and chocolate crumble.

“How was school today?” I asked, half distracted as I checked on the Yondaime's in the oven. “You said you had a test?”

God, I couldn't believe she only had a year left of the academy once winter was over! Awww, I remember meeting her at the inauguration, when I slicked dad’s hair into spikes and Hana giggled...we're so big now.

The Inuzuka rolled her eyes, tossing the Triplets a few dogs treats I kept in a jar for these visits. I liked dogs.

“Fine, fine...although you'd have killed everyone if you were there.”

I smirked, setting aside the pudding mixture and pulling over my bag of nail polish. “Colour?” Hana surveyed my options (extensive, you know me and Ensui) before tapping on the cherry red. “Nice, it'll match your tattoos.” We shared a grin before I waved for Hana to continue, reaching for the file.
“Go on~”

“Well, there's a pretty civilian boy in my class and he's quick,” here, Hana's nose wrinkled in disgust and I smiled to myself, focusing on not smearing the delicate red on her cuticles. “But everyone goes on about him like he's Kami’s gift!”

“Is he rude or stuck up?” My pink tongue stuck out a bit as I carefully brushed over her little pinky.

An awkward pause. “Well...no. But he’s so smug!”

Navy-sapphire eyes flickered up to stare into Hana's. The Heiress’s eyes looked black but, in reality, they were streaked with dark amber, barely visible unless hit by the sunlight. They were super pretty.

“You're worried you'll end up on a team with him, because you're Top Kunoichi and he's got a chance at Rookie, and he'll just be all talk.”

She grimaced but, notably, didn't deny it.

I pursed my lips and wondered if I had any right to give advice here. I mean...I'd noped so hard out of ninja-dom, I was probably on a watch list. Either for crazies or extremists. (I mean, comparing my democratic-socialism to the feudal dictatorship...they weren't wrong.)

“Everyone has strength, Hana. And you'll be students for a long while yet...if you were perfect from day one, you wouldn't be at the academy. If ,” I shot her a droll look, “and I mean if , he is a worthless ninja...he'll either learn quickly or drop out.” The ‘ or else’ went unsaid.

We were silent for a long moment as I finished her thumb and screwed the bottle back up. We were right; they did match her cheeks, really nicely too.

“I didn't think you'd....” Hana trailed off and I smiled grimly, hopping down from my stool at the island and pulling the final tray of Yondaime's from the oven.

“I know. But it's a career and almost...almost everyone I love has chosen it. If you do something, do it with everything you are.”
*Murderers, mercenaries...* But I couldn't stop loving them. There had been no question.

I glanced at the ruby nails glittering on Hana's hands. *One day soon, that'll be real blood.*

*(But did I not have blood on my own?)*

“Come on,” I sighed, forcing a smile onto my lips that didn’t feel half as stiff as expected. Hana was sensitive, as were her ninken, but I was grateful that she'd obviously decided to let me slide. Still aware of her wet nails (I’d kill her if they smudged, red was *such a stain*), I was left to carry the still-warm tarts towards Ichiraku's.

“Evening, Teuchi-san!” I smiled, ducking under the banners with Hana half a step behind. The man in question, just chopping up some ingredients, raised his head to eye-smile in our direction. Behind him, Ayame waved excitedly, elbow-deep in the sink.

“The usual?”

“Eighteen Yondaime's, fresh from the oven,” I confirmed, eying the free stools before turning to Hana (who still had her wet fingers spread, hehe). “Dinner, Hana?”

The short-wait, *fuck, we were the same height* - *when did that happen?!* - other brunette snorted, hopping up on the nearest stool and whistling sharply for the wandering puppies to sit around us. Which they did, one of them slumping to lean heavily against my foot. Ahhh, I've been blessed~

“Your idea, your tab, right?” She grinned, a sharp tooth peeking out, and I rolled my eyes in return.

“Good luck eating with those wet nails, then!” I said, tilting my head towards where Teuchi's had automatically started on our usals. *Hehe, you were good, young grasshopper...but there is much trolling to be learned yet.*

“Bring it!”
Low laughter interrupted our bickering and I turned to greet Ayame, who was wiping the suds from her arms. “Kiharu-senpai, Hana-chan, I hope you don't plan to scare our other customers!”

As one, Hana and I grinned. Viciously, I might add.

“I'm trying to up sales, Ayame-chan,” I rolled my eyes when the moment passed. “And traumatising my business partner doesn't fit into that.”

“‘Up sales’?” Hana twisted in her seat to face me completely as Ayame leaned forward over the counter. Even Teuchi slowed down as he listened in.

I gave it up as a loss. “I'm thinking about expanding.”

The effect was immediate, Teuchi and Ayame exchanging surprised smiles. Hana, as expected, was much more shrewd.

“Why? And can you even afford that right now, I thought winter was a bad season for you.”

“Well,” I blustered, huffing internally that a 10-year-old had no business looking so intent, even if she was an Heiress with all that bullshit. “Hitoshi tells me we're doing very well-”

Cricket pause.

“Hitoshi?! You left the accounting to the panther?!?”

“Listen,” I patiently placated the academy student, hands aloft like she was a wild creature. “I don't think you understand how awful I am with maths. Hitoshi is as smart, if not smarter, than any adult and he's much more level-headed!”

Hana was gobsmacked and even the father-daughter duo looked beyond bewildered.

I'd re-sat my maths exam, guys, and had never actually got ‘round to memorising all my time’s tables. *Don't look at me for maths.*
December was bitterly cold. I hated the cold. I'd said that before, right?

Ninja wore open-toe sandals and sleeveless vests and they're toasty warm 24/7. Panthers are too well insulated for plebeian things like getting cold.

For me? I was swamped in about eight layers; leggings under trousers, under my yukata, under my coat. I had on two different kinds of vests, a long-sleeved tee and that damned yukata. And coat, don't forget the coat.

Add on two pairs of socks, fur-lined boots, hat, scarf and gloves and...hey presto!

"You sicken me." I hissed, scarf pulled over my nose and teeth still stubbornly chattering.

From their posts, Izumo and Kotetsu placed a hand (only donned in the usual weapon-protected fingerless issue) on their chests. Considering the fact they did it in sync and were wearing identical expressions of hurt, I was rightfully disgusted.

"It's December, Kiharu-chan," Izumo noted, act falling away first. "If this is you when it's only frosting, you're going to suffer come the snow and ha-"

Kotetsu leaned forwards from where he'd slumped in his chair. "Low blood sugar or something? Surely that ain't natural.."

Crikey, I wasn't a fucking rare species, Tetsu.

"Low blood sugar'?" Izumo stared at Kotetsu like he was a new level of stupid. "With her diet?-

"Oi!"

"-Kiharu is more likely to have a vitamin deficiency-"
“I eat well-rounded meals—” I tried to pipe in. God, when I'd wandered down to see the boys on my break, I hadn't gone looking for a paediatrician.

“The brat is just unhealthy,” a rumbling, unwelcome growl cut through the boys’ nonsensical babble. I didn't even know Kotetsu knew words like ‘anaemia’. I turned slowly to give Hitoshi the gimlet eye. So much for ‘I'll stay here’. “She eats all day and does little else.”

I kicked a rock at him. “If you're saying I'm fat, I'll have you know I'm in several layers! And you chase me. Through the woods. Until I collapse. Daily.”

Kotetsu made a sound like a choking turkey. Pacifist, swacifist - I lobbed the next rock at his head, over my shoulder, and turned to see it bonk off his chest. Had he grown again? Teenage boys were weeds.

Hitoshi sniffed, prissy as a Capital Courtesan. Fucker.

“What?” I snapped, still huddled like a clothes version of Cousin It from *The Addams Family*. “You want to train me, is that it? Another bid to make me a ninja, a fighter at the very least?”

Emerald eyes fairly glowed against the bleak, grey landscape.

I tossed the bag of piping-hot Churros at Izumo, still warm from where I'd kept them tucked protectively inside my coat. If a bit crushed. The Chuunin caught it, smiling in thanks even as he continued to eye my summon with a careful expression. “Enjoy your lunch boys,” I tucked my hands into my pockets. “It's on me.”

I didn't glance back at Hitoshi or the duo as I jogged back inside the Village walls.

I got it. I really did.

But Hitoshi knew I was a pacifist. He knew my political, in this climate, extremism with socialist inclines. I didn't like Dictatorship at all, even if the Head Honcho themselves was someone I knew or liked (Minato).
That didn't mean he necessarily agreed.

Long ago, Hitoshi had told me that, as a panther, he didn't care about politics or social hierarchy. There was the Home (territory), the Mission (the hunt) and the Pride (the three of us, very minutely extended to those dad and I loved too). That was really it.

So, he didn't want me to be a ninja out of any kind of status quo. This was all about him being a predator, in a society of predators. (Not the sexual kind, although I was certain they existed too.)

As things stood right now, I was prey.

“Kiharu-chan!” Mikoto smiled when I reentered the stall, halting me as I slowly worked on peeling off my numerous layers. “Shisui-kun is getting his crutches today. Take the afternoon to go with him?”

I glanced around and noted that all of our current customers had already been served and seemed plenty happy. The Uchiha Matriarch was wiping down the counter with a wet rag, a cup of tea steaming to the side.

Hitoshi was probably on his way back here, taking his time to give me the illusion of space.

“Sure thing! Thanks, Hime!”

The bell chimed as I left.

The physiotherapy clinic was a small building, tucked in behind the hospital and facing towards civilian neighbourhoods. As it was, it was around a half an hour walk.

Coasting on the back of Shisui's wheelchair, after I'd swung by his place to find him?

Pfft, Shi and I blazed it in 15!
“Ruffians!” An old lady yelled in our wake, crane lifted to wag angrily at us.

Shisui merely pumped more chakra into the wheels as I threw my weight to the side, tilting us onto a single wheel as we skidded around the corner over the icy pavement, like some strange bobsleigh.

“Woooo!” I yelled, cry stuttering as the wheelchair fell back onto both wheels with a heavy clatter. God but these things were well built, no weakness or loss of grip at all! Well, they had to be to survive Gai. Shisui, bent forward like some kind of chariot rider, was silent but he'd been laughing like a maniac when we'd done a slippery wheelie in the main square, so I figured he was just that into it. Crikey, we should have done this more often, Officers catching us be damned. As it was Shisui's last wheelchair ride, we'd decided to indulge. Hitoshi, fighting and, fuck, even my dreams were washed away in the thrill of the ride.

(Out of Kiharu's line of sight, Shisui was grinning from ear to ear with eyes aflame with delight. Kiharu was all but crying with laughter, a rare and unrestrained shriek of joy that Shisui revelled in. How long had it been since they'd been so carefree? Too long, Ensui's birthday having been a riot from the sake and alcohol. But now, with no substances and no inhibitions, Shisui couldn't have been happier. Who knew Kiharu was an adrenaline junkie? His Shunshin was probably way too fast, without a Sharingan, for her to even consider enjoying~)

“Faster! Faster!”

Shisui was more than happy to oblige and we skidded dangerously down the next street, only slowing when I noticed the clinic was around the next bend and tapped on the older boy's shoulder.

I ducked my head, shoulders hunched down to reach, and the rocking of the abused chair kept on bumping my lips against the shell of Shisui's ear. “We're almost there, Shisui, we might want to start slowing down.”

Ears scarlet, no doubt from the bitter wind, Shisui nodded and reluctantly started withdrawing the chakra from the wheels. When we finally rolled to a stop, a bit underwhelming after our fuck-crazy joyride, I whistled innocently as I hopped off the back bar and started pushing towards the access ramp. The wheels crunched over the frost and the ramp was uncomfortably slippery.

We were the picture of innocence~

“Don't think I didn't see that, Uchiha-san,” the receptionist, Rai-san, giggled. She was a pretty girl,
auburn waves brushing her collarbones and happy brown eyes twinkling. Shisui was still bright red and I was abruptly reminded that he was fifteen and Rai was only a few years older than him, seventeen if I remembered correctly. Did Shisui fancy her? Not to jump to conclusions on who he was attracted to.

_Was Rai, _I pondered as said girl rose to escort us to the waiting room. The clinic was private, ninja only, and it showed. _Was Rai his first crush?_

Somehow, the idea of Shisui having things like crushes was...phenomenally bizarre to me. Maybe it was because I'd yet to have my own in this body, aside from fangirling over Minato and Shikaku. Maybe it was because I'd never really been this close to a boy at this age, had never watched one go through puberty like this.

_(Maybe I was just being my usual, possessive, asshole self and didn’t want to share my best friend.)_

The waiting room was empty, aside from a long fish tank running along the back wall. My mind desperately repressed memories of _Nemo_—

_Nope, too late... _duh, duh, duh..._DARLA ! _

The walls were a ‘soothing’ mint green that really just made me think of seasickness and general feelings of queasiness. A couple of old armchairs dotted the space, the cream wooden floor empty besides a low coffee table. Where _before _there would've been a depressing selection of old, trashy magazines, here they had a neat little pile of books. I pursued the titles as Shisui confirmed his patient details in a low voice behind me.

_Ninja...ninja...weapons, so ninja...Oooh, a history one!_

I glanced at the title before snorting. Senju Tobirama. _Oh, naturally._

The volume was thick, bound in the kind of cheap covering that was so at odds with the famous author that I knew it had probably been mass-printed and this was only one of many readily available copies. Well, I'd hardly expect something like a Forbidden, super-duper secrecy-secret tome to fall into my grasp. No matter _how _private this stupid clinic was.

_Ha! _I bet you thought I was gonna start fawning on about an OP source of power falling into my
grasp. Pfft, get real. This isn’t a fanfic, you know.

The book itself, when I cracked it open for a look, was incredibly dry. A tiny font, that was killer to read with my crap skills, and, from what I could decipher, a bone-dry-boring tone. Fuck that. Tobirama...so gorgeous, so smart...why are you like this...

Shisui, I noticed when I turned away from Tobirama's book, was grinning massively. “Excited, Shisui-kun?” I smiled knowingly.

“4 months in this stupid chair, Kiharu,” the curly-haired boy shook his head, tapping a hand on the armrest. “They said at the start it would take a while because of the reconstruction but…”

My smile was considerably softer when Shisui looked up at me again. “At last, hm?”

“Uchiha-san, the nurse is ready for you.” Rai popped her head around the corner.

The nurse, Sara-san, was an older woman, middle-aged with a white stripe through her dark blue-black hair. I promise I tried not to compare her to a skunk.

I...failed…

When I plopped myself down into the chair beside Shisui's, I smiled winningly at the dubious expression on her face. I wasn't shy. If she asked me to leave, Shisui would probably roll over her foot.

“Right…” The older woman blinked, turning back to the folder. I shot a still-pinked Shisui a cheeky wink and he snorted softly. “Well, your legs have healed nicely, despite attempts to undermine that progress—” sharp eyes pierced the Jounin over the top of his file, “-and your rehabilitation therapist has written that your leg strength has started to return. Your independence regarding your chair has actually aided in your recovery; Your arm strength has not atrophied to the same extent as would be expected so you should find yourself able to travel a reasonable distance on your new crutches.”

Shisui thumped a victorious fist discreetly against his hip. However, considering how close my chair was to his, he ended up knocking against mine too. I grinned at him, pleased and amused. Sara-san continued speaking, ignoring the thump-war that had broken out between us. Shisui and I were good multitaskers, though, and listened well as we pretended we weren't knocking knuckles.
“Your bi-weekly physio sessions are only going to be once a week for the next three, and then once a fortnight. If you can organise a trip with a healer, I'd recommend you take to the Naka, stretching your legs and trying some gentle kicking in the shallows will help you recover even quicker.”

I could already see Shisui mentally planning to beg Akane-sama to go down tomorrow, if not today. I didn't doubt he'd completely forgotten that it was mid-winter.

“As for the rest, your medication will not be affected, although I'd recommend you only continue taking the max strength if you're in considerable pain. Now,” The sharp clap of her hands in the quiet room was a surprise and I felt Shisui snicker when I jumped a bit at the noise. I dug a knuckle into his side in revenge. “What colour crutches would you like?”

“What...colour?” Shisui croaked.

I'll admit, it did sound surprisingly indulgent for a ninja clinic. Then again, Shinobi were ridiculously eclectic in their wardrobe and style, Genin and Jounin most notably. Was she just...humouring him? I mentally snickered.

“Grey,” I piped up before Shisui. Two brows were quirked at me and I folded my arms defensively. “What? This way it goes with everything you could wear and not get too hot in the sun like black or navy might.”

Sara-san smiled at me. “Grey it is.”

When dad left on his next mission, the middle of the week following Shisui's ‘liberation’, I found myself in an empty house, sans Hitoshi. Sora-oba had offered my usual room but...Hitoshi's words had stuck with me.

“She...does little else.”

Maybe it had nothing to do with staying at home, in the dark with demons circling my imagination. It was a stupid thing to take away from that argument, really rather unrelated but.
But, if nothing else, I was honest with myself.

I was, I was discovering, a surprisingly bitter person. I didn't like to linger on the past too much, clean breaks healed so much quicker, but I was broody. I know, I know; it had come as a shock to me too. I had a huge chip in my shoulder. Independence. I'd scarcely allowed myself to ask Kaiya, Teuchi and Mikoto for help with the stall. Speaking up to Shisui about the Uchiha had been even worse, like blood from a stone.

Dealing with my own problems? I was an internalised.

Hitoshi, one of the few able to really get under my skin, made a casual comment about my lifestyle in a bid to persuade me to up my self-defence.

My response? No, thank you, Oba-san. I'll be fine on my own.

I wasn't a coward. I wasn't. (Right?)

I was a big girl, I could handle being alone in a blizzard...all night...with branches clawing at the windows...

Over four months after Danzo had fled, even longer since the whole issue with Tobi. The shadows no longer shifted, tingling my senses (and hadn't done for over two months so I guessed Raven was no longer charged with my protection). Either that or I was under even further suspicion and they were no longer affording me the courtesy of allowing me to sense them.

Wow. Way to ease your fears, Kiharu.

The snowfall had started earlier today, a gentle coating like icing sugar sieved over sponge cake. Heavier and heavier it fell, piling up in fluffy drifts and numbing the world. The sky, even late at night, was a smoky charcoal grey as the frosted rain continued to fall.

My bed was toasty warm, wrapped as I was in Tou-san’s dressing gown under my duvet. The warm milk I'd had in an attempt to soothe myself, was a pleasant weight in my tummy and I was extremely comfortable.
That didn’t mean I could sleep though.

My notebook lay open on my desk, a pale rectangle to my well-adjusted eyes. I’d written in it earlier, notes about songs I could only remember a line or two of for further perusal.

The bedside clock ticked.

It was 1 am and I had the opening shift in the morning.

Cheeks puffing out in a sigh, I rolled over again, feeling my eyelids ache with exhaustion. The day had been hard and I’d seen a woman in the market that looked a bit like kaa-san from behind and my feet had gotten wet and Iruka had hit an awkward growth spurt last week and looked so weird and-

My body begged for sleep but my mind churned.

Where was Danzo now? I mused, curling up on my side and tracing thoughtless fingers across the roped scar on my neck. Had he run to join Orochimaru? Made his own village?

I promise I tried not to think of him not having left Konoha at all. Keyword tried.

I marvelled over Shisui’s progress with his crutches, how Itachi had slowly started popping into Nekki’s again (rarely and only for a few minutes to see his mother). I wondered at the Uchiha, how the guards still maintained their distance but didn't seem to have the heart to ignore/dismiss me completely any more. How Ino had half-adopted Naruto, how Chouji was both excited for and dreading the new baby (if it made his mum so sick now, what would it be like when it arrived?) and how Shika slowed down even more in the colder months.

How dad had started leaving the village again, the extensive burns slowly fading to scars only slightly paler than his natural tan. How Hitoshi had started disappearing again, coming back bloody more than once.

Ensui worked tirelessly, dodging Yoshino and his coworkers like bullets raining down on the battlefield.
But my point was that everyone was moving on. Not like nothing had happened, but accepting and carrying on. I’d liked to think I was good at coping with stuff and I was but…

Why couldn't I just sleep?

A door opened and closed downstairs and I jerked upright, clutching the duvet to my chest as I held my breath.

_Surely fucking not?_

I tried to tell myself that an enemy, like the ROOT who'd tried to take my head, wouldn't be heard or noticed.

A creak on the stairs, the step I knew dad had purposely made creaky as a warning sign, and I threw myself towards the window. The apple tree in next door's garden was big enough that some branches were close enough-

“And what do you think you're doing?”

Smooth as fuck, I lunged to throw my alarm clock at his stupid head.

“You!” Hitoshi blinked. “What are you doing? I thought it was a psychopath!!”

Slinking in a gracelessly swagger towards my bed, the panther made himself comfortable on top of the discarded duvet. Coincidentally in such a way that prevented me from joining him. “Your imagination is as laughable as your escape plan.”

“It's not paranoia if they really are out to get you.” I recited, arms folded defensively and hip popped.

Emerald eyes, glowing in the dark, narrowed. “Save such drivel for Shinobi. I was under the impression that civilians, such as yourself, had no reason to hold to such teachings.”

My eye twitched, whether from his bullshit or plain exhaustion, I couldn't tell. “Tell that to someone
who hasn’t had attempts on their life.”

My summon seemed to realise something and glanced at the clock on the floor, the one I’d thrown. “You still cannot sleep…” his rasping growl mused.

Sapphire sharpened. “‘Still’?”

The panther licked a long stripe over his paw, which was annoyingly-endearingly domestic. “Do not take me for a fool, cub. I sleep lightly and right beside you. You do not rest as you once did.”

I didn’t answer. There wasn’t a point.

“I…” The huge carnivore heaved a sigh, lost for words for once, and I slowly perched on the bed beside him. “I believe I…spoke too harshly.”

My brain stalled. _What._

A dark muzzle nudged my cheek, emerald eyes blazing angrily as if it was my fault he was feeling any emotion other than self-pride. “You are not weak-” I swallowed. Hard. “-no cub raised by _me_ could ever be-”

My hand planted itself on his big forehead and shoved. _Moment. Ruined._ “You can’t be nice and sincere for _one stinking moment_ ?!”

He growled loudly, a deep reverberation ripped from his chest, and I was growling back before I’d ever registered it.

Abruptly, the noise cut off and Hitoshi’s muzzle lowered back over his gleaming fangs. “I’m back early for a reason,” the topic change blindsided me. “I have something to show you, in the woods.”

Emerald flickered over to my wardrobe and I gaped, jerking a thumb towards the clock still on the floor. “What, now? I have work in the morning!”
His ear twitched, visible against the white of my sheets. “Now.”

By the time I'd rushed to pull on some decent layers, shoving my feet into my fur boots and forgoing my coat for dad's (on me, it was almost ankle length but, honestly, I didn't care), it was almost 2 am and the snow had started drifting down again. At this rate, we'd have over a foot of snow…

Hitoshi was, apparently, on a tight schedule. Demanding I climb onto his back as soon as we were on the porch, he threw himself down the street, claws clicking and skidding on the ice.

The streets were empty, a muffled silence that hovered between eerie and peaceful. We didn't see another soul, although I knew there were always people working, patrols on their rounds.

When we reached the outskirts of the village and showed no signs of slowing, I started to question Hitoshi's game. Our breath froze before us and I was hunched over, face pressed to Hitoshi's thick pelt against the bitter wind.

The trees swallowed us and my summon leapt.

The landing was muted, cushioned by chakra and the panther's oversized paws, and, then, we were sprinting through the treetops.

I couldn't see a damned thing.

“We should just make it in time,” Hitoshi growled and I could feel the rumble of his words through my cheek, pressed to the ridge of his neck.

“In time for what?”

I was shushed, my summon's tone suddenly all the sharper and that urgency was the only thing that kept my mouth shut.

Eventually, after about ten minutes running through the trees, Hitoshi came to a stop, hunching low on the great branch and stopping me when I went to dismount.
Below us, something growled, loud and vicious and *decidedly unfriendly*.

“*Toshi, what the hell?*”

His neck twisted slightly, just enough so that he could pierce me with quelling emerald. “*Hush, cub. There is a tiger below us and she must not sense you.*”

“*Tiger?*” I mouthed, knowing that the feline could see perfectly fine. “*Why-*” my fingers spazzed from where I was gripping the loose rolls of fur at his neck. “*We’re in the Forest of Death?!*”

Hitoshi merely blinked, his eyes only just visible in the shadows of the forest. The Forest of fucking *death*-

I shoved my face closer, lips against his ear, and hissed out a string of unapologetic swears. Below us, the tiger (oh god, those tigers rivalled *elephants*, what the hell was I doing here-) continued rumbling loudly.

Abruptly, I remembered Hitoshi’s words from just before we’d left.

I pinched him. Hard.

“*Is this a trial of bravery?!*”

Trying to control my breathing - the churning of my nervous stomach really making me regret that hot milk -, it took me a moment to realise that Hitoshi hadn’t responded with the expected affront. He was actually very quiet, eyes fixed on whatever was going on below us. The tiger, my slowly adjusting eyes could just about see, was just as huge as I’d feared and was lazily shuffling around in the undergrowth, snarling loudly.

Then, Hitoshi started speaking.

“*We were in grave danger when Seiichi-sama was burned and I was rendered unconscious. You*
almost died and the two of us would have, had you failed to Reverse Summon us.” Slowly, my breathing calmed, hands falling away as I listened to Hitoshi’s slow drawl. “You only seem to get more and more difficult as you age. You and Seiichi-sama both…so I took steps.”

He nodded to the scene below us.

My brain stopped working. But my ears didn’t.

“Whilst the mother is not a Summon, the chakra-rich environment of Senju Hashirama’s woods have supplemented her body. There’s a chance the cub may have an active chakra network, like myself and my departed kin. If not, there is little loss.”

Blazing emerald turned to stare at me, something strangely paternal in his gaze as I gaped up at him.

“We arrived just as she was born, I can smell her on the wind and I felt her birth looming. It was why I returned early, why I brought you out here. You may not fight but…I cannot be beside both your father and yourself at once. This cub…she will be.”

My throat was tight and the bitter cold had my eyes watering, just a bit. Swallowing hard, I glanced below us, as if I could see the little hybrid (-oh god, Hitoshi had a kid, he went and had a kid-) in the dark.

We were silent for a long moment before Hitoshi slowly straightened, leaping silently to the next branch and slowly picked our way through the treetops.

“What,” I quietly cleared my throat when the words caught, quiet and almost lost to the wind. “What…are you gonna call her?”

Hitoshi was silent for a moment, stopping on a branch for a long second, seemingly lost in thought. “Fuji.”

All tenderness fled my system. Seriously? Deadpan, what the fuck.

“‘Prosperous objective’?!” I gawked at the back of his head. We landed in the snow, racing through
a field as I howled at the ridiculousness of my summon. “She's not a business investment!”

“Oh, like you're one to talk,” Hitoshi snarled back, leaping clear over a dividing fence. “You name things nonsensically-”

“No, I don’t-”

‘Noko’ and ‘Nekki’ aren't true shortenings of names, cub; Kami, do you even pay attention to Kanji-”

“FuFu!”

Hitoshi’s ear twitched back towards me. “What?”

I grinned into his fur, pleased at the compromise of a truly abysmal name. Jeez, poor baby.

“You wanna call her ‘Fuji’? Then I’ll shorten it to ‘FuFu’!”

Hitoshi’s shoulders spasmed with a snarl, even as the neighbourhoods drew closer.

“You are not naming my daughter ‘giggle’-”

“You can't talk!” I exploded, poking his pelt accusingly. “Most people give their kids a curfew or keep tabs when they're worried about them!... Not get them an escort!”

We raced inside the village via the entrance from the training grounds, Hitoshi’s chakra signature meaning that the ninja on duty only nodded us through.

Well. Until they turned to stare after us, my final words caught on the wind.

“And you didn’t even get me an escort! You just fucked a tiger!”
Shikamaru knew a lot of things.

He always understood what people said to him, even if he was too lazy to really pay attention. He got things he wasn’t meant to either.

He’d always been clever, quicker than Chouji (but his friend was nicer) or Ino (who was more outgoing). Shika was a sleeper though, like Ensu-nii. Kiharu-nee had laughed a lot as a kid, Sora-oba said.

She laughs a lot now, Shikamaru had replied.

Shika had a long memory too. He remembers sleeping on his Nee-chan’s back and how her warmth would rumble with purrs. He knows the feeling of riding on his cousin’s shoulders more than his dad’s. He’d never been without Chouji or Ino, fuzzy dreams filled with blonde hair or cookie crumbs.

“-an, Shika-chan-” A gentle voice interrupted his doze, a warm hand on his cheek. It was hot compared to the coolness of the sky and he pressed closer without a thought. It was dark out; when Shika had slowly clambered up from his bedroom window, the sky had been pink with the sunset.

It took a long second for his eyes to adjust, his older sister’s face only just standing out from the blue-black sky.

“I was wondering where you’d decided to nap this time,” He couldn’t see her smile but he could hear it. “Stargazing, hmm?”

“There...were clouds...” He mumbled, slowly sitting up on small hands and leaning into her warm side.
Kiharu sighed, not sad but thoughtful. “I love the stars.” A vague impression of her arm rose to, Shika thought, point at the silver-speckled sky. He followed her direction automatically...she was always teaching him something, in some way. Ino didn’t notice most of the time and Chouji was often too busy enjoying the present to get what his sister was trying to say. But, Shikamaru was smart, everyone said so, and he knew a bigger picture when he heard one.

It was a game of theirs, to see if he understood before the ‘lesson’ was over.

“Have you learned what stars are, yet?”

Shikamaru turned his head up and tried to make out his sister’s eyes in the dark night. “Light, right?”

Warm fingers cupped the back of his head and Kiharu-nee rested her chin on his temple. “Old light…they’ve been there forever and will be forever.” Her fingers started gently petting his hair and Shika’s eyes slowly half-closed, his earlier drowsiness seeping back. But… he tried to stay awake. For his sister’s lesson.

“No matter what changes, Shika, when you’re in your own home and I’m an old crone-,” he could help but smile at the thought. Kiharu-nee as an old lady was...weird. He couldn’t imagine her without her dark hair, brown like a Nara’s so he could pretend she really was his sister, or with loads of wrinkles like the stuffy Elders. “…These stars will be here. They don’t just come out a night. They shine in the day too but it’s so bright we can’t see them.”

His sister raised her head and Shika peered into the blackness, knowing Kiharu-nee was looking back. “They’re always watching over you, Shika. And, oftentimes, it’s only when things are at their darkest that we can see their reminder.”

It was silent for a long moment.

(If the night was lighter or a Sharingan or Byakugan was watching, they would’ve seen Kiharu’s wet smile. Tinged with grief, loss and love, every single year of her lives showed on her face. The stars, in this new and strange land, had never changed.)

“Let’s go down, Yoshino-oba was looking for you.” It was only then that a large shadow moved and Shika realised Hitoshi had been crouched to the side the entire time. How his sister had made it up, then.
All the while, the stars twinkled above as a party celebrated the passage of time, glowing from warm, golden lanterns and companionship under the dark sky.

*-* this bit is dedicated to MaskedTrickster/ Morning-chan hehehe

note: for anyone wondering, tigers are usually pregnant for 93-112 days (just over 3 months).

Chapter End Notes

A/N- Yo! I know I said I was going to update really soon after the last chapter but...well, I'll come back to that.

First things first, thank you to everyone who reviewed! To my Discord chat, a huge part of this chapter was thanks to their brainstorming and enabling so, cheers babes. Now, onto the not so nice stuff.

I know authors always go on about getting reviews; some really want them to up their total so that they can get even more views, some of us just want feedback. And, I've noticed this and so have my fellow author buddies, but people aren't anymore. Some of you, even if you still read every chapter, because you've already favourited or followed or bookmarked or pressed kudos, I have no way of knowing if you're still enjoying or even reading anymore. And some people might not comment on fics because they think ‘oh, they have tons of reviews already’ or ‘I've already commented loads/before’ but... it's really discouraging to 1, see ‘regulars’ disappear and 2, to see the review count going down. It makes you wonder where you've gone wrong, if the fic is on its final legs and you're the only who hasn't realised it.

This chapter was almost finished when the last one was updated. And its nerve-wracking, waiting for just one email to come through saying ‘this was cool, thanks’ or whatever. I know, when I review fics, I key smash and send crying emojis. It's not exactly dignified but I know that, when I get reviews like that, it makes me feel so much better. But, last chapter, I waited. And then I went to sleep, and I woke up the next morning.

To three reviews.

Have I gone wrong somewhere? Has my writing taken a nosedive in quality?
So...yeah. :

Now, a few chapters ago someone asked me why people shipped friends together and I never got round to replying. And, btw darling, you're right; I'm always more than happy to answer questions like this.

My answer is: because they can.

Some people don't want people in a sexual way, some people don't feel attracted to anyone at all and there are people who much prefer platonic relationships to any others. Now, when it comes to relationships, I think that friendship is essential for a good one. People talk about love like it's a rollercoaster, a firework in your belly that's all consuming and you want to faint in their arms and be swept off your feet-!

In my book, that's more like lust.

To me, being in love is one part choice, one part emotion. Healthy relationships are when (2+) people choose to grow together. That doesn't make them one person and it doesn't erase their individuality. It's...when you love them, not despite their faults, but because of them. Its when you always think to pick up their favourite (snack or whatever) at the shop or something makes you think of them or you want to be alone...but they're the exception. When you've had a bad day but theirs was even worse, so you sit and listen and comfort. All of this is applicable to platonic or family, but with the knowledge that you've chosen to be One for each other. Fuck, I'm getting sappy.

Now, in regards to Raidou x Genma, they never got together in the actual series and their friendship is just great how it is. However, as someone who does feel both a desire for romance and feels lust, I like to think of a couple's relationship is another step on their intimacy. To kiss and BE with another person (or persons, whatever floats your boat), is a wonderful thing. Just as wonderful as platonic life partners. Genma and Raidou could be platonic friends, happily so, for their entire lives. The same with Shisui and Kiharu or Yuri and Akane. However, as someone who likes the intimacy brought with being in a romantic relationship, I would like the same for them. And that's why I ship them. Because I just...want to! <3
Chapter Summary

Surprise, surprise; the world doesn't revolve around you.

It's a novel thought.

Not in a really vain way, of course! Just the idea that people, everywhere, are living their lives. Maybe we become so used to being the omnipotent reader (or narrator) that we forget that we don't know every piece of the puzzle, travelling between story arcs and POVs like...erm. A ghost? (I didn't think ahead and prepare an example...we're gonna move on)

The Alternative title for this chapter was "Snowballing: where things start off kinda cute but quickly get rather out of hand"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ever feel like you've just transcended reality (and sanity) and are experiencing life on a whole new wavelength?

Aside from the literal out of body experience that was death...me neither.

(Cue the theme tune of Alien or Jaws... )

Well.

Until I woke up, after only a few measly hours sleep, to the shrill ring of my alarm clock. It was on the floor, across the room. Why?

But the ceiling was still above me and the floor looked pretty sound from where I was, tucked in my duvet-cocoon.

Really, I could just live my life like last night had been a terrible amalgamation of exhaustion and an overactive imagination! Yeah!
A sense of reality secured, I threw back the covers and ignored how my body creaked like it was 20 years older. My snow-soaked coat was strewn by the door and so were my sandals but it was just coincidence. I was running late but it was fine!

My shower was so quick that my cold toes had scarcely warmed up and I just grabbed a muffin on my way out of the door. I could easily pick up something more substantial in the market later.

“Morning, Kiharu-chan!” Mikoto called, already behind the counter when I pushed the door open. The oven door was ajar as the Matriarch hefted trays of warm pudding and I hurried to get it for her.

“It's not often I get here before you,” She commented with a barely-there smile, stepping back from the heat and shedding the oven gloves.

“Oh,” I grimaced, turning away to grab my apron and pull it on. “Bad dream, slept in late.”

A warm hand settled on my shoulder and I paused. “It's unsettled you?”

( - “the cub is only a newborn and the mother completely feral, you cannot tell anyone about it yet. Not until my legacy can be protected, by itself or one of us.” )

“ Weird is all!” I tried for a smile, stepping towards the fridge-room and cracking the heavy door. “Just,” I glanced over my shoulder at her pale face. “Give me some time to wake up!”

Mikoto seemed hesitant to drop it but I was pretty blasé and set about getting ready with renewed vigour.

On the outside, I was doing fine. Inside?

“Oh! It must be baby season!”

Head snapping around, I almost poured the hot custard over my hand instead of the Kaki crumble. “What?! What makes you say that?!”
The two pregnant women, I recognised one from the grocery stall two streets over and the other from the richer part of town, blinked at me from the other side of the counter. Mikoto, gathering their change from the till, blinked too.

“Uchiha-san was telling us about the pregnancy of Akimichi-sama.” The strawberry blonde smiled hesitantly as I mentally face-palmed.

“Yes, of course, sorry...congratulations!”

Although still perturbed by my little crazy outburst, the two women smiled in thanks, accepting their puddings with grace and moving to sit at one of the three tables Mikoto and I had managed to squeeze in by the window.

Ignoring the curious eyes I could feel on me, I hurried over to refill the kettle.

Fuck my life, that was embarrassing!

Sensitive mum-senses tingling, Mikoto gave me an out.

“Kiharu-chan, could you please prepare five slices of matcha cheesecake to-go for the Officers waiting outside?” she gestured to the group of young men huddled on the curb, hands stuff in pockets and shoulders hunched against the cold.

“Breaking patrol for a snack?” I grinned, grasping the chance with both hands. Moving to pop open a handful of cardboard takeaway boxes, I slid open the cold fridge and cut the generous slices.

Mikoto started measuring out the tea for the next order, reaching around me for a cup as I grabbed some napkins in front of her. “Ensui-kun always has a snack at work, both from the menu and off, so are you really surprised? Not to mention I work here, there was bound to be some curiosity, Kiharu-chan.”

I started to carefully pop the vibrantly green desserts into their containers and smirked. “Heh, it’s a wonder they don’t order doughnuts, then.”

“Hmm?”
I folded the flaps down and secured the tops with a *Nekki*’s logo sticker (a good thing about Kaiyahime’s pregnancy was that she was both on bed-rest and ever restless, so she’d been taking care of my napkins and logo stamping for over a month now). “Oh, nothing.” Private joke~

Moving around the corner of the counter to deliver the cheesecakes, I glanced over at my seasonal display and grinned when my eyes confirmed all the snowflake and snowman-shaped cookies had sold out. *You owe me dinner, Ensui.*

Then again, he *had* made the cutters despite those protests. Mah, I’d foot the bill (on Ichiraku’s tab, Heh).

Never let it be said I was a shining beacon of goodness.

“Officers,” I dimpled, ducking outside into the cold and shivering when the wind battered straight through my uniform. The Officers were chatting quietly amongst themselves but stopped as I approached, turning to accept the offered boxes with low thanks or nods.

One of them, with the standard dark Uchiha colouring and porcelain skin, shot me a gentle smile in thanks and I mentally stuttered. *He looks...familiar.*

“I’m sorry, Officer-san,” I couldn’t resist, “but have we met before?”

That soft smile widened and the grin that replaced it was unfairly charming. “I don’t think so, Dazai-chan, but now we have. Uchiha Kagen, Detective-Sergeant.”

My professional smile was genuine by now. “A pleasure, please enjoy your cheesecake.”

His dipped his chin in a shallow bow and the Officers slowly started making their way down the street and I scampered back into the warm stall. Absently, I wondered if those nice men were rude to Ensui at work.

Part of me was tempted to argue no but I liked to think I wasn’t that naive.

Being friendly and charming to civilians and little girls was a completely different kettle of fish to
both a work environment with a controversial colleague or being a decent person. And the Uchiha were filled with backstabbers, especially in recent years.

I mean, they wanted to throw a coup. Sure the village wasn't the most friendly at times but...there were plenty of good things and good people too. Everything deserved a chance at retribution. Surely a village, built from hope and the chance for peace, could change for the better.

It was one of the reasons I'd decided to take action, besides the wracking guilt. And… I thought it was working rather well.

Mikoto had told me that Akane-sama had secured influence in the civilian sector, and I knew that was largely due to my grandmother's support - she'd been a seamstress since the Founding -, and that most people were much more open. I maintained the idea that it was all thanks to Mikoto's serene warmth at the shop. The merchants, for the most part, had never been more open to business with the Dojutsu-using Clan and it was only looking up. Shisui's friendship with Ensui and myself had only aided that and, as bad as it was, Sarutobi's decision to deny Itachi's promotion may have helped too. It showed a fairness, I mused, that they weren't spoiled as many may have thought.

I was hopeful.

The day went slowly, pocketed with incidences where I either slunk into thoughtful mong-outs or spazzed out at the mention of ‘babies’.

When we locked up, the sky a deep slate grey and snow finally having settled, Mikoto placed her hands on my shoulders as I went to leave.

“Kiharu-chan,” dark eyes peered down at me, concern in their depths, and I felt a hot stab of guilt. Here, my business partner and friend was concerned for me and I was just having a teeny tiny existential crisis! “You know you can always talk to me if you need to.”

I blinked a few times - stray snowflakes, or something - and shrugged in her hold. “I know Mikoto-hime...just an off day.” I excused, biting back a half laugh and shaking my head ruefully.

*Hitoshi decided to impregnate one of those ginormous tigers from TG 44 because I keep getting into scrapes?*!
Delicate, deceptively so, fingers gently brushed my bangs behind my ears; “If you’re sure, Kiharu-chan,” and Mikoto finally stepped back, something scarily maternal in her gaze.

Nodding quickly, I turned and ran home.

It was scarcely 4 pm, the shops closing earlier because of the bad weather and decreased hours of daylight, but I was restless. Whipping out Kaa-san’s recipe book, I forced myself to pay attention to the difficult kanji and try my hand at something new, even though I was exhausted from baking all day already.

I was elbow deep in a batch of homemade udon noodles when the door latched open.

“I’m home!”

Had that gentle baritone ever been more welcome? Probably, but reality had decided to nope out, leaving me akin to Alice in LSD Wonderland, and then dad comes home?

Thank fucking god.

Arms covered in flour, I quickly whipped a towel over the kneaded dough and poked my head around the door, just in time to see him toeing off his sandals.

“Wellcome home!” I tried not to sound as frazzled as I felt.

Nose red over the edge of his scarf, Dazai Seiichi turned to grin at me, eyes crinkling charmingly at the corners.

I burst into tears.

Chocolate eyes popped wide and dad’s thick scarf fell from limp fingers onto the snow-wet floor.

“Hime?!” Two quick steps and then strong arms were around me, pulling me up on his hip. I was really too big for this, and that made me cry even more. “What happened?! Who did it?!”
Who did it?

“Hitoshi had a baby!”

Dad's arms twitched and then he was striding around the corner into the sitting room. He sat us down on the sofa, pulling me into his lap and tucking my head under his jaw. He smelled of soap, no sweat, so he must've been at the mission's desk all day. His throat bobbed in a loud swallow. “Hitoshi as in our Hitoshi? Are you sure? Is that why you're crying, Hime?”

And I was crying like I hadn't in a long time because I wasn't scared or heartbroken. My chest hurt but my heart didn't and already the tears had slowed. “Sorry, Tou-san,” I mumbled into tanned skin, just above the collar of his navy shirt.

Dad just shushed me and squeezed tighter, one arm looped around my hunched back and the other reaching up to tangle in my hair, matted as it was from the snow and wind. We were silent for a long minute, rocking very gently in dad's favourite chair with the wind howling against the window.

“Now,” Tou-san softly crooned, lips against my temple. His stumble was scratchy but I didn't mind. “Why are you crying?”

“T-the baby…”

Dad hummed thoughtfully. “And what about the baby?”

“It's cold!” and, thus, the floodgates opened. “It was tiny, I couldn't even see it and the mum is huge - one of those big Tigers from that training ground - but there was only one baby and it's snowing so bad and Mikoto-hime kept asking me if I was alright and people kept mentioning babies-!”

“Whoa, whoa!” Dad pushed me back a bit, tucking a finger under my chin until he could meet my gaze. “First off...the baby will be fine, cubs are born all the time and it's strong! Okay?”

Long-lashed eyes held mine until I nodded.
“Secondly, what do you mean there was only one?”

“Cats have litters! Did they die?!”

When my voice shot up another octave, dad visibly panicked, eyes scanning my face and hands rubbing up and down my arms.

“He's a Summon, okay? The chakra build up is different for them, especially if the cub is only half; it may have affected how many!”

Slowly calming, I did manage a watery smile at how dad was skirting around outright commenting on conception. God, I'd had a period for a good while now, dad.

The sardonic thoughts did their trick, however, and I reached up with clumsy fingers to rub my tears away. Well, the few that hadn't been absorbed into dad's top (alongside a bit of drool, sorry).

Blue eyes slowly cracked open again and dad smiled hopefully, no doubt praying that the storm had passed.

I felt bad now.

But...sometimes you just had to cry. Whether it had been a stressfully long day, something was playing on your mind or it had just been a while. Tears actually helped settle your mood...and, fuck, if I hadn't been due for that.

“Did you know he'd done it?” I asked, rubbing at the wet crumples I'd left on his collar. My father sighed heavily, lips pressed so hard together I could see his dimples through his 5 o'clock shadow. Then, finally-

“No. No, I didn't.” Dad dragged distracted fingers through my ratty ponytail, combing through the tangled curls with short nails. “But...I can't say I'm too surprised. He's very private, Hitoshi,” yeah, I sullenly agreed ... I noticed. “And, as uncaring as he can seem, I never really thought he'd let everything end with him. Too stubborn, at the very least.”
“He called her ‘Fuji’,” I pouted.

Dad *snorted*, chuckling ruefully with a tiny grin. “Kami, he *is* consistent.”

I couldn't help but smile then, lips pulling wider when calloused fingers fondly stroked my dimple (same as dad's). “I told him I'd call her ‘FuFu’.”

And that *really* set dad off, head thrown back and chest shuddering under me from where I was still huddled in his lap. “Giggle!” he snickered, eyes screwed shut and grin splitting his face. “Kiharu, you are a gem! Giggle!”

Laughing myself, I hopped out of the chair and danced away from dad's searching arms, feeling so much lighter. The udon needed rolling though, so I puttered back towards the kitchen.

“Well, it *could* also mean ‘plan’,” I shrugged in the doorway. “But he was so mean, I didn’t feel the need to tell him!”

Thick socks sliding on the wooden floors, I quickly washed my hands and face in the sink, glad that crying never really made me puff up. It had been the same *before*, my eyes only going red when I was exhausted, thank god.

The sound of helpless chuckles drew closer as dad slumped in the doorway, still grinning in amusement. Lightly dusting flour over the udon dough, I started kneading the mixture as the Chuunin sat down on the stool opposite me.

“Udon?” Dark eyes sparkled happily as a started rolling the mildly elastic dough. “What's the occasion, you know it's my favourite!”

I handed the knife to dad with a grin. “You can cut the noodles, then!”

Dad pouted, slumping forward pathetically, but I was way too used to his ploys and didn't even bat an eyelash. “The longer you put it off, the longer til you can eat them!”

The knife disappeared from my hand in a flash. Smug, I started in on the vegetables as dad expertly
started scoring the dough into long strips for poaching.

Cutting up the spring vegetables, I sneezed once, twice, and opened my eyes to see *kawaii* plastered across my father's face.

Oh, for gods-

“Noodles done?” I smiled blandly, blinking when dad immediately gestured towards the neat, regimented lines. It was the matter of a few seconds to carefully lift them and drop them in the simmering water, setting the egg timer to 10 minutes (it would take slightly longer than that but there was nothing worse than soggy noodles so I wanted to keep an eye on them).

“Are we having prawns, too?”

“We are if you prep them!” I jerked my chin towards the wrapped seafood beside the sink, picked up from the butcher on my lunch break.

With a mournful sigh, Dad slunk from his stool, cracked his back and set about deveining them. I mean, I *could've* had the Butcher do that but... well, dad wasn't the best cook. He had to help out in the kitchen *somehow*, I wasn't a house-woman after all.

With a dash of oil in the pan, I started cooking the chopped veg, adding the grey prawns as soon as dad had finished and letting them slowly turn pink. Then, it was a dash of soy and mirin and then a few cups of dashi. Fragrant curls of steam coiled through the air, making dad's mouth visibly water and my lips to curl in a satisfied smile. I checked the udon, the pale chords rolling through the simmering water; they were ready.

Taking a mesh serving spoon, I carefully lifted the noodles from the boiling water and immediately blanched them in a bowl of iced. Dad took the pot away for washing, a contented smile curling his mouth as I hummed, nose still running a bit but decidedly more settled.

Once the udon was rid of any extra starch, I split the portions between the ramen bowls dad had reached down from the cupboard, before syphoning the shrimp and broth over the top. A final sprinkle of fresh spring onions and-

“Itadakimasu!”
“Will you tell me about...when you met Hitoshi?” my quiet voice broke the silence, previously disrupted only by the clatter of chopsticks and slurp of broth (dad was a very intent eater).

Brown eyes met mine over a pink prawn, the meat held halfway between the bowl and dad’s open mouth. His jaw half-closed, opened again before he set his utensils down with a grunt. Trailing my eyes over his pinched brows and the thoughtful twist to his lips, I decided to just sit back and wait.

I’d finished my own bowl by the time dad spoke up again, twirling chopsticks through the half-cooled broth at the bottom of his dish. “Keida, you remember her?”

I bit the inside of my cheek. “She was the last one, right? You said she gave you an opening to get out?”

Dad sucked in a deep breath, chest expanding visibly under his dark shirt, before slowly exhaling. “She was Hitoshi’s grandmother, a white leopard. We were...on a hunt. In the war. And...well, it was an ambush. Hitoshi was only a cub, still in training. I’d been there when he was born—,” so, that was why Hitoshi insisted I come last night, “- but we’d only interacted a few times. But he was going to be mine, my partner in the Pride, so we had a very loose chakra bond. Like those between ninjen, like Hana-chan?” When I nodded solemnly, he continued. “Well, I was hurt, quite badly—,”

I knew, from the hesitant self-censoring to the skittish look in his eyes, what he really meant. He’d been dying and Hitoshi had felt it.

I swallowed hard, slightly regretting those last few mouthfuls.

“He summoned himself, was very smug about it too. But the battle had turned and, suddenly, there was a great explosion. On Keida’s back with Hitoshi, it was just the three of us left. Hitoshi’s sire, his dad, had been a white tiger from another territory called Kuiaratameru. That’s why, I think, he thought it would work with the new cub. Because he already had Tiger blood.”

I leaned to place both elbows on the edge of the table, cushioning my face between my palms. Fuck, but my brain was whirring. I hadn’t been good with science, except physics, or maths: humanities and the arts had always been much easier but...

“H-How does that work? How can Hitoshi be half tiger if he’s a full panther? And how are you so calm about this?”
I'm not ashamed to admit the idea of Hitoshi doing the nasty literally broke my brain.

Seiichi blinked once, twice. “He’s a Summon? Blood always wins out and Hitoshi, despite being fathered by a tiger, had a leopard for a mother and his mother’s parents. The Big Cat Contract has always crossbred, they were pretty big but never enough for just one Cat per Contract so there was always some mingling!”

Spluttering, I could do nothing but gawk as dad casually stood up, taking our dishes and heading towards the sink.

Wha-but?—

*For fuck’s sake, Kishi!!!*

It was a while before Hitoshi came home again.

Dad said it was because he had to reestablish himself with the mother, so that she'd let both him and myself near the baby, and it was a delicate and slow thing to bond with the new cub.

A week. A *week*.

I was losing my shit, okay?

On Saturday morning, Christmas Eve, funnily enough, the door latched open despite the fact that dad was right in front of me, helping me sort out the washing.

Dad's pillowcase was thrown casually back into the wet basket and I was steaming out of the washing room, arms pumping and on a mission. Behind me, dad scrambled to follow.

“You!” I beamed, throwing my arms around the panther’s head as soon as it came round the kitchen corner. Hitoshi, for his part, looked *terrible*. Exhausted and wrangled and very, very dirty. I
smooshed my fist against his forehead in a headlock, uncaring for the vicious growl ripped from his chest or the muck smearing me. “It's the New Dad himself!”

My grin was not more of a bearing of teeth than a smile, excuse you.

Dad folded his arms, shoulder propped against the wall and face split in a knowing grin. I winked back.

Slim fingers pinched his velvety ears and emerald shot me a poisonous glare out of the corner if his eye. “Where's the baby, hmm?”

“She's not here - get off , you insolent lit-!”

Large hands gripped me under my arms and heaved me away, backing up the stairs before depositing me half way up.

Straightening, Dad decided to play the Mature Parent card.

“All right guys, that's enough. Kiharu! Be nice!” He pointed at me, face mockingly stern but eyes dancing with merriment. “And Hitoshi,” he turned to his partner, who was looking both rumpled and petulant. Focus off of me, I stuck out my tongue and Hitoshi’s tail twitched in warning. “Don't spring stuff like this on us, it's rude and Ki didn't understand how the Pride worke- works.”

The older man took a weary step down, hands aloft like he expected a fight to break out as soon as he was in the clear.

Once the panther had a direct route should he choose to maul me, I smiled as sweetly as possible (throwback to the days of wooing the Canon characters and Uchiha, Huh?) and ran to my room.

I wouldn't be so obvious when the time for revenge came.

Which just so happened to be a week later.
The days had slipped passed and, still, no-one outside of the three of us was aware that Hitoshi had done the dirty and there was a panther-tiger hybrid stumbling through the Forest of Death. Tinther? Piger? Oh hell, I was just gonna call her a cryptid and be done with it!

Honestly, what even was this insanity? I know this is, technically, anime-verse and, therefore, fucking ridiculous but...I'll admit that I'd become accustomed to it all. Sweat-drops and facefaults and eye smiles and all of that were kinda old hat by now.

Hitoshi procreating with a mutated Tiger, one that was so much bigger than him? Not to mention bloody feral…!

I'd watched National Geographic enough to get that tigers weren't like praying mantises or spiders, with tiny males and huge females. So, I figured I was justifiably bemused as to how that would even, like, work?

Actually, you know what? I really could have lived without that mental tangent. (Brain bleach, brain bleach!!)

So, anyway, I dropped in to see Kaiya-hime at the end of the week.

It was for an amalgamation of reasons. I hadn't seen her in a while, she was sick from the pregnancy, I missed my little Chouji-panda. Although, it was more like she came to save me.

Also...ever had one of those really, really embarrassing moments? Like...you'd never live it down?

Now, even if I'd lost my adult brain to the onslaught of my Childhood 2.0, I'd known what was happening. Remembering how to hold it in until you could get to the toilet had saved me from those toddler and kiddie wetting-yourself moments we'd all had. Same with feeling sick; I knew how to coach myself through nausea. And I'd never smeared food all over my face, except when hand-eye coordination was particularly difficult that day or my folks had been the ones doing the feeding.

So, I'd basically managed to avoid getting nerfed in public for a long time. Figures that my luck would one day run dry.

My period (oh-ho, can you see where this is going?) had been pretty good in this life. No crippling pain, as of yet, or really bad flow. I wasn't sick and I could walk fine and, honestly, I'd put it down to
luck of the draw.

Oh, woe is me.

Naivety, whilst nice, is a Bitch when you realise what reality really has in store for you.

It was a Friday, five days since Hitoshi came back and almost three weeks living with our new ‘Dazai Family Secret’. My period had started that morning when I’d peeled back my covers and found an ‘innocent’ little red spot in the middle of my pristine mattress cover. RIP another spotless sheet. And the stupid thing wasn’t even due for another half-week, damn.

As he always did, Hitoshi complained about the bloodshed. I, naturally, punted him out the room with orders to find his own breakfast if he thought I was defrosting him a haunch after that.

Periods sucked but they were nothing new, so I’d stripped my bed, showered and wore a pad. Pop a few pain relief tabs and I was good to go.

Well...up until, halfway through the lunchtime rush, Mikoto-hime ducted to whisper in my ear.

“Kiharu-chan, you need to go to the bathroom; I'll cover you here.”

Bemused, I'd glanced down only to see a dark patch on my yukata, where the loose fabric had been caught tight between my legs.

Mortification - you never got over this shit, only got better at dealing with it - crashed over my head like a bucket of hot water, my cheeks blushing a splotchy red.

“Hey, Kiharu-chan!” Shisui - oh god, not again! - leaned over the counter, crutches propped up next to him. “You okay?”

Face like the bloody sun (or, maybe, that red splodge on Mars), my mouth flapped uselessly for a long second.
And then Mikoto, an angel of angels, stepped in front of me, hiding me away with her much taller frame. Pale hands grasped mine. “Do you have your things with you? I can fetch you some fresh clothes if you want…”

“I-I-er-”

“Here, allow me.” A husky voice interrupted, stepping around the counter and coming in on my other side.

“Kaiya-hime!”

Kaiya was another godsend. Her closely-cropped pixie cut glinted black under the lights, her orange eyeshadow a pop of colour against her dark skin. She merely smiled, the sharp slash of her mouth quirking upwards as she pulled my coat off the back hook and gestured for me to slip it on.

“It's alright, Mikoto-sama.” Her dark eyes met the Uchiha’s. Behind them, I could see Shisui craning to know what's going on. Nosy! (But sweet) “I'll take it from here.”

Mikoto relaxed, bushing off her apron and turning back to me with quelling eyes. “Take the rest of the day off, Kiharu-chan.”

I opened my mouth to argue but, well, I was miserable and felt grim. “Alright.”

Kaiya tilted her jaw, pleased and in charge, as my partner moved back to the counter and distracted Shisui. The expecting mother, for her part, looked fit to pop. I always forgot how big babies could get just before they were due. And due Chouji’s new sibling was indeed, estimated to arrive within the next three weeks. And, speaking of…

“Kaiya-hime,” I started, following her out of the stall and jerking my hand in a half-aborted wave when Shisui called ‘bye’. (Urgh! I can’t believe-!) “Aren't you on bedrest until the baby arrives?”

As if to undermine the healer’s orders, the older woman's biceps bulged against her coat, hands innocently resting on top of her bump. “I rested this morning.”
Well. I wasn't going to argue there.

The walk back to my place was quiet and as rushed as possible, considering I was shuffling a bit like a penguin and Kaiya basically had a beach-ball for a stomach. When we made it up the porch, I flung open the door, shucking off my shoes and barely remembering to call “Help yourself to the kitchen!” as I thundered up the stairs.

Once upon a time, Kaiya’s mere presence made me sweat. Now, whilst keenly aware of her power, I could hear her throaty chuckle as I threw myself into the bathroom.

The water was hot, almost on the wrong side of scolding, with curls of steam and my shoulders flushing pink under the beating showerhead.

As quick as I was - as quick as someone cursed/blessed with chaotic hair could be - I still had plenty of time to think over what had just happened.

Before wanting to melt down the drain.

Ninja have such sensitive noses! Who knows who could’ve smelt the blood before Mikoto spotted it out of the corner of her eye? I certainly was unaware; which was sometimes the scariest, most paranoia-inducing thing about a period. Well, aside from the uncomfortable twinges up my thighs, like growing pains but worse, and a soreness to my lower tummy. God, what if Shisui had seen first! Bad enough that he’d caused that scene at my birthday but, for it to happen again…

“Well, Kami….” I whimpered, sliding down the tiled wall to crouch directly under the stream. Water thundered against my back, a thumping that soothed my sore bones. Not enough, though, to make it all better. Warm water dripped over my bare shoulders, my hair a slicked and heavy weight down my spine, through my scalp and over my cheekbones to drip off my nose and lips.

It wasn’t the end of the world. Really, all things considered, I probably should be breathing a sigh of relief for the bullet dodged. Let’s not even go into the countless possible incidences of me leaking in front of the counter or sitting down and leaving a mark-!

If Shisui - urgh! - had looked just a little lower a little quicker…

Well. I’d probably already be working out my new name, intent on being a herbalist in good ol’ Tea
country. Nothing like a change in identity to run from mortifying Never-Recover-From moments.

I choked on a blubbery, very wet laugh at the thought.

But I’d wasted enough time in the shower. Kaiya was downstairs, and she was one lady I’d hate to really keep waiting, and I was very keen for my next dose of pain meds.

I turned the water off, the bathroom more than warm enough without it as I hurriedly dried off and pulled on fresh clothes.

I dressed in Kaa-san's oversized green jumper again, the jasmine scent only just clinging to the soft wool after so many re-washes. My legs were swamped in some old trackies, thermal-lined because this was me. I finished off the look with a messy, wet bun (I'd regret that later) and fluffy socks.

Hold the phone on the Child Modelling Agency, guys.

Kaiya was comfortably absconded in the living room when I padded down the stairs, a mug of tea in hand and the TV on low.

I can't even remember the last time I watched that thing. The shows here really were bullshit.

“Thanks for helping me back there, Hime.” I tried for a smile, still a bit miserable.

“You should spend the night at our home, Kiharu-chan,” Kaiya replied.

I mentally wiggled a finger in my ear. Huh?

“Huh?”

The older woman smiled, slow and knowing as she absently pets her baby bump. I wondered if the baby was kicking again; they did that a lot.
“Well? Pack a bag and stay for dinner. I'm sure my husband and Chouji-kun would be thrilled to see you again.”

Which is how I found myself, duffle over my shoulder, at the Akimichi Compound.

The afternoon had turned on us, the sky thick with charcoal clouds that misted the streets with a light drizzle of rain. Against the backdrop of amber lanterns and budding-green trees, it only made the place look more welcoming.

Chouza opened the door for us when we arrived, an apron around his waist and his long auburn hair pulled back in a fluffy bun. At his ankle, Chouji beamed at the sight of us.

The upset clench of my stomach relaxed a bit.

“Ki’aru!” The little boy smiled, fidgeting happily whilst I shed my coat and boots before tucking his hand into mine. Smiling helplessly back at him, I remembered to dip into a quick bow when Chouza-Oji met my gaze, arm already resting on Kaiya’s back.

“Thank you for having me.” I mumbled.

Chouza’s gaze was, as always, achingly jovial. Kaiya started moving towards the kitchen and her husband naturally gravitated after her, raising his arm again to wave Chouji and me through before him.

“The boys are going to see Yoshino after lunch, so we’ll have the house to ourselves, Kiharu-chan,” Kaiya called, meeting her husband’s eyes across the room as Chouji pulled me towards where he’d been drawing. In a single second, they seemed to share an entire conversation. Chouza’s soft gaze flicked over to me and I flushed in remembered embarrassment.

Chouji shyly showed me a surprisingly good cat. Its fur was a scrawling mixture of black and brown - although judging by the snapped black pencil abandoned under his chair, that seemed to be ore from necessity than intentional design. Its eyes, in roughly the right place, were green and I wondered if I could twist this into another ‘New Dad’ joke. Oh, probably.

“Right,” The Akimichi Head agreed. “Chouji-chan, let’s go see Shikamaru-chan, eh?”
Head turning at his father’s call, Chouji visibly hesitated.

“Go on,” I encouraged softly, setting my chin against his soft little temple in a quick squeeze. He smelt like babies and ginger cookies, just like when he and Shika were babies snuffling on my shoulders. Somehow, the memory made me want to cry.

Chouji slowly slipped out from under my arm, smiling that same little grin before putting over to his daddy, who swung him up on a hip and bounced him a few times.

“Let’s get your coat, ay?”

When her son and husband were in the hallway, Kaiya put the kettle on to boil.

“You didn’t, er, have to empty the house for me, Hime.” I twisted my fingers, feeling rather off kilter after the day I’d had. “We could’ve just...stayed at mine?”

The boiling water whistled and Kaiya immediately set about pouring the tea, shuffling to reach sideways (manoeuvring around her stomach) under the sink for a hot water bottle and preparing that too.

“Grab the tea, Kiharu-chan. I’ll join you in the living room in a second.”

Sensing an explanation, I did as I was told, socked feet slipping a bit on the high-polished wood before they met the plush carpet in the front room.

Kaiya followed a moment later, carrying a fluffy rabbit plushie and a huge fleece blanket in her arms. Which she then proceeded to dump on the sofa between us.

“Here, for your stomach,” She offered the toy. It was pink, about the size of a loaf of bread, and rose pink. Hesitantly, I accepted it, inhaling in pleasant surprise when my cool skin registered the heat radiating from it’s soft ‘fur’. She’d put the hot water bottle inside it!

I unashamedly snuggled it, holding it against my stomach and smiling when the cramping muscles
relaxed a little bit. God, I had to get me one of these. Wrapping them in a towel just wasn’t the same.

The fleece was spread over us, Kaiya-hime stretching her sore ankles out on a footstool that I rather think she’d bought intended for times like this, and the tea was poured.

“I rather think, Kiharu-chan,” Kaiya eventually spoke up, “that you and I deserve to put our feet up.” Even with her extremely pregnant figure, bundled under a blanket with tea as the clouds finally broke and rain fell outside, she still looked incredibly regal. Absently, I wondered if I’d ever look so composed 24/7.

As if to illustrate her point, and further contrast the matriarch against her surroundings, she picked up the remote and put a film on.

I didn’t much care for the TV around here, too trashy and cliche-

“Er, Hime?” I asked, eyes wide with surprise as the title flashed across the screen. Kaiya hummed. “Isn’t think film...a little old for me?”

(It was hardly Icha Icha but...maybe a bit of an adult romance? Like The Other Woman or Legally Blonde... not to say that (for the latter at least) I didn’t watch them when I’d been a little older than I was now. Still...I didn’t expect Kaiya, of all the parents, to be the least ‘responsible’(?).

“Oh, I hardly think so,” The woman in question sipped her tea, lips quirking in a little smile as she watched my face in her perceptual vision. “You’re almost a teenager and I’ve yet to see you fawn over silly things. I think it’s about time you had a little fun, Kiharu-chan.”

...It was a trashy movie, with a plot that put most Korean Dramas to shame. Kaiya and I watched all three in the franchise, tutting at the poor choices made and how the main girl really should’ve dated her best friend instead of the other guy. I got serious romantic vibes watching the two girls have a super close ‘best-friendship-forever’, *sigh*.

(If I mentally made a note of the name, for future perusal, well.)

February seemed to pass, after that horror story, relatively peacefully.
Well. This was *me* so it wasn't without incidences.

*This* time it was Ensui's idea, even though Shisui could be traced back as the kick-start.

It all began when Shisui got his crutches and bid *adieu* to the Wheelchair from Hell. Now, there wasn't much in the way of healthcare in Konoha (or the Elemental Nations at large) and he'd been referred to a private physiotherapy clinic regardless. However, because he was a ninja and had been injured in the line of duty, the village footed the bill for his meds and stuff. Including a certain chair. So, Shisui hadn't ever actually owned the thing.

There was a persistent knocking on my bedroom door that symbolised how quickly this day would spiral into hell. Swamped under three blankets, I had devolved into a half-melted puddle of warmth and was only capable of grunting like a pig.

The knocking only got louder.

“Kiharu!” Fuck, it was Ensui. I really regretted telling Shisui and him where the secret key was. *If he's plucked his eyebrows too much again and needs advice, I'll kill him.*

“Kiharu!”

The garbled shriek I made wasn't very human.

“Kiharu, your dad will *kill* me if he smells me in your room so just open up!”

Fuck that.

“I'll tell everyone about how much you swore at my 20-”

The duvet was thrown to the floor, extra blankets shed as I lunged towards the door. Colliding against the pale wood, which shuddered under the onslaught, I got a grip on the handle and ripped the door open.
“You wouldn’t!”

Hair pulled into a messy topknot with patchy stubble littering his jawline, smudged olive eyeshadow and perfectly curled lashes (*Bitch*), Ensui smirked wryly. “No, I wouldn’t,” he agreed, hazel eyes flickering over my thermal layers and dressing gown with clear judgment. (Yes, I slept in it under all those covers. And *yes*, our central heating worked fine. I was just...I had bad circulation!) “That would involve me confessing we didn’t just have an impromptu sleepover, as you told your dad, so...no. That’s called bluffing, Ki-chan.”

I smacked his arm again, just for good measure, before turning away with a haughty sniff. “Why are you even here, anyway? It’s a *Saturday*.”

The tired droop to Ensui’s eyes let me know just how much the sleepy Chuunin was aware. Annoyingly, my curiosity spiked.

“Shisui hated that damned wheelchair, right?”

Rolling my eyes, I gestured for him to get on with it.

“Apparently, he abused it so much it’s structurally unsound so... they’re scrapping it.”

Stare deadpan, I sighed. “Are you gonna get to the part which requires this rude awakening?”

Ensui took his time, lips pursed, before kissing his teeth, rude as anything. And I shut the door with a put-upon sigh.

Moving towards my wardrobe, I pulled out a pair of thermal charcoal-grey leggings and an oversized jumper, thick and plush.

“I was thinking we get it for Shisui!”

I stripped off my PJs, fumbling into the new clothes to escape the chill. Then, I sat on the edge of the
bed to pull on a pair of thigh-high socks, the sleep kind that Yuri-oba had knitted me, before snatching up my hair-tie and starting to braid.

“What for? Another birthday gift, two months late?”

I could clearly hear the older boy snort as I fastened the end of my plait and tossed it over my shoulder.

“Hardly. Shisui is probably gonna trash it but it might cheer him up.”

I opened the door with a sympathetic smile, leading the 20-year-old back downstairs (and glaring towards the secret compartment in the doorframe until he returned the key). “I didn't doubt you'd noticed too.”

Turned to grab an apple and lemon muffin, I missed the guilty grimace that flashed over the Nara's face. “What? That he's been stuck off-duty for so long, he decided to make everyone else miserable with ‘music’, not to mention the moods?”

We pulled on our shoes and coats - Ensui may have been a technical intruder but, at least, he was a polite one - and I grabbed my knitted accessories before following my friend out onto the porch and locking up.

“I’ll have you know, the music tuning, er, thing I got him for his birthday has helped!”

“Well done,” Ensui pretended to clap, starting down the steps. “He’s gone from nails on a chalkboard to a dying cat.”

The snow, none freshly fallen since yesterday morning, had crystallized into crisp drifts and dangerous sheets on the pavement. Don’t even ask me why it was snowing in Feb but, it seemed, Mother Nature had it out for me. Maybe she sensed my Olde Soul? Pffft.

Pulling on my mittens, scarf bundled around my neck and earmuffs in place, I hooked my elbow through Ensui's. He was over half a foot taller than me (I could forgive him, he did have a 7 and a half year headstart) so an excellent counterweight for when I inevitably slipped.
And I did.

Many times.

*There was a reason I never went skating, in both lives, and that was my inevitable reenactment of Bambi on Ice!!*

By the time we reached the end of my street, an impatient Ensui scarcely waited for permission (“Kami, yes!”) before picking me up piggy-back style and taking to the roofs. After that, we reached the clinic in 10 minutes and I shuddered to think how long it would’ve taken on foot.

The wheelchair was abandoned by the bins outside, recognisable by the (very poor) pictures Shisui had scratched into the metal. You could see they’d tried to fix it, some neat solder lines on the wheels that hadn’t been there before, but they probably hadn’t wanted to risk it breaking again due to a patch-job.

Stood in the snow for a long second, Ensui with his hands in his pocket and with me looking like a burrito, we must’ve been quite the sight.

“Are we just gonna...carry it?”

I eyed the icy roads. “Not gonna lie, Ensui… I'm gonna need to hitch a lift too.”

I'd said this before but… some people were so smart they looped right back around to silliness again. I'd always kinda applied this to Shisui but, sat in an abandoned wheelchair *which was strapped to Ensui’s back as he ran across the rooftops* … I could think of several other applicable parties.

Honestly, mentally cussing up a shitstorm whilst holding on for dear life was a bit consuming so I didn't really have the time to consider revenge until we were dropping down (that's fucking right, I was falling bloody backwards!) to land in Shisui's backyard.

“Is the Wicked Witch gone?” I croaked, staggering from the chair and resting my hands on my knees. Just because I'd loved theme parks *before*, didn't mean I was prepared for- for that!
“It's almost 10, so probably? She’s rarely in during the day, so we should be good.”

I was just about to ask if he was gonna ring the doorbell when the Chuunin in question scooped up a handful of snow, squeezed it into a tight orb, and lobbed it at the window I knew was one of Shisui’s.

The glass shuddered under the too-hard blow and Ensui immediately started moulding another. “Er,” I began, eyeing the thin windowpane, “Ensui-”

The window opened just before the next snowball could connect as a pale hand lashed out to catch it. Curly hair peeked through the gap.

“Ohayo, Shisui-kun!”

A pale face lit up. “Kiharu? Morning!”

The hand flashed and then Ensui ducked to the side as his missile was ‘returned’.

I was not so lucky.

The snowball connected with my forehead, exploding quite painfully in my face and sent me sprawling back into the snow.

Ensui let out a choked snicker but Shisui was another matter entirely, yelping before the distinctive shiver of a Shunshin thrummed.

I raised a mitten to wipe off the mess of ice and snow from my face, forehead a bit numb before there was a crunch of feet on snow nearby and then Shisui had plonked himself down beside me.

“Sorry, Ki-chan!” Fingers, bare but so warm, started brushing the ice away and I cautiously blinked, not really wanting to get anything in my eyes. A little to the side, the mortified face of our best friend, pyjamas getting wet in the snow and crutches at his side, grimacing down at me. Behind him, Ensui was bracing himself with hands on knees as he continued to snicker. I hoped he choked.
I started giggling.

“It's okay, Shisui-kun...it's Ensui’s fault for ducking!”

Perhaps sensing two scowls burning into the side of his head, Ensui straightened up and immediately started in on a subject change. Absently, I wondered if he'd picked that up at work too. Then again, with Yoshino as a godmother...

“We didn’t just come here to laugh at Kiharu,” (“Just ?”) “-but bring you a gift, Shisui.”

With an expansive wave of his hand, the Nara brought our focus back to the real Star of the Show.

“Is that…” Shisui gawked, staggering as I helped him up back up and handed him his crutches. “The Wheelchair of Doom?!”

That was definitely a smirk twisting Ensui’s lips now. “Yep.”

The evil grin on Shisui’s face...well, it was automatic by now for my smile to match his.

Things escalated rather quickly.

One oversized, over-enthusiastic Fire Ball Jutsu later and the wheelchair was set ablaze. Ensui had popped inside for drinks, because that's what we were about now apparently, and Shisui had gone to get changed.

Which left me to tend to the ‘bonfire’.

You know, I rather liked fires. There was something mesmerising about the flicking of an open flame, a colour that licked at the air without true solidity. The shifting colours, glimmers of electric blue and rolling auburn...well, I could watch it for hours.
It was then that I noticed that our little fire wasn’t doing too well.

It was, literally, a wheelchair on fire. Nothing between the ‘tinder’ and the snow-packed ground, nothing else to burn. Also, most of the chair was metal or highly durable plastic. Really, it was just the cushion and armrests on fire.

“Hey, Ensui,” I called, eyes still fixed on the less-than-spectacular spectacle.

“Yeah?” His voice echoed from the open door.

“Can we get some firewood on here?”

At the time, it had seemed like a great idea. Get some wood and proper tinder, get a real blaze going!

Tell you, Shisui had been thrilled. Apparently, all Uchiha were pyrophiles and he seemed genuinely ecstatic that the open flames only fascinated me. I’d be the first to admit, I wasn't the safest around fires. They were just so pretty, okay?

Ensui, with an air of amused tolerance, passed around mugs of hot coffee and I was quick to start warming my fingers. The fire may have helped, as was squishing myself under the two boy’s arms like a penguin-huddle, but I was still cold.

Said boys were chatting quietly above me, Shisui’s chin brushing my forehead as he turned to ask about his Clansmen at the Station. He’d grown in the chair, amusingly enough, and I’m not ashamed to admit I’d moped for days. Sometimes, I just felt like slapping my legs, as if the growing-whatever-tissue was in hibernation and just needed reminding to do its fucking job.

I refuse to never see the other side of 5 foot in this life. I was 5’9” before, this wasn't funny!!

“Hey, Shisui,” I cut in during a lull in the conversation, “remember when you were my age and I was still two inches taller than you?” As if to illustrate my point, I twisted to glare at him, my nose at his chin. Shisui looked dumbfounded and Ensui wheezed. “Good times.”

His mouth flapped uselessly for a moment or two - Shisui could be rather slow on the comebacks
sometimes - but I was already turning away, reassuring a snickering Ensui that he was much, much older and, therefore, forgiven.

It took ten more minutes for us to realise several things.

1) The metal chair wasn't burning any time soon.

2) And the tinder? Wow, now that was a big bonfire.

Everything went downhill very quickly when Shisui abruptly snapped around to gaze to our left.

“Fugaku-sama-!”

Ensui bolted like a spooked hare, eyes darting around furiously like his boss was going to jump out and scream ‘boo!’

“He's coming this way, the fire must've caught his attention!”

Oh, nevermind. He was.

“Quick!” I blustered, twisting out of Shisui’s grip (unsteady, he awkwardly settled his right side back on his crutches - sorry!) and scooping to fling handfuls of snow on the fire. The wood dampened and sizzled, smoking and wet, but it wasn't going out anytime soon.

“Ensui! Water Jutsu?!”

Hands defensively pressed against his chest, Ensui was not a shining example of composure. “I'm Earth Natured, don't look at me!” Behind me, Shisui started poking at the 'pyre' with one of his crutches. I mentally face-palmed.

“Fine!” I threw my hands up in the air. “We'll just do a runner-”
“I think *not*, Dazai-san.”

All movement stopped abruptly, Shisui subtly trying to put out the end of his crutch (it was metal and plastic, how the fuck did he manage-). In front of me, Ensui pinched his brow, expression constipated.

Slowly, as innocently as possible, I twisted to face the Uchiha Patriarch. Dressed in a dark Yukata with a black coat over the top, Fugaku didn't exactly paint a picture of tolerance and friendliness.

(Actually, he looked rather like that time Sasuke had sicked up on him-)

“Good morning, Uchiha-sama.” I tried to ignore the raging bonfire a little to my left. Behind his Uncle, Shisui had his lips pursed, eyes fixed on a drifting cloud high above us. *Denial, Shisui, wasn't just a river in Egypt.*

Fugaku quirked a brow, the movement scarcely detectable. “Good morning, Dazai-san. Is there a reason for this dangerous spectacle on Uchiha grounds?” Dark eyes trailed over the fire. I had little doubt he didn't miss, or even fail to recognise, the wheelchair smack-bang in the centre.

“Private joke?” I tried.

Shisui face-palmed.

After our little show of delinquency, even if it had been Shisui’s yard, Ensui had hung out with us slightly less.

On a quick lunch break, he'd reassured me that it was just because Fugaku had been keeping an even sharper eye on him, having pulled him aside. He'd said, apparently, that Ensui had been lucky that no-one besides him had witnessed our little bonfire; Ensui was on thin enough ice without adding ‘immature’ and ‘nuisance’ to the list.

God, I'd felt guilty after that. I mean, it had been Ensui's idea but we hadn't exactly started a forest
fire or anything. Maybe, if we'd done it in a training ground instead…

Well...they did always say that Hindsight was 20-20.

However, the Wheelchair of Fire had done its trick (‘closure’, or something) and Shisui had definitely been in better spirits. Add on that Itachi had finally received news that, come the next batch of graduates, he'd be assigned a Genin team and, well.

I liked to think that, whatever gods there were, one of them had taken pity on me and decided to redirect Fugaku's attention from boring holes into the back of Ensui's skull. And mine too.

On second thought? Never mind.

The snow gradually melted, to my everlasting relief, as the new year began in earnest and I wondered if Hinata had met Naruto yet or if that had changed. The trees were still bare, for the most part, but tiny green buds had begun to slowly emerge and I knew that winter was soon to be behind us.

It didn't sound busy and I was happy, like a slice of picturesque Studio Ghibli, but it was.

Nekki's was actually closed for today because I figured we deserved the day off.

And I was completely, 8000%, right! We worked that stall most days of the year. I've never had the chance to be anything but a student before, my time passing in strict accordance of term times and lessons. It left me feeling...slightly bereft. Maybe that's why I'd been such a productive kid. Because, come spring or autumn, I was expecting the tension of exams or a new academic year beginning. And it was a tough pill to swallow, acknowledging that life didn't run to the ring of a school bell.

But I couldn't continue on this strain forever. Ensui had been right after all, back when I was first toying with the idea of Kaki day. I was getting bored. That was the issue with doing things too quickly. If I'd stayed a child for longer, waited to enter an apprenticeship now, like most civilians, Nekki's would only just be starting out.

But I didn't regret it. Who knows where I would've been without my cakes. Certainly not friends with Minato, for however brief a time. And I perhaps wouldn't have met Mikoto that day, searching for green tea. Then, there was the ripple effect. Not Mikoto equals no Shisui. No Shisui?
Well, I didn't really want to think about it.

And there was really no point getting melancholic now! I mean, I was only getting started!

So, on one of my rare day's off without purpose, I was completely justified in feeling...listless.

Hana was at school, which was just starting up again. Itachi had joined a Genin team, at long last, from the recent batch of graduates. I'd not met them yet, Itachi and I... I wasn't sure we'd ever been that close again (there was only a certain about of time you could put in one-sided effort. It made me sad, and Shisui's lips would twist like he was disappointed, but I wasn't going to push for a friend who obviously didn't want me). Speaking of, Shisui was out with Akane-sama for another physiotherapy session and Ensui...Ensui was at work...*sigh*.

So, when all else fails me?

“'Toshi.”

“'Toshi.”

“'Toshi.”

“'To-”

“ What?!”

“When can I see the baby?”

His ear twitched, the tip of his long tail flicking.

“Not. Yet.”
I pursed my lips, leaning back on my hands. My fingers sunk into the thick rug beneath us, the left side of my face washed with warmth from the open fireplace. “Do you at least visit her?”

Pressed along the length of my outstretched legs, I felt the panther’s massive rib cage heave with a sigh “...Occasionally.”

“Why not more?”

“Allright,” Hitoshi snarled, twisting to shoot me a poisonous glare with a single green eye. “Listen. I have spent decades surrounded by nonsensical humans. Cats are not so complex. I procreated with purpose, cub, and the mother is extremely territorial at this time. The new cub is still small so I will not be able to approach. Nor shall you, for a good while yet. So. Stop. Asking.”

The fire crackled for a long few minutes and my summon settled down again with an affronted ‘hmpf’.

“….at least tell me if she's cute.”

Working with another Uchiha - besides Mikoto-hime, Fugaku-sama and Shisui - was...weird.

Detective Osamu-senpai wasn't necessarily a nice man, but he was a good one. He was strict (and stressed) and neat (except when he ran restless hands through his hair and ruined the neat little bun at the base of his neck) but he was fair. And fairness, Ensui had come to realise, was in short supply around here.

For example. Ryuu-san was unfair. He was unfairly well-connected, knowing every source in Konoha and on decent terms with every big shopkeeper. He was unfairly mean, always snipping and stoic in equal turns should Ensui so much as blink in his direction. He was unfair about work, completing his share with aggravating ease whilst bitching about how much longer it took the Nara, despite being fully aware of the hurdles his new coworker faced.

He was also, Ensui was bitter to admit, unfairly pretty.
Now, all Uchiha were pleasing to the eye. Fuck, most of the village was! Konoha was a village of lookers, that was a fact. Most people had a pretty something, eyes or smile or whatever. The Uchiha, on principle, had dark hair and even deeper eyes, contrasting with the general paleness of their skin.

So, yes, Ryuu was distracting. When the sunlight caught his silken hair, the strands gleaming blue, or his skin flushed with warmth.

But, then, he’d ruin it. Open that mouth and sarcastic taunts would slip out. Snarkiness, he could deal with. Heck, he’d been raised on the tongue-lashings of Yoshino, parried witticisms with Hitoshi and Kiharu, and played mind games with his uncle. Ensui knew the line between rudeness and a joke, between bullying and a game.

Ryuu was a bully and it set Ensui’s teeth on edge.

True, you couldn’t expect to get on with everyone you met. Hell, Ensui didn’t get on with most of his Clan, let alone his colleagues or the other villagers. (Too lively, too reckless, they said; as if Ensui wasn’t lazy enough for their sloth-like tastes. Just because many of them would prefer to slump over in the Compound and watch the world go by, didn’t mean Ensui had to. He was plenty lazy, he just knew there were a time and a place for it.)

Their little investigation, however, had put a whole new spin on even a Nara’s concept of ‘slow’.

And, by slow, Ensui meant ‘barely moved at all’.

Months - months! - He’d been working on putting together this case. The tampering was on-going, a small stack of copies of the corrupted files (that Ensui kept stashed away under his kitchen sink) having steadily grown since that first little report. He had evidence that it was real, that this was actually happening, but no way of finding out anything else.

The files tampered with? Ranging from attempted rapes to vandalism, from theft to swindling ‘merchants’ who sold expected deliveries but never made good on their word and made off with the money. There was...very little in the way of a trend. And the victims, especially those assaulted, never seemed to want to speak out.

Motive? Aside from steadily increasing the number of unsolved cases? There wasn’t any proof that they were connected, either tampered with to conceal a trend or that there was an individual this all
linked back to.

Suspects? Nothing.

Ryuu was helpful, annoyingly enough. But only when he wanted to be. He could get to the archives so much easier than Ensui himself, although he liked to play up that he was just so busy, another time perhaps? I’m on lunch break, Nara-san.

As if that ever stopped an Officer from working before. As if everyone didn’t stay late to finish work or keep chipping away at a case most evenings, or come in even earlier in the morning. This investigation was behind closed doors for a reason; they couldn’t be seen working on it so their ‘free time’ was, in actual fact, the only time!

There were 20 Officers, not including the higher-up Detectives and analysts. Konoha had crime, yes, but not enough to consistently interrupt Ryuü helping him with investigating the damned tamperings.

Kami, this was important. This was a scam, an interference with the law; People could be seriously wronged here and, when it inevitably became public, that was gonna be on the Uchiha!

Ensui wasn’t an idiot. He knew how his best friend’s Clan had been received in recent years. Ensui had already been a ninja when Kyuubi attacked, bustled into the caves with all the other Genin. He knew the rumours, the gossip that only an Uchiha could unleash the Demon like that.

He’d felt the stares, even after years of friendliness and warmth, that Mikoto-shishou had garnered. Even in that brief time when they’d worked on Kiharu’s case together.

In actual fact, Mikoto could hel-

Wait.

No, no, he couldn’t.

The temptation to go to her for advice, knowing she’d make coffee and listen attentively, was almost overwhelming. She’d helped him solve a robbery last month, sussing out that, whilst most ninja
knew better than leave footprints, some could easily pretend to be a civilian by doing so. He’d caught the Chuunin, a cranky son who’d wanted more money from his miser-like parents, the very next day.

But… Mikoto, whilst a shopkeeper and a ninja and his shishou, was also the Uchiha Matriarch. The Chief had said he could go to her, confide in her, about the tamperings but Ensui, seeing the bond between Itachi and Shisui, knew that Uchiha watched each other’s backs on a new level. He was still an outsider at the Station, even after proving his willingness to work and his ambition to succeed time and time again. Six months, half an entire year, and he wasn’t sure what else to do. *Something* had to give.

Maybe...maybe Mikoto-hime couldn’t help him this time. She’d been the one to suggest the whole thing but...what if this was the final step, the one that goes too far?

Ensui found himself at his Uncle’s door.

As Jounin Commander, Shikaku-sama was holed up in the Hokage Tower, just a single level below Sandai-me-sama’s office and one above the Jounin lounge. It was a quiet space between too very hectic floors, painted cream and terracotta with leafy plants in the corners. They’d been from Sora-sama, Ensui knew; She’d claimed the place needed livening up. Ensui didn’t miss how she’d only chosen varieties that even his Uncle would struggle to kill.

For a man who raised deer, lived in the middle of a bloody forest, Shikaku-sama had still managed to bypass ‘green-thumb’ and completely skip to ‘water-and-they-inexplicably-die’. Much to his Aunt’s ire.

The 20-year-old had scarcely knocked once before his Uncle’s drowsy voice was calling him inside.

Shikaku was slumped at his desk, reclined back so far his feet stretched out the other side of the table. Which was covered with files. Ensui internally winced.

“Ensui,” his Uncle grunted in greeting, eyes half-lidded and sparking with irritation. “If you’ve come to add to this mess-” his chin dipped towards the strewn files “-kindly desist.”

Ensui, pulling out a chair opposite and slumping down to mirror his Clan Head, decided that discretion was the better part of valour. Settling himself down for a *long* talk, olive-toned hands ran through his hair, tugging on the tie of his pony and letting the messy strands fall against the collar of his flak jacket. “Nope,” He popped his lips on the end, reaching for the coffee pot and helping
himself. “It’s an unrelated pile of shit.”

Shikaku watched him for a long second before chuckling - ruefully, Ensui might note - and nudging his own empty mug towards his nephew. Ensui wordlessly topped it up.

“Anything to get me away from this stuff,” he was probably going to regret that, the Sergeant noted, “Go on. What now?”

“Oba-san and my folks tell you about how things are going at the Station?”

Shikaku-sama raised a brow, cradling his coffee. “Yes, although I doubt I need to remind you that I don’t need those comments to keep track of you.”

Ensui dipped his head, the two sharing a smirk. “Of course.” And then, all humour was gone. “I’ve not been well received. The Uchiha are...more suspicious than anticipated.”

His uncle’s office was completely secured, under the same seals as the Hokage’s - thanks to the work of Yondaime-sama and Uzumaki Kushina-hime - but Ensui couldn’t help but glance around nervously.

The relaxed slope of Shikaku’s shoulders tensed, expression sharper than any weapon. “Have they suspected anything?”

“No, no,” Ensui bit out, sitting upright. “Mikoto-shishou has assured me that there have been no real remarks regarding my presence, both through the Uchiha Compound and in the Head’s household.”

Shikaku didn’t relax. “What, then?”

“There have been...tamperings.”

Dark eyes bore into his and Ensui, as he had as a kid, imagined he could see the lightning-quick thoughts flashing through his Uncle’s mind.
“So, someone is messing with the Uchiha. Still...is there any connection to Danzo?”

Before he’d even finished speaking, Ensui was shaking his head. “For the most part, they seem wholly unconnected. Files missing, witnesses unwilling to talk about the pettiest of crimes, lab reports misplaced. It’s all very haphazard.”

“Are you not investigating this? Fugaku must surely be aware...”

“I’ve already been assigned to it. As it is now, only Fugaku-sama, shishou and Uchiha Ryuu are involved. Besides us.”

Shikaku knocked his coffee back in one long gulp, uncaring for the heat. Tanned fingers set it down with a light ‘thump’, which felt strangely resounding in the tense room. “And this is affecting your primary mission?”

“I’m saying, Oji-sama, that it’s not adding up. Uchiha Ryuu is unconcerned and the Chief doesn’t seem as affected as you’d expect once discovering that his Station is riddled with corruption. It’s the apathy that hints to something bigger.”

“Like what, nephew?” Shikaku stared, scarred face darkly amused. He’s three steps ahead but wants me to catch up on my own...tch.

“Either someone has a vendetta against the Station or...they’re the ones involved.”

His Uncle barked a laugh, raspy and familiar and dangerous. “Internal Clan politics or are you jumping straight to treason, Ensui?”

Only a lifetime of playing his mind-games kept the younger man from acting on his mounting frustration. Pacing being the mildest, although flipping his chair and demanding clarification was also pretty up there. “You tell me.”

His uncle turned to assess him out of the corner of his eye, his facial scars only adding to the effect. Shikaku-sama may have been as lethargic as an overfed housecat most days but his mind never dulled. And here, in this office, he was Ensui’s superior in more than just rank.
“Fugaku has been much more vocal at the Council meetings as of late. Whilst it is important to promote the needs of our Clans and ensure standing within both the economy and politics of the village, especially after Danzo’s treachery, the smaller clans and civilians may feel stifled. They push too hard or not enough...people are so fickle.”

“So,” Ensui licked his lips, the flesh slightly cracked from worried abuse. “Do you think someone is attempting to curtail the Uchiha’s advance via their work as Police?”

Shikaku’s sighed through his nose. “Maybe. This-” he gestured between them, “-is all mere conjecture unless we can find solid proof...or, at the very least, a viable lead before presenting this to Sandaime-sama.”

Ensui’s mouth opened, closing when he thought better of it. The knowing glint in the Jounin Commander’s eye, gaze missing nothing, did not reassure him.

But... Sandaime-sama had, dare he say it, hesitated. He was lenient towards his old student, Orochimaru, and had hesitated to strike out against Danzo as soon as the ROOT plant was discovered. Even after that very same operative had attacked and died.

In comparison, his order to infiltrate the Uchiha Police had been swift. Mikoto had been a willing aide, getting Ensui into the actual Station as her apprentice and then subtly persuading her husband to enlist Ensui into the actual force. (Mikoto had been the one to originally go to the Hokage, acting as Matriarch and demanding intervention. Her Clan was talking, she knew this. She wanted peace. And so, Ensui had suggested he suss out the Officers.)

“What should I do?” he croaked instead.

Shikaku-sama straightened, legs crossing at the ankle and elbows coming to rest on his desk with hands clasped. “You tell me.”

……………………………………………………………………

“Are you serious? He's a kid!”

Kiharu glanced around, as if any ninja worth their salt wouldn't be concealed better, and tightened her grip on his elbow. Her fingers were icy, as always, on his skin.
“Shisui, I am being serious! I have a bad feeling about this…”

The Jounin frowned.

They’d just come back from Ichiraku’s - where they’d polished off an entire Yondaime’s between them - when they’d bumped into Itachi in the marketplace.

With his new Genin squad.

They’d seemed nice enough, both of them civilian in origin but interacting with his cousin without the usual hesitation. Shisui had introduced himself happily, glad that his younger relative seemed off to a promising start. Kiharu, after a long minute, had followed suit.

He wasn’t sure the other kids had noticed but...well, both Itachi and himself had known Ki-chan far too long.

Any kind of friendliness in his cousin’s eyes had vanished, the two staring for a long moment before they’d stiffly parted ways.

“Why were you so rude to Itachi, though?”

Oops, he probably should have phrased that better. But, as expected, Kiharu pulled away looking defensive.

“I wasn’t rude, I was surprised.”

Shisui scowled, turning the corner onto Kiharu’s street and grumbling under his breath, “could’ve fooled me…”

Judging by the angry set to his best friend’s jaw, she’d heard that too.
“That boy gave me a bad feeling, alright? I was going to warn him but…”

Whilst it was true that Itachi had been even more distant recently, he had just joined his new Genin team. For his cousin…that kind of support had been lacking for ages. Shisui had been there for him as much as possible but, for one thing, he was on crutches. Not to mention that running to help him with Danzo and that entire catastrophe no doubt contributed to Itachi’s broodiness. But it was great that his cousin could have friends now! He'd always been so shy, Shisui was slightly worried for him, but maybe things were looking up for him!

“A bad feeling’?” Shisui couldn't help the dubiousness from creeping into his voice. Surely Kiharu wasn't going to-

Sapphire narrowed as the shorter girl crossed her arms. Oh. She was.

Kiharu was smart - like...she talked about things Shisui knew no-one else really thought about - but she just. She jumped to conclusions, okay? Sure, she was right 80% of the time when she got really inventive but...there was still that 20% to think about.

And Shisui had thought Itachi’s teammates were nice enough.

“You think I'm being stupid?”

Shisui’s mouth reacted before his brain did. “Uh, yeah? They're just kids, Ki-chan, and you've never even met them before.”

A couple on the street corner, hands clasped between them, glanced over curiously when Kiharu tipped her head back to groan. Shisui shuffled on his crutches.

“Why can’t you just trust me with this?”

The jibe hit a nerve in his chest and Shisui felt his waning patience fade as something ugly twisted his chest, twisted his mouth. “Trust? That’s hypocritical…”

Kiharu’s eyes may as well have been two blue flames and they both ignored the mother in the garden...
across the street, glancing over as she weeded the front flower beds. “Excuse me?”

Her disbelief only fanned his frustration. Why was she so- urgh! “You heard me! How do you think it feels, playing go-between between you and my cousin? Why can’t you just-!”

A single finger poked him once, twice in the centre of his chest. Hard. “Oh, no, go back to what you said about trust!” Kiharu took another step forward, impatiently brushing her plait back over her shoulder. Damn, but Shisui wished he wasn’t on crutches. He felt awkward, stilted like this. The urge to cross his arms and meet her step-for-step was almost overwhelming. “You don’t think I trust you, huh?”

“We’re talking about Itachi, you idiot!”

There’s a hot curl of something in Shisui’s stomach and Kiharu’s cheeks get really red when she’s angry. And, suddenly, he doesn’t know what to do with his hands, awkwardly held as they are at the elbow. His fingers clench the smooth plastic handles, wanting to reach out somehow, and his palms are sweating.

The anger’s gone now, though it still sparks in the younger girl’s eyes, but Shisui still feels... agitated.

“You’re not gonna trust me on this?” Kiharu’s bitter voice, muttered under her breath with disappointed eyes, snaps him out of it. Just.

He hates it when she looks like that. Resigned, as if she’s waiting for everyone to turn around and bail.

Well...Shisui was known for running in head first, stubborn as a mule.

(-Kiharu, cold but clammy hands squeezing his, hunched as they were in the corner of Hitoshi’s hospital room. Her eyes had been dark and frantic and he’d scarcely believed that she’d seen his Clan and figured it out and tried to help-)

“Why, Ki-chan? He’s barely a Genin?”
Kiharu stared at him for a long second, like she was weighing him up. She did that a lot but he tried not to take it personally, being a ninja after all. He hadn’t told her anything about a lot of stuff, so he couldn’t expect her to be 100% honest when he wasn’t. (Even though, as a civilian, he really hadn’t expected her to have anything much to hide, besides the usual privacy stuff.)

(Even if those comments about trust had hit a little too deep, a little too hard.)

Something shifted in those dark eyes and Shisui felt his own narrow in response.

“What?” He muttered, dipping his shoulders to give the illusion of privacy on her open street. Maybe we should’ve talked about this at her place…

“He...he smells wrong.” Had he not been a ninja, Shisui might’ve taken that with a pinch of salt. But, for all that his best friend wasn’t a Kunoichi, her heritage certainly was. “And his eyes are wrong like he wants to dissect us.”

“Who? Itachi?” Shisui blinked, lips parting in surprise. He knew his cousin and Kiharu had had a falling out - neither would mention it but something must have gone wrong! - even though it annoyed him. He was so loyal to both of them, sometimes it felt like they wanted him to choose. (He wouldn’t and they’d have to deal with that.)

Small fingers came out and gripped his shirt, fisting the material just below his harness, as Kiharu stepped even closer. A couple, skirting around them on the pavement, giggled and Shisui wondered why on earth his chest was thudding like that.

“No, Shisui!” Kiharu’s jaw clenched. “That Kabuto kid!”

PARTMENT I

Wherein Morning-chan made me a meme so I really had to include this~

“Get out of the tank.”
Ensui’s really not in the mood for this, foot tapping and arms crossed and way too sober for this shit.

Two meters above his head, Shisui merely grins. “You're not her dad!”

A tick twitches at his temple, temper mounting. “Get out of the tank, you two!”

“You're not her dad!”

“I am her dad, get out of the fucking tank!”

A red bandana, orange under the yellow streetlamp, and then Kiharu was up there too. The duo smirk in tandem, devious grins and sparkling eyes belying the alcohol they’re way for young to have had access too. God, this wasn't healthy.

The fact that they’d clambered into an honest-to-Kami tank was, really, just the cherry on the top of a very bad night (morning? Was it morning yet?).

“You're not my dad-!”

“You're not her dad!”

“Get out of the fucking tank, I'm part of the Uchiha police!”

“We are literally in a tank and you're not~”

“It'll go on your record-”

“PUT IT ON MY RECORD, I DON'T GIVE A SHIT!”
(this is a meme that Morning-chan, the star, redrew for Ensui, Shisui and Kiharu. Check it out on my Tumblr, “x-authorship-x”!)

‘Kuiaratameru’: ‘repent’

Chapter End Notes

A/N- OH. MY. GOD.

The response to the last chapter?!? I was absolutely blown away and I’m honestly shaking. Add on the fact that, on AO3, this fic is in the top 10 across all fandoms in the tag ‘self-insert’ and the third fic for Naruto?? And it’s part of 21 communities on FF.net???

I’m pretty sure my brain stopped functioning for at least three days.

All I can say it...thank you so much! Our girl and the gang have come so far (three arcs, by my reckoning) and we’re just entering the ‘fourth’! I hope you fastened your seatbelts!!

(Okay, yet again some bad news. I was on Cloud 9 after your amazing responses to the last chapter and many of your comments actually really touched me. Ask Discord, I was a wreck. So, on a high, I decided to check out the fics listed as inspired by this one...Just a message for anyone unaware: Fanfic can be plagiarised as intellectual property and I don’t want anyone to do this again, to me or any of you. Maybe it was a genuine mistake. But, the tone of the entire fic...I was devastated. So, please be careful and respectful to every fic out there, please!)

UPDATE: check this stuff out!!!!!!!!!


https://x-authorship-x.tumblr.com/post/178207624604/me-this-isnt-what-happened-in-the-scene
Chapter Summary

Like with crepes, spread the batter too thin and it'll either burn to the pan...or rip.

Even things as delicate as French pancakes need support!

OR

Kiharu may have that whole 'pacifism' thing going on but Ensui sure as hell didn't.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hitoshi was not pleased.

He was a truly skillful hunter, more intelligent than any mutt and sleeker too. He had chakra, he could speak and, when it came to tracking, no-one was better than him.

Which only made their lack of any solid findings at the crime scene all the more aggravating.

"'Nothing substantial'?"

The office was silent for a long, tense moment before Inoichi kicked his chair back and started pacing. On the other side of his desk, Seiichi’s lips pressed into a tight, pale line.

"We triple checked, all the way to the boarder of Kumo and then a sweep across to Iwa.”

Beside the Chuunin's chair, Hitoshi's tail lashed, the only sign that the predator was agitated at all.

"You're certain it wasn't one of them?"

Seiichi resisted the urge to grit his teeth, knowing his friend was merely frustrated and not really
questioning him like that. As it was, he couldn't quite keep the affront from his voice. “I think I've fought more than my fair share of Iwa and Kumo nin to understand their techniques and the evidence left behind. Hitoshi even more so.”

“And there have been no non-affiliates through the area?” The blonde interrupted his own pacing to pick the file back up, the sheath of papers distressingly thin for months of work. Even if they had been doing it on the side of their usual workloads.

Seiichi brought out his own notepad, tucked into the inside pocket of his vest and no bigger than the length of his palm, and flicked through the notes taken. “No-one with a grudge we're aware of and only a few good enough to get a drop on him like that. The crime scene was too neat for anyone less skilled than Jounin, or Tokubetsu. The only disturbances present lacked any scent or chakra signature.” The brunette glanced up but Inoichi had his back to him, the line of his shoulders tense and the lamplight catching on the shiny scar tissue at his temple. “Anything in-village?”

It was beyond fucked up to even consider their own but...after Danzo...they didn't have the luxury of not checking any and everywhere.

“Yes...actually.”

That caught Seiichi's attention.

“What?”

“Did Inokumo ever….come to you?” Inoichi sighed explosively.

Seiichi blinked, mouth ajar in genuine bewilderment. “About Inoko-chan?”

The blonde turned and Seiichi could see in his eyes how upset he was. “About money, Seii.”

His chest went cold, something like grief or disappointment curling in his blood. “Gambling? How bad is it? Is Natsuko going to be okay-”

“No, no, she's fine. He was...his accounts are irregular and it doesn't add up. Lump sums gone but
not spent on anything material. The card tables, pubs, runners - no-one saw anything of it, even in
the villages nearby. Unless he was going to the boarders, it certainly wasn't spent gambling or on
drink.”

Seiichi pursed his lips, sharing a look with Hitoshi. “Blackmailer?”

Inoichi sat down again, legs flopping under his desk and Hitoshi, subtly as ever, gently leaned on
them. The panther was all but radiating heat in the cool building, his huge form hulking down in the
space between Seiichi’s chair and the wall and the weight of him was a welcome constant.

“That...would seem most likely. But for what?”

…………………………………………………………

“Pass me that golden cord, would you, my love?” Yuri’s soft voice interrupted the quiet
concentration of the workshop, the ticking of the wall clock and low scratch of fabric being sewn.

Not even lifting my head from where I'd smooshed it against the tabletop, my hand plucked the loop
of cord from the tray beside me and handed it over with a sigh. A clatter of the tea tray announced
Hoshiko coming over, pouring Oba-san a cup with a soft murmur and then placing another
somewhere in front of me.

“Thanks, senpai,” I mumbled.

“Cheer up, Kiharu-chan,” The older girl tried, still fluttering beside my grandmother's workstation
and no doubt fiddling with her hair. “You've fallen out with Shisui-kun plenty of times before! You'll
make up in no time, I'm sure.”

“He said he ‘needed to think’!” I wailed into the wood, which frankly tasted gross. “What does that
even mean?”

“Do you remember,” Yuri-oba chimed in, still serenely sewing cording along the trim of a
nightgown. “When you and Shisui-kun didn't talk for three days, just because he forgot you were
meeting for lunch and went fishing instead?”
Yeah, okay, not my finest moment but that boy totes stood me up!

Slowly, I peeled my forehead from the wooden surface, settling my chin down instead and then shuffling to the side half a foot because my tea blocked the view. “So?”

Eyes cast down, Yuri-oba smiled at her stitching. “Three days for such a simple fall out and it's not even been one for this one, my dove.”

“This is different,” I insisted.

Yuri-oba, Hoshiko and Gin, who turned around from where she was fixing a piece of cloth to a mannequin, simply looked at me. I didn't pout, promise.

“You don't think he's sick of me, right?”

Hoshiko, ever sweet, blinked in utter bewilderment. “Why would he be?”

The sheer mischief? All my scheming and shit? God, I wasn't toxic, right?!

Something must've shown on my face because Yuri-oba immediately slid a pile of tangled thread towards me and I obediently started picking at the knots. Slowly, as Hoshiko wandered off to organise the displays for the next week, as Yuri-oba kept sew-sew-sewing away and Gin started draping more and more fabric over the pinned designs, I felt myself relax. Idle hands and idle minds, after all, and I'd always been a bit of a stress baker. As it was, it was Mikoto's night to do the baking and the house was empty with dad and Hitoshi on patrol for the evening. Nothing worse than going back to an empty house to let my mind run fucking rampant. I'd always been a chronic overthinker and I was upset enough to know I'd probably convince myself that Shisui hated me if left alone long enough.

Also, Yuri-oba was making dumplings tonight.

I'd thrown myself into work today, rolling countless pancakes and focusing on everything but Mikoto's younger relatives with laser focus. I'd had a bath the previous night, shedding a few frustrated tears that dropped into he steamy water before Hitoshi had come in and licked them away. Funny how licking had never been considered uncouth to the stuck-up cat. He didn't ask questions - he could be surprisingly tactful like that - but simply started commiserating over his own hunger until
my bath water had cooled and, wrapping myself in Kaa-san's fluffy dressing gown, I'd gone to pull him a haunch from the cold room before he'd left again to check on Mama Tiger and FuFu ( "don't call her that!" ).

The sun slipped behind the horizon, shining Amber and purple through the high windows on the back wall, and Yuri-oba eventually packed up for the night. Wishing the girls a good evening, she rested one aged hand on my shoulder and shepherded me towards the stairs, flicking off the shop lights for the night. Upstairs, to the back of the building, her kitchen looked out onto the next street, dusky as the sky flushed pink and plum, and Akane-sama soon came padding up the back steps to the back (front) door.

“Good evening,” I smiled, small and slightly sad (I couldn't help it), from where my grandmother had set me to chop the peppers.

Akane, the silver at her temples looking a little whiter than it had in the winter, smiled back. She had come with dessert, cooked apples and sweet preserves, and her hand brushed Yuri-oba's as she passed the basket over.

Soon enough, between the three of us, dinner was prepared, cooked and served, and I sat back to appreciate the simple evening. Shisui still lingered on my mind, how his eyes had bore into mine and the slow, disappointed shake of his head, mouth set in a clamped line-

“Pass me that towel please, Kiharu-chan,” Akane's voice snapped me back and I wordlessly did as she said, setting the dishes in the cupboards and helping tidy up.

I set off home when the sky was dark, a homemade jar of apples in my pocket and leaving Yuri and Akane sipping tea behind me.

It was on the walk when my thoughts turned back to the issue at hand.

I didn't abide violence but, fucking hell, why couldn't Kabuto fuck off?! He was slimey as a snake and aggravating to boot and I wanted him gone.

But doubt wouldn't stop niggling in my mind. What if he was innocent? Pre-ROOT and Orochimaru and everything? Just a little orphan boy.
I wasn't...sure how to feel about that.

I knew I'd had a lot of difficulty as a kid 2.0, coming to terms with the reality of everyone here and the people I'd known from Canon. Itachi for one, was much more tolerable and I actually liked him. For people like Kabuto, it was much harder. Danzo had been an evil asshole long before I was born...but Kabuto was, possibly, just a little kid before it all went to shit.

Not to mention, with Shisui still unsure and Ensui seemingly barely existing between shifts at the Station, I was at something of a dead end. What even could I do? Steal his file? Even if I managed it, he was probably flawless in there. Either in performance or, thinking on his Chuunin Exams, purposefully fault-riddled.

And even if it was perfect, what was that supposed to tell me? There was a reason no-one had yanked me off to T&I; because there were people like Itachi, who acted almost as weird as I did and I had a reason, and no-one ever thought anything beyond ‘wow, much talented very prodigy’!

Honestly, Kabuto was weird for having re-sat the exam so many times! How in the ever-loving fuck no-one had looked at that teenage boy, dropping out for no reason and with so much dirt on everyone else, and hadn't thought he was suspicious, I don't fucking know.

Regardless, his files wouldn't tell me much.

But...maybe getting to know him might.

March was a miserable time for a fight with Shisui. Not only did I just plain miss him, not only were his physio sessions going so well he'd be back in training in a few more weeks, but it was only two weeks to my thirteenth birthday!

I was literally about to join him in teenhood and we weren't even talking!

Okay so ‘not talking’ might be taking it a little harshly.
“Hey, Kiharu-chan!” The older boy in question smiled, leaning crutches against the counter and pulling his coffee closer.

“Shisui-kun, good morning,” I replied, smiling around the swallow that visibly bobbed my throat.

My eyes were fixed on the macaroons I was arranging, Shisui's apparently fascinated in his very normal looking drink and I could almost hear the crickets chirping awkwardly.

Saint Mikoto chose that moment to step forward.

“Good morning, Shisui-kun,” The Matriarch smiled, handing an Officer his change and fastening the lid on a take away box. “Any plans for the day?”

“Oh, er,” Shisui coughed and I felt his eyes on my face, turned away as I was to refill the napkin tub. “N-Nothing much actually.”

Sometimes. I couldn't help but marvel at Shisui's success as a Shinobi, and a regretfully impressive one at that, when he was such a shit liar. Drama technique, 2/10.

I snorted and Shisui sat up straighter.

“Good,” Mikoto, ever the saving grace, kept up the conversation. I was but a priestess at her noble shri-

“-Then you're free to keep Kiharu-chan company in her lunch break...in five minutes.”

‘Angel’, did I say ‘angel’? I meant meddler.

Stupid, stupid, stupid Kiharu! Never mess with a woman who wanted daughters but got sons, you idiot!

Nine-year-old me had fucking had it right and I was a damned fool to be blinded by that serene, maternal smile and the way her sooty hair pooled on her shoulders like some kind of Elven Queen-
Whilst I was having internal appocliptions, Shisui was wildly jabbering as he backtracked like an overweight Shetland faced with Olympic dressage. That is, with all due haste.

“Oh, Mikoto-hime, I'm sure Kiharu-chan-!”

God, this wasn't going to go well and Shisui was going to tell me he'd reconsidered and I was crazy and I'd have to lie and say-

“That's fine!”

It was only when the two Uchiha turned to me, Shisui jerking in surprise and Mikoto with catlike smugness, that I realised that ridiculous squeak had come from me.

I'd…said that out loud, hadn't I?

Well, I had to roll with it now.

“That's fine,” I reaffirmed, smoothing down my apron like I was perfectly calm, even though I'd be taking it off in a few moments for my break. “I was just going to sit at the bar anyway, I brought food with me. No need for Shisui-kun to go out of his way.”

I'll admit that last line was pretty petty, especially when Shisui finally met my eyes to give me a flat look. Never mind, #noregrets.

“I'll bring you your tea, then,” Mikoto nodded as if everything was settled and I found myself reluctantly hanging up my apron, grabbing my bento and sliding into the stool between Shisui at the wall. At little cagey, yes, but it was more private too.

“How have you been?” The Jounin finally asked, sipping his tepid coffee.

Unconsciously, the corners of my mouth curled up. “Since the day before yesterday?”
Pink ears flushed red where they peaked out from Shisui’s dark curls and I shifted guiltily when his shoulders slumped a bit. Ahhh… I was a mean person.

“Not the best.”

Shisui turned slightly towards me and I hastily took a bite of tuna.

“...really?”

It was his turn to crack a faint grin when I glared, chewing my mouthful as quickly as possible.

“Yeah, really,” I groused, pouting. “You think I didn't miss you when we've been attached as the hip since aug- urk !”

“Yes, not mad!” Shisui grinned somewhere into my hair, an arm around my shoulders and the other squeezing my back as the older boy dragged me into a bear hug that almost had him in my damned lap. “You don't hate me!”

Laughter bubbled up in the chest against my cheek and, rolling my eyes, I hugged my best friend back fiercely.

“And here I was thinking you didn't want to be my friend any more!”

His arms tightened slightly and, the next time he spoke, Shisui’s voice had dropped down much quieter. Rolling out a pancake further down the counter, Mikoto started humming an airy tune. “What- Why- Ki-chan, I told you I needed time to think!”

“Er, yeah!” I hissed into the leather of his shoulder harness. “Do you realise how bad that sounded??”

Talk about ‘it's not you, it's me’ rhetoric!

Shisui twisted again, settling his temple against mine as though he wasn't planning on letting go for a
while. “I'd literally just said I was with you on this, like always.”

“You told me I was crazy!”

Shisui mumbled something that sounded suspiciously like “I'm not wrong there,” so I pinched his side and shifted back into my own stool when he flinched away.

“I cried. Hitoshi licked me again.”

Wincing, Shisui's eyes roved my face like the panther saliva would magically become visible, still on my skin. “Sorry, Kiharu-chan.”

“No...no, I'm sorry.” My eyes fell from his. I was sooooo mean. “I should've given you time to process… I know I'm a little-” insane, chaotic, unpredictable, ridiculous, “-sudden sometimes and I can get really impatient. So, yeah. I'm really sorry.”

His ears were cherry red again but Shisui smiled, small and endearingly shaky.

I had five more tuna rolls in my bento. Shisui ate three.

When Shisui and I fought...it was always like a match striking, we'd explode for a few moments before being blown out barely any time later and our make-ups were notoriously brief too. Legit just breaking the Dam and a desperate hug or two.

It was waiting for the crack in the stalemate to appear that was the worst part. In older fallouts, Shisui and I had said some horrible things to each other. ‘You don't care about me’ to ‘leave me alone!’ and we never failed to storm off either. This time had been different. We'd been angry, yes, but it was borne from frustration and impatience and that elephant was still in the room.

Luckily, Shisui hasn't been exaggerating when he'd claimed he'd spent the past two days thinking.

“I asked around a bit, by the way. About that Kabuto kid.”
Pausing in tearing off a piece of our shared cinnamon and sugar pretzel, I blinked up at him for a long second. “Huh?”

“Just some kids, a few from the orphanage and one of my third cousins who was in his class last year.”

Oh...Shisui had been doing digging. For our investigation. I coughed against the lump in my throat. “A-and what did they say?”

Shisui tore off almost half of the sweetened bread and ate it in one go. I was almost impressed except for the fact that I knew he could eat an entire one in one mouthful too. “He's weird. Like...really, really weird.”

Unfortunately, as much as part of me would love to take anything at solid proof of his dodginess, I knew that didn't mean anything in the grand scheme of things. Especially in this crazy place.

“Is that all?” Unless we're talking Tom Riddle, Mr-I-hang-animals-and-mentally-torture-my-fellow-children, I was holding the sceptical line.

This wasn't Stranger Things.

“He got picked on pretty bad at the Orphanage so he started wandering off, more and more.”

“Meeting someone? Oooooh,” I forced myself to coo as though the thought was entertaining, “maybe he was training to be stronger?”

Shisui popped that balloon with a rueful scoff. “Nope, no physical improvement.” I pursed my lips, like I'd bitten into lemon (I had, ’twas life) and the older boy correctly read my own skepticism. “In general, I mean. Not that he was hiding anything in class, but his overall form and health hasn't seemed to fluctuate.”

“Where did you get that information?” Health seemed a little more than just ‘asking around’.

“Akane-sama,” Shisui promptly replied.
My next gulp of tea went the wrong way. “Akane!” I spluttered.

“She's a healer, remember?” He gently prompted, as if I could ever forget.

A stream of nonsense escaped my mouth as I tried to compute that I'd had dinner with Akane the previous night and she'd not said a damn thing about Shisui or Kabuto. I knew she was a private healer but I'd never realised that included helping cover nursing at the Orphanage...

Shisui snickered around the rim of his drink but I ignored it, feeling myself soften at the sight of his twin dimples.

“What did she say?” My voice was unconsciously soft and Shisui's dark eyes snapped to mine before he'd even put his cup back down. They were wide and I couldn't quite read them... had the Elder said something?

“Shisui?” I prompted when he failed to respond, eyes still boring into mine.

That snapped him out though and another faint blush stained the slope of his cheeks and my eyebrows arched. He blushed so easy! Maybe that was a curse of being so damn pale...

“R-right, well,” he coughed. “I went to go see her yesterday afternoon.” my eyebrow twitched at the confirmation that she'd even seen him just before me, “-and I got right to it, because you know how she hates when people beat around the bush. Well, first she said that medical health was extremely private and then spent ten minutes scolding my 'thoughtless nosiness' - her words, not mine - but when I mentioned you and Itachi, she got all thoughtful and told me to sit down whilst she watered her window boxes.” We shared a look, Akane's red roses a staple outside every window. I was half convinced I'd wouldn't know which house was hers without them. “She finally said that she couldn't reveal anything but none of the children had experienced a spike of fitness and their chakra systems weren't irregular.”

I breathed out, slow and deep. Part of me was appalled that getting information was so easy - confidentiality was a loose concept if you weren't a ninja etc. And the only reason orphans had rudimentary healthcare was because they didn't have parents - but I couldn't deny that even that smidgen of information was useful. Did that mean that...Kabuto was innocent?

Ooooooooorrr, I'd been mean to him, shit shit shit-
Bad thing about disliking characters? I didn't know shit about them.

Maybe...maybe I could help him? One less psycho in this shit show was always good in my book.

I sat up straight. “I'm gonna make him a cake.”

Shisui, at this point, was probably developing whiplash. “Er... what?”

I was already hopping down from my stool, little red shoes slapping against the wooden floor and I quickly gathered up my empty bento and our rubbish (my break was most definitely up by now), twisting around the counter and dumping the lot. Well, except the bento; it was yellow with bunnies, so there was no way I was getting rid of that.

“Most kids like chocolate, right?”

Mikoto, to whom the question was aimed at, hummed in confirmation, spooning hand-whipped cream onto a mug of hot cocoa. “From my experience, yes, Kiharu-chan.”

Shisui was still mentally scrambling to catch up. “Where the hell did this come from-!?"

I ducked to pull a bag of rose tea from the cupboard, cracking open the empty jar and pouring the dried leaves in. “Listen, Shisui, the kid might smell weird and disappear into the woods, but he’s Itachi-kun's teammate so, before I try and get him arrested, I should probably get to know him first. Ergo, cake.”

“You know baking isn’t a solution to every problem, right?”

I shot him a flat look, unsure myself if I meant ‘I'm not stupid, of course I know’ or if I was asking him for proof. Regardless, the Jounin’s mouth snapped shut. Huh.

“Well,” he huffed a moment later, shuffling his stool closer and nodding when an Officer stepped up to order again. “It hardly worked with Itachi.”
I clicked my tongue. We were both still salty about that, for slightly different reasons.

“'I'll admit I didn't use every weapon in my arsenal there'—only because the little punk was too good at avoiding me ‘-but this time he won't escape so easy.’”

“Oh?”

I poured a ladle of batter into the waffle pan. “This time I won't be going in by myself.”

Ensui was working late, way past his official hours. However, he'd quickly learned that was just how real jobs worked. They say ‘9-5’ but they mean ‘7-9’. It was the same with his old teammate, Yuko-chan, who was apprenticing at the Hospital. The common trend didn't mean it didn't fucking suck though.

Kami knew how long Shishou and Kiharu really spent at the stall, how late his Uncle always got in from his own office. Even his own folks...

Regardless, he was one of the last ones left, wrapping up his report on another case of defacement of property. His desk lamp washed the area around him in a sleepy yellow light that did not help his concentration at all, dim like a candle. Detective Osamu was still in his office, the light visible through the misty privacy window that ran along the length of the wall. With the light on beside him, only his hunched silhouette was clear. Then, on the other side of the hall, Ryuu was stamping files...a miracle considering his distaste for doing his own paperwork and staying late.

His coffee was cold and his eyes were inching but Ensui merely sighed, picking up his pen again and trying to remember the proper filing protocol. The record keeper said it was initial complaint, the crime and then witnesses, rig-

The door slammed open with a ‘bang’.

Head jerking up, Ensui had his shadows lashing out before his brain caught up with what he was seeing.
The woman, lips beaten and split, shirt torn, let out a low, broken noise before collapsing against the nearest desk.

“Miss!” Ryuu was beside her in an instant, leaping clear over the hall in a chakra-powered jump and carefully approaching the wounded civilian. Ensui, for his part, was only a second behind him, dark eyes roving over the dimly lit atrium, the closed receptionist's desk, the empty street outside. Detective Osamu-senpai’s office door opened with a ‘snap’.

“Wha- bring her further inside, now!”

The woman started sobbing and Ryuu slipped an arm around her waist when her legs shook. Ensui didn't miss how she flinched from his touch and something cold and furious curled in his gut. Oh but he knew that look.

“I'll check the street.” He barely recognized his own voice and didn't wait for confirmation before he slipped out onto the steps, neatly avoiding the streetlamps and ducking into the darkest shadows.

Nothing, nothing, made him angrier than abuse and now, somewhere out here, a fucking low life was escaping after trying to, no doubt, rape that poor girl. She looked hardly any older than him and, from the gentle wave of her dark hair, he couldn't help but imagine his cousins, Kiharu or Hana or his friends in the same position.

The shadow that concealed him writhed.

Unfortunately, after a lightning fast but calculatingly throughout sweep of the neighborhood, he found no-one. Fuck.

When he returned to the Station, the young woman was sat in Osamu-senpai's office (now with all the lights on) with an ice pack for her face, a cup of tea and wearing a spare Constable's shirt. It only made her look all the younger. Rikari-san, the security Officer on night shift downstairs, was also sat beside her and Ensui was fiercely glad that one of their few female Officers was in tonight - being surrounded by men would hardly be much of a comfort, he couldn't imagine.

She was answering the Detective's soft inquiries in a shaky whisper when Ensui came in, shutting the door behind him and shaking his head grimly at Ryuu. The younger Uchiha was sat against the far wall, trying not to loom, and Ensui joined him wordlessly.
“...he- he was wearing a dark shirt, like, like a red or brown colour... His sandals didn't look like a Shinobi’s either.”

Osamu sighed through his nose, a single lock of hair falling to brush his under-eye from where it had slipped from the tiny tail at his nape. “Thank you, Masaru-san. Was there anything...strange about him? Maybe his voice or the way he walked?” The woman, Masaru, shuddered as she slowly shook her head and Ensui's eyes caught how her fingers clutched white around Rikari's. “Maybe a smell?”

The slow shaking paused and, Ensui's eyes fixed curiously on the back of her head, the woman seemed to pause in concentration. “H-he smelled...wrong, musky but not l-like dirt or stale. It was...sweet but,” the next words caught in her throat as Rikari rubbed a warm hand up her arm. Ryuu crossed his own. “It was like when someone's sick...y-you can smell it in t-the air?”

Osamu-senpai's back eyes flicked up to meet Ensui's over her shoulder.

*Get the files.*

His lips barely moved but Ensui knew he hadn't misunderstood. *Fugaku-sama told him about the cases.*

Slowly, hyper aware of moving too fast and terrifying the woman who had been strong enough to escape her attacker and immediately recount the tale to a dark Station of (mainly) men, Ensui rose from his seat. Beside him, Ryuu followed half a second later.

“I have the clearance,” was the only explanation offered once they were back in the corridor, striding down towards the archives shoulder to shoulder. Ensui didn’t voice that he had the same level of access too...they both knew it would take him longer to find it. Even in a crisis, he was still treated shit. Ryuu had just never bothered with it before.

The records were empty, lights turned low as was custom at this time of night, and, with Rikari upstairs, only Akihito-san was still at the desk. When the duo came through the double doors, he was filing the last of the documents sent down from the day's work.

His eyes, as always, slid over Ensui like he couldn't even see him. “Ryuu-san, what do you need?”
“The files reserved under 000534.”

That was Ensui’s private storage locker. They’d figured that, considering Ensui’s position, people were less likely to snoop through his under the idea he wouldn't be trusted with files so delicate. Most Officers used their names to file; Ensui was one of the few, like the higher up Detectives and Inspectors, to use his serial number.

(That's not to say he didn't have another under his name, but the only things kept in it were records of his own involvement in cases. Actual files, the originals especially, were supposed to be filed in the actual archives. Fugaku had special circumstances listed for the Nara. Shikaku-oji had been pleased.)

Akihito didn't even blink, lifting up the desk access and allowing the two of them to slip through before dropping it back and opening the doors behind him. Beyond was a long corridor, lined with lockers upon lockers of safety deposit boxes and, further down, rooms to open them without prying eyes.

Ensui kept his key around his neck, pressed into wax inside a chakra-secured locket. Some people would call him overly paranoid. Ensui just knew he was smart enough not to be so careless.

Grabbing the files and rushing to a private room, Ensui waited until he was certain that Akihito was back at his post before he allowed and equally-agitated Ryuu to tug them from his arms.

“This all of them?”

“Yeah. Some robberies but a good number of assaults too. More than a few rapes…and half a dozen disappearances.” The words tasted foul in his mouth, like bitter blood.

Ryu, true to character, snorted derisively. “Would have thought traffickers were fucking better than this.”

Ensui’s grip on the case file of a 18-year-old's disappearance turned white. “Traffickers?”

The Uchiha glanced up, dark eyes glinting like oil. “Bunch of pretty girls being sexually assaulted or kidnapped? You bet this is fucking systematic.”
“And you didn’t say anything?”

Ryuu leaned back, mouth twisted down like he smelled something foul. “It is hardly my problem if you cannot-”

Ensui didn't know what made him do it.

Actually. That was a lie.

He knew exactly what made him do it. Frustration, exhaustion, months of sniping and bickering with the only other person he could work with. And, judging by how Ryuu instantly responded, the other Officer felt exactly the same way.

Ensui’s fist made the most satisfying crack as it smashed against the other man's stupid, delicate jawline.

“You arrogant fucking pig! You're assigned this case to help me! I'm your superior and I'm privy to details you are not! Negligence-”

Ryuu swung back at him and all conversation screeched to a halt as they concentrated on beating the shit out of each other.

When Ensui managed to throw the other Officer against the wall, Ryuu started swearing up a storm.

“You think I'm petty enough to keep secrets on purpose! You don't even share information with me, how am I supposed to know what you don't! Fucking Nara-”

They twisted again, Ryuu's knee slamming into Ensui's thigh and deadening the nerves. The Uchiha pressed his advantage when the Nara’s leg threatened to buckle. But Ensui wasn't done yet either.

“You're one to talk! Arrogant and impossible to work with, how am I supposed to even discuss anything with you when you don't bloody listen?! You think that, just because I'm a Nara and younger, I don't deserve to be here?!”
Ryuu's pale face twisted, bloody knuckles raised to strike again before Ensui wrapped his hands around the thin wrists, his darker skin a jarring contrast. “Yo-”

“This isn't about me! This is about them!”

The two Sergeants pushed away from each other. Gulping in heaving breaths, bleeding and bruised and still simmering with anger. Ryuu looked murderous. Ensui wanted to strangle him in frustration.

Slowly, finger shaking in carefully leashed rage, Ensui stabbed a finger at the files still sat on the tabletop. “It's about them. Those girls and their families and the scumbags who hurt them. Now, all of those files have been altered in some way and that means we have a snake in our nest. Someone with full access is covering this up without drawing attention and it's only by pure luck that we even know. Now, I hate you.”

Ryuu sneered. “The feeling is mutual.”

The Nara's teeth creaked, gritted against another sarcastic barb. “I hate you but-” he leveled a warning glance when Ryuu made to speak up, “but, we need to work together. It's just us and senpai-” Ensui only narrowed his eyes when Ryuu mockingly mouthed the title, clearly disgusted at his obvious respect. And he did respect Osamu. He was a good man and a good Detective. “And the Chief. That's it.”

Ensui didn't mention Mikoto-hime or his Uncle. Even Fugaku-sama didn't know about that.

“Deal?”

The Uchiha glowered and, in the harsh white lights and against the rapid bruising of his split lip, his skin was like chalk. “...Fine.”

Ensui took it.

“So...trafficking.”
Ryu snorted but nodded, gingerly touching long fingers to his sore mouth. “Heh. Yeah. See,” he moved back towards the files, Ensui slowly following, and flicked through until he found one of the petty theft ones. “These are all unsolved but pretty different from the others altered. Might be connected but, more likely, trying to throw us off the scent.”

“Surely they'd be more thorough than that?”

“Criminals like this are often civilians looking to make a lot of money without working too hard. They don't go to school like us, they don't get trained like us. They learn on the job.”

Ensui scowled. “I get the point.”

They were quiet for a long moment.

“Do you think...it's the same people as the man tonight?”

Ryu didn't look up to meet Ensui's gaze, dark eyes fixed on the missing persons photo of a young girl, sixteen years old and missing for eight months.

“Yeah,” his voice was subdued. “Yeah, I do.”

The next day, Ensui woke up at lunchtime to the ferocious growl of his stomach and the throbbing of bruises in time with his pulse.

“Urgh, fuck.”

When he dragged himself into the shower, the splotchy purple trailing from shoulder to hip assured him that, for all his prissy assholeness, Ryu knew how to pack a punch. He had some bruise salve but... well, he was tired. Why not go and get it treated? At least then he'd only be dealing with a rundown body instead of a beaten one on top of that.
Plus, Masaru-san had been checked into the hospital in the early hours of the morning and Rikari-san probably needed her post relieved-

At the very least, he could check on her for a minute or two.

Hair in a wet bun and sans makeup, Ensui grabbed a banana before heading out towards the hospital, stopping off at Nekki’s for a pretzel-to-go and skillfully ignoring Kiharu’s wide-eyed demands for an explanation on the state of him. He wasn’t due in today, Ryuu and him dismissed by a pissed off Osamu to “get yourselves fucking sorted.” Ensui hadn’t slept a solid six hours in weeks. He had no complaints.

He did, however, get more than a few raised brows when he entered the Hospital reception. The Nara told himself it was just the lack of eyeliner and not the black eye that had negated the possibility of it.

“Smokey eyeshadow tends to be on both lids, Ensui-kun,” a friendly voice tittered. The brunette ignored it, bowing politely instead and straightening with a slight smile for his old Genin teammate. Against his will, the memory of the last time he’d sought her out rose in his mind and he repressed a shudder (her lip gloss had been disgusting but, well, he had nabbed the files for Shishou).

“Yuko-chan, it's been a while.” And immediately grimaced at the accidental reminder. Unfortunately, the blonde perked up.

“Yes, it has! Finally come to take me for lunch, have you? Well, we'll have to see about that bruise first.”

“Ah,” the Nara coughed into his fist, shooting a pointed look at the older healer behind the desk. Who was, actually, watching things unfold with barefaced amusement. How dare. “I have an appointment, actually. With another Healer.”

Yuko visibly wilted and Ensui sternly reminded himself that pity dates were Bastard things to get roped into. The blonde was pretty enough and friendly enough to get her own date if she wanted one. And Ensui had made it pretty clear he wasn't interested.

(Oh why did she have to fucking kiss him last time?! He'd just wanted the file! Not a steamy make-out!)
Mikoto, no doubt eavesdropping the other day, insisted that I leave at three instead of five on Wednesday.

It was as clear as crystal that she wanted me and Itachi to make up. ASAP.

I could almost hear her mind go ‘one friendship good, one to go!’ and, honestly, my fondness for her was the only reason I went along with it.

I wasn't sure why she'd insisted on today, maybe it was because Shisui had arrived only half an hour beforehand, but the Matriarch had untied my apron and handed me my coat before I could do much more than gawk at her.

“Off you go, see you tomorrow morning, you two!”

Shisui, eagerly waiting by the door, was just as keen. Suspiciously keen but that was definitely not a influencing factor, thanks.

When Mikoto pressed one of the spare cheesecakes, matcha, into my arms, I knew this was planned against me.

Without ceremony, I was then shoved out of my own damn shop.

Now, the great thing about Spring, despite its general sogginess as the snow melted, was the return of warm sunlight. Being blinded by the sun glinting off snowbanks was all well and good on a Christmas card but I didn't appreciate needing sunglasses midwinter. Warmth and greenery were much more preferable, call me a cat or whatever.

Itachi, Shisui insisted as we made our way down through the merchant's sector, was training in one of the closer fields today. And, at three, they were probably wrapping things up.

Butterflies squirmed in my stomach but I told myself I had a grip. They were just kids (-I was just a kid-) and they couldn't hurt me (-they most definitely could-) and I didn’t have any grounds to be
nervous (-I really, really did have the right-)!

“Itachi-chan!” Shisui suddenly called out and I abruptly realised I’d monged out the entire way here. By the looks of it, we were at the perimeters of one of the training grounds closest to the village, probably number One or Two. Actually….fuck, this was the one where the boys almost broke my bloody nose!

My eyes scanned the treeline before picking out a patch of flattened earth right beside an old oak. *There*. God, those boys could be arseholes.

My reminiscing had me miss the approach of the Genin team until they were only a dozen or so feet away and I found myself looking to the sensei first, out of sheer curiosity for the figure assigned to teach both Kabuto and Itachi. I knew Fugaku hadn’t exactly been a happy bunny but-

My eyes met pearlescent lilac before blowing wide.

*Hyuuga. That's...that's a Hyuuga.*

It sounded ridiculous, utterly ridiculous, but I'd never actually met a Hyuuga face to face. Oh, I knew that Raven had been one and I'd seen a few in the market place too but...their Compound was far from my usual jaunts and they didn't exactly...mingle.

And they *certainly* didn't go into *Nekki's*.

A throat was cleared politely, the vaguely long-suffering expression on the Hyuuga's face letting me know that my reaction was probably annoyingly common for a civilian.

Well. You *know* I hate to be lumped with a crowd.

“What shampoo do you use, Hyuuga-san?”

Itachi slowly closed his eyes, like he was warding off a headache.
The Jounin-sensei was still for a long moment, almost-non-existent eyebrows rising in a judgemental arch. “It’s a herbal remedy.”

Smiling naturally, my shoulders shrugged in a smooth, rolling motion. Very blasé, I was proud. “That’s a shame. Curls are such a handful.” I dipped into a shallow bow. “Dazai Kiharu, a pleasure to meet you.”

A minute head tilt. “Hyuuga Hoheto, Dazai-san.”

Mikoto had mentioned that the Sandaime had had a hand in Itachi’s placement but I hadn’t quite realised that that meant placing the *Uchiha Heir* under the guidance of one of the, apparently, newer Jounins from a rival Clan.

No wonder the Officers on the curb had felt particularly gossipy the past few weeks.

The Hyuuga stayed to themselves. Ensui had admitted to having only interacted with them a few times, Shisui even less so as an Uchiha. They were one of the largest Clans and, easily intimidating the council, they could afford to be so cold and strict. I certainly knew Ino had never met Hinata at the playground.

However, Hoheto seemed to be rather polite, if stiff and blank faced when he returned Shisui’s own greeting. The team, Kabuto and Itachi and Fusae-chan, were just about to break for their cool down, as Shisui and Mikoto had no doubt plotted, so Itachi really had no choice but to stick around and bear with me.

*Unfortunately* for Itachi’s ego and Shisui’s hopes, the Heir wasn’t my intended target.

“It’s nice to see you again, Fusae-chan,” I smiled, hyper aware of all the botched female friendships I’d had when I was younger.

The Kunoichi’s short and sweet, yet professional, blonde pixie cut was, I hoped, a good sign. Maturity was a hurdle for me and if she was taking things seriously, I was prepared to give her the benefit of the doubt.

Oh, just watch this backfire, ha!
Her eyes, yellowy green, brightened however at the sight of me. “You too, Dazai-san. Why are you at our training though? Did Itachi-kun-?”

“Ah,” I easily plonked myself down on the grass beside her, in the space she patted and ignored how Shisui was trying to get Itachi to sit on my other side. “No, but I had cake and Shisui thought it would be nice to share it with his cousin’s teammates. Mikoto-hime, his Kaa-san - Itachi’s, that is - suggested it too, so why not?”

“Oh!” Something seemed to click for the younger girl, grassy eyes popping wide as she perked up. “You’re the baker!”

The two of us must’ve looked a little silly because I perked right on up too, preening just a little from the recognition. “That’s me! You know it?”

Shisui coughed beside me, loudly.

“Yes! Otou-san bought me a tart for my birthday!”

Shisui coughed again, so obviously fake that I was almost embarrassed. Fusae’s eyes flicked, uncertain, over my shoulder and I was forced to turn, slapping a hand between his fake-hunched shoulders a touch too hard.

“Okay there, Shisui-kun?”

“Fine.” He choked.

“Good. So, Fusae-chan! How are you finding being a Genin so far?”

Honestly...I kinda liked her. She was cute and happy - a sunflower between Gothic-phase Itachi and Creepy possibly-not-a-snake Boy - and I almost felt bad for her. Living life with two boys could be annoying as hell, I would know. Unfortunately, unlike me, Fusae didn't pick said-boys of her own free will like I had.
“It's...good, thank you.” Hmm, maybe it's was a little unfair to put her on the spot with her sensei and teammates right there.

Apologetically, I offered her a slice of cheesecake.

Shisui heaved another bad (bad as in what bad acting) cough and I rolled my chin around to shoot the teen a disbelieving look.

He spluttered pathetically a few more times, to very poor effect.

Oh, fineeeeee.

“Itachi-kun!” I smiled, almost like a challenge at the raven-haired boy on Shisui's other side. Obediently, the Genin in question glanced over with all due politeness. Wow, Huh? Never thought I'd actually want to cat-fight with anyone. If he looks at me one more time with those bland eyes -

“Yes, Kiharu-san?”

“How are you liking your new team?”

“We'll do...well together.”

“Good,” My smile even felt plastic. What can I say, I'm bitter™. “I'm glad.”

Itachi made exactly zero moves to continue our exchange and I made sure Shisui saw the hurt expression that flitted across my face. Okay, maybe this was petty but why was I getting so much grief for not trying when Itachi was the one being rude! He bloody well started it!!!

Time for the low blows. “We're having dinner with Ensui on Friday, you should come?”

Abruptly, Itachi's flat gaze shifted, piercing and bright and I half expected his Sharingan to swirl to life. Well...that was a wild card.
His beef, or closeness or whatever, with Ensui had to be The Most Mysterious Thing going on right now.

“Right-o!” Shisui suddenly sat forward, breaking our stare off and beaming at a very taken aback Kabuto. “Have you tried Kiharu-chan's cheesecake, Kabuto-kun? It's really good!”

“Er-”

“Yo!” A familiar voice called to the left.

Things were getting a little crowded. Okay, there was no fucking way this was by accident….apparently everyone had ulterior motives today!

“Ensui!” I beamed, feeling rather like a certain shark from Pixar. “Fancy seeing you here~”

The older guy waved me off, flapping a dainty hand which was promptly stuffed back into his pocket. “I was in late, so I have the day off. Is this a picnic?”

“Something...like that,” Hoheto-san finally spoke up.

“Itachi, a moment?”

My jaw dropped.

What in the hell? “Shisui!” I hissed, smiling at the guilty Jounin. “What?!”

Kabuto's pale grey brows were at risk of disappearing into his hairline and Fusae was frowning suspiciously at Ensui's back, green eyes lingering on the Police badge on his bicep.

Not now, Kiharu! Shisui's eyes yelled, stabbing his wooden takeaway fork into the final bite of his slice with unnecessary force.
Oh, but I knew this old game, we'd been playing it since last summer. Where ‘later’ meant ‘never’ and they kept their stupid, boys-club secrets.

“Kabuto-san! Do you happen to know Iruka-kun?”

The gray-haired boy nodded politely, accepting the slice that Shisui had failed to follow his offer through with. “He lives with one of the Sandaime's Guards now.”

Okay, I could totally do this. Genma was an easy subject and his ducklings weren't much of a stretch either. “He's on a C Rank right now, his longest yet.”

Nodding, I noticed how the two Genin seemed to relax again, the tension draining away as I chattered about all the D Ranks Izumo and Kotetsu had had to complete, including helping with building Nekki's.

Hoheto never contributed again and neither really did Shisui but, somehow, I felt they were listening to Itachi and Ensui more than our own harmless conversation.

Mentally, I promised myself that I'd make my bluff of dinner with Ensui a reality. I wanted answers.

The rest of the week was a little bit strange, everyone rather distracted but I kind of put it down to business at work. Kami knows I was up to my neck in it.

Ensui, exhausted (as was his new constant), had rocked up to mine for dinner with Genma (fresh back from Kiri with naught but a million complaints about the weather) and the boys (sans Iruka, who was two weeks gone for his longest C Rank yet) and the added company ensured he was safe from my wrath. I was rather pissed at that.

So, as I usually did when meddling fucked with my zen, I went to Hana.
The younger girl was the personification of common sense, something I knew myself to be lacking more and more as time passed. Honestly, she was a blessing on this earth and I marvelled that she’d never been much more than an empty face in canon.

Maybe I should’ve been more proactive towards the issue with Itachi, the issue of Kabuto, the issue of... everything.

But I was pretty much done with planting myself in the middle of shitty situations, toxic thoughts that my pre-teen brain was much too young to cope with. It wasn’t healthy, living like this, and I wasn’t sure how much longer I could keep this up. Call it bullshit self-care or whatever but I just needed to breathe. Life was so... so hectic.

And I was drained...so the cake would have to be enough...for now.

“Ohayo!” I called on Friday morning (my day off), knocking on the door as though any Inuzuka worth their nose hadn’t sensed me before I’d even reached the gate.

“Intrude, brat!”

Tsume’s call had me pushing open the front door, not pausing to take off my shoes because, a) I wasn’t planning on lingering if Hana was out somewhere and, b) they weren’t a family who did that sort of thing. The Clan Head was seated in the kitchen, long legs stretched out and crossed at the ankle as she wolfed (ha) down a messy wrap of god-knows-what.

“Is Hana in?” I asked, patting a hand over my windswept hair whilst Tsume, her own locks as wild as usual, watched in amusement.

“Nah, she's helping at the clinic. Another litter came in last night and it's her job to wash 'em.”

I tried not to look that deflated. As a kid (er, when I was a little younger), I'd been allowed to help out a bit with the newborn puppies but, as I'd grown older and moved out of that harmless childhood stage, I knew that it was a bit symbolic. Nothing serious that I had undermined or intruded upon, but I wasn't going to shove in on the Heiress’s chance to bond with new members of the wider pack.

“Oh, alright.” I rubbed the lipsalve between my lips. “Tell her I came around then?”
Tsume smiled, the corner of her purple-painted lips quirking up at one side to reveal a single, sharp canine. “Sure thing, brat. See you later.”

“Later!”

Back out on the porch, I puffed out my cheeks, blindly looking over the Compound with hands in pockets. Fuck, well, what now?

A sharp yell of laughter, accompanied by shrill yapping, sounded as soon as I'd finished the thought.

Kiba and Akamaru were rolling around just around the far corner of the house, coats scuffed with dirt from the rain-dampened grass and panting happily.

“Yo!” I called, smirking when Aka-chibi immediately came scampering over, stooping to scoop the puppy up onto my hip.

“Hana's not here,” Kiba greeted me, standing up and meandering over, really kinda similar to his partner, with a curious expression.

“I know,” I shrugged, scrunching up my nose as Akamaru started lapping at my chin. “But then I heard this incredible snarling and I thought there must've been a pack of wolves around here!”

The kid's chest clearly puffed up with pride. “That's just me and Akamaru, see!”

The laugh that bubbled in my chest was free and genuine. God, but I couldn't wait until Kiba was all grown up. I wasn't gonna let him forget what a cute kid he'd been. “So I see! You two not going to see the litter?”

A mullish expression immediately pulled at Kiba’s lower lip, jutting out with a puppish whine. “Not ‘llowed. It's Hana's job.”

I paused for a long second, setting down the white dog when he started wiggling and taking in how
Kiba immediately plopped the smaller dog into his hood.

“Wanna go to the park, Koinu?”

Kiba's eyes jerked up to meet mine.

“How about we have a good ol’ cats vs dogs race, ay? First to the Main park?”

The smile that split his face, eager and raring to go, had brightened the younger boy before I was even finished. He trotted up to stand beside me, arms swinging eagerly and cheeks stretched in an excited baring of his sharp canines, as through I was gonna run off any second. Knowing some stuff from Hana, I grinned wide too, teeth glinting in the sunlight. It wasn't the same for felines but, well, I knew some stuff from Hitoshi.

“Ask your Kaa-san, ay!”

And he was off, up the steps like a shot.

I blinked in bemusement, barely even managing to stroll back to the porch before he came raring outside again, this time with Akamaru at his heels.

I pulled my hands from my pockets, zipping up them up so my keys didn't go flying.

“To the Main park, yeah? No detours and don't push people.”

Kiba nodded hurriedly, jumping the steps with his little legs to stand beside me and crouching ready.

“On your marks-!” He snarled playfully.

“Get set!” I grinned.
“Go!”

And we were off!

Fuck! I may have been older and taller and Hitoshi may have kept me from going all *Violet Beauregarde* from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, but Kiba was a ninja kid and I knew Tsume had already started on their endurance.

So, basically, I ended up being the one scrambling to catch up.

“Score!” Kiba howled, skidding on the gravel and twisting to shoot my panting self a look of insufferable triumph.

Hands on knees, I only wheezed in reply.

The park wasn't busy, the overcast clouds that seemed to threaten rain having kept a lot of families home, but there were still more than enough kids to witness my fall from grace. And I wasn't so old that some couldn't be classed as my peers. Fucker.

Well. I wouldn't call myself terribly dignified but that wasn't fucking on.

“I...let you...win…”

Maybe I would've been somewhat convincing if I wasn't wheezing like I'd run a mile. Oh wait-

Kiba certainly didn't look terribly impressed, folding his little arms in that puffy coat and staring at me. The single canine poking out of his lip ruined any kind of judgy look.

“You look dead, Kiharu.”

The curve of my spine felt sticky under my layers as I glared, only half playful.
A flash of blonde, like a sunflower against the overcast sky, caught the corner of my eye and I immediately straightened, fatigue comically forgotten as I twisted towards the sunny blonde alone on the swings.

“Naru-chan!”

Kiba, curious, twisted to see who I was calling out to, the jinchuuriki in question (what other one was there, ha!) now trotting over with that constant, careful expression. I mean, he was smiling, but his blue eyes were guarded.

As always, I told myself that he'd been chewed up and spat out by most civilians. It was okay that he didn't fully trust me, even after so long. Hurts were harder to overcome than that. And I wasn't gonna be a selfish asshole and get insulted over it.

Time and constancy were my allies here.

And then I saw the instant Naturo's scent reached my friend's little brother, his nose wrinkling and eyes confused.

I knew the feeling.

Naruto stank of chakra, an almost electric scent that had my hair rising. The effect was barely anything now, my own system well used to the amount he was leaking, but Kiba had to have been unnerved.

Add in the musk of predator and fox and, well...

Hitoshi had always smelled of an apex predator, a twang that dad carried too and I'd been told I'd developed after signing the contract. I was used to it. But, the thing is, that for all their fierceness and bite, Inuzuka weren't quite as close to the top of the food chain as a panther...or a bijuu.

“Kiba,” I clamped a hand on his shoulder, pulling him half a step into my side so that my own scent would hopefully flood his much keener senses. “This is Naruto, my imouto’s best friend.”
I had faith in the brat, though. He'd befriended Naruto in *Canon*, without any interference whatsoever.

“Is that a dog?”

Well...never let it be said that Naruto didn't have his priorities in order.

“Yep!” I smirked, pushing Kiba closer a step and plucking Akamaru from the space between us. I was so proud of the little guy when he didn't so much as fuss.

Have I mentioned before that my favourite character was the dog?

It actually took me just wondering out loud who was best on the climbing frame for the boys to actively hit it off, running away with a kind of competitive camaraderie that I didn’t think was going to get out of hand. And, if it did, Hana would bonk both of their heads!

Whilst the boys got better acquainted, I cast an eye around the playground but, as expected, no sign of ANBU.

Trying not to feel put out as the list of unsolvable frustrations piled up, I trotted over to the boys.

The next day didn't include any dog petting so, understandably, wasn't an improvement on my long week.

Honestly, at this rate, I think I'd take Hitoshi almost crushing me in our sleep than going without fluffy comfort. Literally. Unfortunately, FuFu was reportedly growing bigger by the day and Hitoshi was determined to slot himself into her life as much as possible so that, when the time came for me to meet her, I wasn't at risk of kitty chow.

I was forced to settle for duck-stuffed coconut buns. Well, it wasn't much of a trial, but anyway.
Talking business, dry as sand, *was*.

“Do you think it's feasible?”

Across the dining room table, reading specs low on her nose, Kaiya-hime sighed. Spread out between us were heaps of documents, most of them ours, some of them hers.

Orange-shadowed eyes glanced up to meet mine, bisected by the gold frames of her glasses. “As things stand now? Yes.”

Mikoto let out a quiet, happy breath beside me.

“Unfortunately, there isn't a great number of lots in locations worth the investment. You'd have to really convince the owners to sell and the live will rose accordingly. On top of that, you'd need a slightly different focus, so that your customers aren't split instead of doubled. Also,” the Akimichi picked up another sheath of papers, flicking through with clinical efficiency, “you need more hands before anything. Not only will you be too busy with the expansion to man the stall everyday, but you need staff to be ready to take over as soon as construction is complete.”

“Oh.” I opened my mouth, lips sticky from the duck.

Mikoto glanced at me, knowingly, as Kaiya waited.

“Ah…”

“Stop stalling and say it,” Kaiya barked.

*I don't want employees.*

“I'm not sure anyone will want to-”

‘Slap!’ A pile of forms, about half the thickness of my pinkie, landed against the table, skidding slightly from the momentum.
“All the people who have expressed interest in working at my restaurants. For most, a food stall isn't much of a difference to matter.”

Bugger.

“Why don't you want people?” Kaiya held up her hand when I moved to deny it. “No lies, I see your face. And don't tell me it's that silly independence nonsense again.”

My lids dropped to conceal the irritated rolling of my eyes. Gahhhh.

Mikoto had my back very soundly in most things. Especially business.

Unfortunately, she also seemed to have developed her own loophole in her own bloody policy. As in, snaking me when she thought I was being self destructive.

“I believe Kiharu-chan is concerned about the safety of her recipes. They are unique and any kind of betrayal could potentially ruin us. Most of Kiharu-chan's workload is the baking and the recipes themselves; if her menial hours are cut back, we will have to hire someone to handle those recipes.”

I slurped my tea, loudly.

Which is how we found ourselves here, at Nekki's, two days later.

“Good morning!” A young girl ducked inside, no older than seventeen with a pretty light brunette bob. Just seeing the shine on her pin-straight hair had my hands twitching to fix the windswept mess of my own.

“Good morning,” I swallowed, feeling ridiculous beside the stool.

I felt even worse when she dipped into a respectful bow like, geez, I'm a midgit kid. Way to make me feel even younger.
Gin stabbed a sharp, manicured nail into the curve of my spine and I internally wondered why I'd even asked the two apprentices to help.

“Please take a seat. Tea?”

_Ah. That's why._

Hoshiko smiled gently, lifting the teapot to illustrate her point. We weren't standing on any kind of ceremony here but it was nice that _one_ of us wasn't incompetent.

Honestly, Gin was here because, a) she'd basically invited herself when I asked Hoshiko-senpai and, b) she wouldn't let me procrastinate the hard decisions. Like telling someone 'no'.

I hated that part. God fucking forbid I have to _fire_ someone.

Thankfully, the girls proved savvy and helpful and I'd sounded out five girls - three under twenty, one just about to turn the big 2-1 and another with her pregnancy just starting to show - before it got too late.

Tomorrow, Mikoto and I would start seeing how they were with food.

I wasn't looking forward to it.

And I was right not to.

For a girl who'd kinda wanted to be a teacher _before_ , it turned out that I'm a _shockingly_ shit one!

“Oh! Sorry, I should've said to take it off the heat!”

“- _icing sugar, I meant icing sugar_-”
“Maybe,” Mikoto gently pulled me aside an hour and a half in, “I should do the training whilst you focus on planning the next few steps?”

I wilted like a posey in the bloody Sahara.

“I cook with the kids just fine!”

Mikoto sighed, looking Very Motherly and I automatically backpedaled a little on instinct, shying away. She soldiered on anyway. “That's because they're helping you with simple things, like passing and mixing...it’s very different from taking a step back and allowing people to make their own mistakes and learn without interference. And, some things we may find obvious after so long, are difficult for those who have never used them or done them before. Have patience, Kiharu-chan...it will all fall into place.”

I breathed in deep...and exhaled slowly.

Yeah...yeah, I could do that.

The weekend was busy, as usual, but I felt...better. More grounded.

The million thoughts buzzing through my head felt so much more settled than before and I internal marvelled that a few well-spoken words could have such a profound effect.

Shisui was feeling better, his legs almost ready for him to scrap the crutches too, and we were essentially back to normal. He knew something about Itachi and Ensui. He was helping me, the two of us getting to know his cousin's teammates.

He still laughed like I was the funniest person he'd ever met and he wasn't tired of my drama.

Ensui was working late, missing the weekly meal with Shikaku and Yoshino more often than his godmother would like, but he was eating and sleeping and, from what I could guess, that would have to be enough right now. He had a friend in the hospital he'd been visiting but not said anything about. He had some kind of secret with Itachi. He'd had a black eye last week.
He'd come round to dinner and smirked and sniped and we were okay, it was okay.

Dad was stressed and Inoichi-oji looked tired but they still lit up when they saw me come in, especially if Ino was on my hip, and dinner was as warm as always. Sora looked better, her cheeks rosy and the flower shop was doing well.

Ino was a precious constant, happy and fussy and petulant. I wouldn't change her for the world when, on Saturday, I was over for a sleepover and we shared another bath. Hana had been around before dinner, smelling strongly of dog and with blissful satisfaction in her eyes that screamed of how well she'd been handling the latest litter. I made her dog-shaped cookies to celebrate.

On Sunday, Mikoto had the girls (Chiemi, Eiko, Ikue, Kira and Maaya) train with Kaiya-hime's servers at one of the less-hectic restaurants (we couldn't exactly throw them in the deep end and expect them to survive, let alone learn). Not only did this have Nekki's open for business as usual (the past few days had been devoted to sorting out our shit) but it wasn't me running it.

“This is a terrible idea.” Nee-chan groaned, hair tied back in the cutest little bun with my red bandana to replace his usual blue one. Beside him, Akane ignored the protests. I was perfectly confident in the Elder, not just because of her Sharingan but she just screamed competency, but Genma...well.

Akane had a point that she did only have the one hand. Genma was, for all intents and purposes, her little helper for the day.

“Agreed!” I beamed, tugging on the way my tiny apron fell on his much longer frame and biting back a snicker when the waist ended up sitting just below his sternum, the skirt of it at the pockets of his blue trousers. Naturally, I'd insisted he wear new stuff. I didn't give a hoot how many times it had been sanitised, I was not having murder clothes in my bakery. “But I have to go business shopping and meet some new suppliers with Yuri-oba and Mikoto-hime is with the fresh mea- uhhh -new hires. Kaiya-hime is overdue so this is how it's gotta be!”

“I'm not being paid,” the Tokubetsu insisted.

“You're surprisingly sucky at thumb war,” I shrugged like ‘what can you do?’

We weren't open yet but Raidou was already sat at the bar, smirking in great amusement.
“Izumo-kun and ‘Tetsu-kun promised they’d check in on you,” I reminded him, as if they hadn’t almost wet themselves when they’d heard.

Genma clicked his tongue, obviously missing the clack of his senbon but hey! No weapons in the stall!

“Right,” I checked my invisible watch, sharing a firm nod with Akane. “I need to meet Yuri-oba in ten. See ya!”

I high-fived Ensui as I went passed.

Unlike my usual daywear, I wasn't wearing my uniform. I wasn't even wearing a yukata.

The mandarin-collared white shirt fell to my thighs, crisp and new, held close by the beautifully ornate (almost tapestried) amber and blue shawl Yuri-oba had brought me, an early birthday present for today. My legs were sheathed in simple slate gray leggings but I was wearing dressy red sandals that pinched my toes and my hair was half pulled back by two scarlet chopsticks. That was the only good thing about thick hair: stuff stayed stuck in it.

(Well...it was good except for brushes, dammit!)

I was only meeting some new merchants, looking around the few stalls that owners were open to selling but...I'd seen how Kaiya-hime dressed. Well, the answer was nicely. And I was almost thirteen and I didn't have a handful of Clan Matriarchs watching my back this time.

I was spearheading this thing. And I didn't want to look like I didn't take this so very seriously.

Baking may have been a way to escape being a ninja, a way to preserve a little bit of my old self and the recipes of my old world, my old mother and old grandmother. But it had become more than that.

Nekki's was my life now, my future, and I wanted to keep going.

“Oba-san, thank you for taking today to come with me;” I bowed low when I reached the older woman, her grey-blonde hair contrasting wonderfully against her soft blue shift, orange dappled Koi
fish hand embroidered along the hems and soft pink shadow on her eyelids.

The seamstress smiled, soft and loving. “You're more than welcome, my dove. Shall we?” She inclined her head and extended her elbow for into link arms.

I swallowed hard, looping my elbow through hers. “Yes, we shall!”

First stop: The lace makers.

A room full of seamstresses, most wizened and having been perfecting their craft longer than my dad had been alive, was a terrifying thing. Despite my extra memories, I'd felt ever do young, bowing low in respect and pressing a Victoria sponge into the owner’s gnarled hands. Madame Chi, the child of immigrant silk workers who had been born in Fruit Country.

Something about her tiny, hunched figure, wispy white hair carefully pulled back from her neck and face, made me want to cry somehow. Just a bit.

(She'd been beautiful, inside and out, and I'd left almost feeling like I was leaving a holy shrine. The pocket square of lace so fine it appeared like spider's web had me shielding that side of my hip from being bumped for the rest of the day.)

The second stop had been to view the first property, which I immediately ruled out.

There was no way I could open up a food stall beside a fish mongers. There was just absolutely no bloody way.

I tried not to think of the only other property on my list. Ain't no crying in the club -er- the street.

“It was a long shot, you knew that from the start,” Yuri-oba pointed out fairly, serene as anything. I tried to channel a bit of her unflappable calm but couldn't quite manage it.

That was when I noticed a certain spikey ponytail moving through the crowd.
“Iruka-kun!” I beamed, genuinely pleased to see him. Oh-ho but that boy had good timing.

A tanned face, even tanner than normal, twisted in my direction so I waved my arm so he knew where to head. When he stepped closer, I noticed the young woman following him.

A pale pink scarf rested over her dark hair, her skin dusky like most people from Kumo (I could guess, considering that's where Iruka's caravan escort had been headed). She wasn't much taller than her young Chuunin guide, curvy in a way that had more than a few eyes lingering despite the large basket strapped across her back, a pigeon-sized bird perched on the rattan lid.

“Ohayo, Kiharu-chan,” Iruka smiled, obviously relieved to see a familiar face. “I was just escorting Ikeru-san to the potters sector.”

“Pottery?” I parroted, eyebrows jumping upwards. I'd never given much thought to it, in all honesty. Most of my bowls, the nice ones, were presents or heirlooms of Kaa-san's. My cheaper ones were just picked up from the shops.

The woman, Ikeru-san, dipped into a polite bow and I automatically mimicked her. “I sell dyes, a family recipes from before I moved to Kumo. Ikeru Amaya.”

“Dazai Kiharu, baker.” I replied dumbly.

“Hachimitsu Yuri, seamstress,” my grandmother continued.

“I'm sorry if I interrupted anything,” I glanced between the Kumo woman, who looked perfectly as ease in the business of the foreign street, and an amicable Iruka. “But I hope your journey was okay?”

“It was alright, if a little hard and trying at times,” Iruka replied, apparently at ease enough with Ikeru-san to talk about his mission. “Is Genma-san back yet from Kiri?”

The reminder immediately perked me up again, and I bounced on the balls of my feet in wicked delight. Ikeru-san, dark eyes liquid brown, seemed to enjoy the show we were providing. Iruka, knowing me a little better, narrowed his eyes in suspicion. “What…?”
“He’s back, yes, but he’s a little... busy~”

“Is he on shift?” Iruka blinked.

I cackled openly at that. “Sure, that’s not incorrect. In fact, he should be at Nekki’s right now with your bros~” a violent, sudden flush burned Iruka's entire face and Ikeru-san's lips quirked in an amused grin. “~if you want to head right over.”

“Er-th-that is, Ikeru-san needs to go to the-”

“What is this ‘Nekki’s’?” The woman in question asked, filling her head and shifting the leather basket strap that rested across her chest.

“My bakery,” I chirped back. “I sell homemade desserts on the Market Street and it's something of a favourite for my regulars, like Iruka-kun’s family.”

The dye-maker tapped a short finger, stained with navy blue designs, against her chin in mock thought. I decided I liked her immensely. “The journey was long and, as a tourist, local delicacies are a must. If you wouldn't mind, Umino-kun?”

With flustered grace, Iruka acquiesced and, smugly, I bid them adieu.

But something made me called out after the pink veil that threatened to disappear into the crush of the crowds. “Ikeru-san!”

Her calm face twisted back towards me, openly curious.

“Can you make edible dyes?!”

Red-stained lips pursed slightly in thought (a man tripped over the curb beside us) before opening to reply, frank as anything. “I have never tried.”

My shoulders slumped a little.
“But that doesn't mean I cannot.” Dark eyes shone knowingly before she turned away again. “We will discuss this later, Dazai-san!”

“But….” I called weakly after her, puffing out my cheeks before turning to meet Yuri's gaze. “She's a bit a of a whirlwind, no?”

“You're not wrong there,” my grandmother agreed with gentle amusement. “...Nor do you lack a similar effect, Kiharu-chan.”

I flushed hotly.

And we continued on...to disappointment.

“Why the long face, Hime?” Dad tucked a finger under my chin at dinner later, leaning to speak directly in my ear over the hustle and bustle of the meal. I'd shed my shawl, too warm in the house and far too lovely to risk spillages, leaving me in just my shirt and leggings. The chopsticks had long fallen from my hair so it was just loose too.

“We couldn't find another property for the expansion…” I stabbed a shrimp on my utensil like it was all its fault. “Well. At least the merchants were nice and Akane-sama kept the stall going fine.”

“I heard about Genma-san, oh yes,” Tou-san chuckled, loud and rumbling in his chest and Shika's eyes bore into the side of my face across the table. Kid probably thought we were going to break into purrs at any moment. “Nice going there, by the way, gave me something to laugh about at lunch when I stopped by for a bite.”

Against my will, a smile curled my lips up. Devilishly, I might add. “Must be a nice change to be the one doing the laughing for once, Tou-san?”

Honestly, you'd have thought I had shot him, the way he reacted.

“Ki-chan! So mean!”
“What's the latest comment this time, Seiichi?” Inoichi-oji leaned back to call down to us from the other side of the long table and Sora visibly pinched his hands at the lack of manners. “Ow!”

“Any plans for your birthday?” Oba-san turned to me, even as she wiped at the rice stuck to Ino’s chin.

“I might get Hana-chan to go to the Onsen with me,” I mused, cheeks puffed in thought. Honestly, given how crazy things had been recently, it had almost slipped my mind. “It is her birthday not long after mine,” I reasoned.

“I'm coming too!”

“Er, Ino-chan,” I balked at the idea, mental images of a stressful few hours of trying to keep the demanding kid from drowning in the hot water dancing through my mind.

The petite blonde scowled - never a good sign - and I immediately shot a panicked glance at Sora.

“Now, Ino, you're supposed to help me wrap Kiharu-chan's present then,” Her mother reminded her with a quelling look and blue eyes turned to bore into her mother's. Out of the Hot Seat for now, I was tempted to fan myself...or make a break for it whilst the coast was clear. “How are you going to do both at the same time?”

The decision was obviously a terrible one to make, judging by how Ino was forced to sit back, still grumpy, and think hard on the stalemate before her. Honestly, she almost reminded me of Winnie the Pooh's thinking pose.

“Well...I guess I'll stay then,” she eventually announced, as though the world had been held suspended with bated breath.

I hid a smile behind the rim of my glass, business difficulties temporarily forgotten.

The next day, three days before my thirteenth, Mikoto and I planned to meet up to go over the
arrangements and how, without a property even on the table, we are going to move forward.

Plans which were swiftly ditched when, at seven in the morning, my breakfast was interrupted by the arrival of Yoshino of all people, Shika on one hip and Chouji on the other.

I opened the door to her with my hair still in a towel turban.

“Wha-?”

“Kaiya is in labour, thought you ought to know.” Yoshino cut straight to the chase before bouncing each boy on her hip to illustrate her next point. “The three of us are heading over to Sora's to wait with her and Ino. Come along if you want. I know I'd appreciate the help with the children.”

“Ah,” I replied. Intelligently.

And then, in her usual abrupt fashion, Yoshino turned back down the steps and continued down the street. The Nara's didn't even live that far from the Yamanaka so why…?

Honestly, I just couldn't believe Kaiya was in labour! I mean, I knew she was fit to almost pop, almost a week overdue and she'd mentioned offhandedly that the healers had discussed inducing labour if it didn't happen soon but...nevermind Kaiya and Chouza and Chouji, I wasn't ready!

The first non-Canon-compliant baby! This was it, people, the watershed moment where, no matter all other failures, the fate of the world had changed.

Because, no matter what, after today, Chouji would have a baby sibling.

Another Akimichi. Another Shinobi, probably.

They could fall in love one day and get married or whatever. They'd have a butterfly effect on their lives.

They were going to be, in both a very similar but impossibly different way, just like me.
Something...new.

I got dressed in a blur, slamming the door behind me and running all the way to the Yamanaka house, nevermind how I was gasping and gulping by the time I rounded the right street.

“Ensui…” I nodded at my friend, sat on the porch steps with a sleeping Shikamaru in his lap. Really, it was far too early for the kid. “You get time off work again?”

Ensui's eyes, still encircled with bruise-like bags of exhaustion but less severe than the previous week, fluttered half-shut in the bright morning light, nodding wordlessly with a neck as weak as a pipe cleaner.

“Hey.” I stepped closer, pressing a hand to his forehead and frowning at the haggard lines that didn't exist when he relaxed. “Why don't you go grab some sleep, I'll wake you if we get any news.”

“Nah,” the twenty-year-old rasped, swallowing and trying again for a moderately more human sound. “No, I'll be fine.”

“You look like crap.” I corrected him, flopping down beside him and wrapping my arms around my bent legs, bopping my knee against his. “What's up? We haven't had a quiet chat in a little while and you look like you need it.”

As one, we both glanced down at the sleeping boy in his older cousin's arms, completely conked out to the world. Heh, yeah, Shika-chan wasn't gonna be stirring for a good long while.

I turned my attention to the peaceful street, eyes tracing over the different trees that lined the pavement at even intervals. Both of us looking straight ahead, Ensui eventually started talking.

“Why did you fall out with Itachi?”

Honesty begets honesty and I shrugged, a lazily and listless motion. “I honestly don't know. Just after Danzo fled, he talked to Nee-chan about his career options and specialising, and that's why he was with Akane for a bit before he got his new team but...one day he just started walking the other way when he saw me, turning away if I waved. Before I knew it, he was avoiding me completely.”
Ensui hummed, eyes fixed on nothing but looking strangely peaceful. Without the stressed buzzing that had tensed every motion in recent months. I was glad.

“I got into a fight at work.” He sighed, running a finger down Shika’s soft baby cheek before settling his head more comfortably into the crook of his neck, pausing when the little boy snuffled for a minute before falling silent once more. Only then did Ensui continue. “We were supposed to be on a case together but we’ve been having some...communication issues...and our frustrations got a little… physical.”

“The day you had a black eye.” I lamented, something like helplessness clenching my chest. Oh, Ensui… I knew you'd been struggling but.

“Yeah, yeah, that was the next morning.”

“I'm worried about Itachi's new team. Kabuto smells off and something doesn't feel right. Maybe I'm just paranoid. But Shisui has asked around and I've talked to him a bit and nothing seems to suggest...but I thought you should know.”

Hazel eyes slid to meet mine, almost managing to twinkle with dark humor despite the glazed exhaustion that dulled them. “Another thing to keep tabs on.”

I snorted quietly, not wanting to wake Shikamaru. “I know the feeling. Expanding the stall, keeping tabs on the kids and Hitoshi, not to mention Tou-san and you and Shisui...did you know he might be back training before the month is out?”

“...fuck, really?”

Yeah, my sentiments exactly.

“Yeah.”

“...is it bad I don't want him out there, again?”
It *was* bad, insubordinate and, god, but I must be a terrible influence but-

“Me too, Ensui. Me too.”

At 15 minutes past four, Akimichi Chouko entered the world and, in the sense of a completely new life created where there had once never existed a second child, we kissed another aspect of *Canon* goodbye.

Generally, on my birthday, I was allowed to sleep in. I wasn't a morning person in any respect and it was tradition that I got a lie on my day of the year.

Despite the fact he'd been shoving his way into my bed since I'd upgraded from the kiddie-sized one and full well knew how I treasured every minute of sleep I managed to snatch, Hitoshi decided to flip that shit on its head.

He fucking woke me up at dawn.

*Dawn.*

As in, it was still dark outside.

(Okay, sunrise was at like, five am but still!)

!?!?

Conscious returned to me like a slap to the face...or the bat of a heavy, club-like tail to the shoulder, and I swear I almost leapt out of my skin.

Too breathless to scream, my heart immediately dropped to my knees when I noticed the open curtains, Hitoshi waiting ready beside them.
This was some kind of *cruel* repetition-!

“Noooooo~” I whined, high in my throat and muffled into my duvet as I flopped back down. “I’m *sleeping*.”

My bed was deliciously warm, fluffy and snuggle and the sheets were fresh...my eyelids weighed down, vision turning fuzzy and then I was driftin-

A jaw clamped around my ankle, hot and sharp and just hard enough to indent the skin. Suddenly, *much* more awake, my eyes snapped open and down to meet narrowed emerald.

The huge cavern of the panther's chest rumbled in warning.

The teeth pulled away slightly. “Up.”

“Low blow.” I frowned… it was never fair when he pulled that instinct shit. The *amount* of times he'd picked me up as a baby and I'd learned to automatically fall limp…

Should've known the damned cat was training me subconsciously. Err, rude much?

Then, the reason said cat was forcing me out of bed at such an ungodly hour snapped into place in my mind.

The duvet was flung away, landing on Hitoshi who batted it off with a kittenish Yoel of displeasure, and I bounced from the mattress, exhaustion forgotten.

“FuFu!!!”

Quick strides took me to the closet and blind fingers rummaged in the dark for a sweater by touch alone. “You're taking me to her, right?!” I grinned, jittery with excitement and nerves, over my shoulder at the black smudge of my Summon. A thick, fluffy knit brushed my fingers and I yanked it out and off it's hanger, pulling it over my sleep top without a care and leaving my bushy hair trapped
down the back. Tucked away, at least I wouldn't be spitting it out on the ride. A pair of dad's trackies went over my matching trousers, the legs rolled up a few times and the waist ties tied tight. (Hehe...ties tied tight..)

A pair of socks and then my boots, which had been placed in my room because I hadn't worn them since the last time they were cleaned, and a coat thrown on top for good measure. No matter the season, predawn temperatures were not a joke.

“Scroll?” Hitoshi asked and I patted the large roll slung diagonally across my back, fetched from its stash.

The panther then placed both forepaws on my window sill, the poor thing creaking ominously, and, with an exasperated sigh at the uncanny Deja Vu, I clambered to sit behind the hunch of his shoulders.

“What's the plan for Mama?” I called once we were on the road and out of range of most ears.

“We get there, you are not eaten by the mother and you add Fuji to the Contract.”

“Yeah, no,” I face-planted his neck, ignoring how my head bounced uncomfortably with each bounding lope. “That doesn't tell me how I'm not gonna die; Her jaws are huge, remember?! Two chomps and that's it!”

The panther beneath me sighed. “Cu-”

“Kami-sama, it'll probably just take one, I'm such a midget-”

“Cub.”

“What?”

“I'll scent you enough to put the mother off but, regardless, Fuji should recognise you on an instinctual level; more than likely, she'll come to you .”
I breathed in and out, slow and steady. *Okay, Kiharu, you can do this. Just a couple more cats is all. Yeah, yeah...just a couple of kitties...*

The village sped past, barely more than silhouettes of houses and streets to my poorer vision. The sky was clear of clouds and the stars were just starting to sink back into obscurity as rose-petal red and pale pink streaked across the horizon. Dawn was coming.

Peachy light had just started to touch on the treetops, the edge of the Hokage monument, the cliff side, by the time Hitoshi and I made it passed the boundaries and into the woods. The underbrush and canopy alike fell silent as we tore through the treetops and part of me, the fragment not currently quaking either from nerves or anticipation, wondered if it was the sound or the smell of predator. That had the other animals become so still, I mean.

...probably both.

Before long, no more than a few minutes since we'd hit the training forests, Hitoshi dropped down into a clearing and immediately pitched him shoulders to dump me on my ass. Unprepared for the speed of his assholeness, I landed arse over teakettle and feeling more than a little dizzy.

You know that saying, *'no rest for the wicked'*? Yeah, I'm pretty sure I embody it.

Head sore from bumping on the hard-packed, rainless earth, I was given zero-to-no warning before Hitoshi started licking my face.

“Grnnnnnnnnnnn-!” I complained, mouth firmly clamped shut because *no*. The stupid, annoying, *gross* carnivore was rubbing his fur against me like he wanted to shed a bloody winter coat, like cleanliness was going out of fashion and he was doing my a big ol' favour. Like! Like- like he was about to take me literally into the Tiger's den and I'd not even had time to write a will-

“Does Tou-san know we're doing this now?” I asked breathlessly. My clothes looked strangely sooty with all the cat hair and I didn't even want to *think* about the state of my own locks.

“Do you *see* an ANBU platoon?” He parried back, droll as anything.
“Fair point.”

“Now,” Hitoshi plonked himself down next to me, except he never did anything so uncouth. ‘Rested’ possibly conveyed the correct level of snootiness that characterised everything about him. “When we arrive, don't breathe too much. Or sweat.”

Putting my weight onto my hands, the dew-damp grass sticking to my palms, I pushed off the ground, batting at the wet spodge on my rump with a sigh. The air was cool, misting around the edges of the field and almost wet on my tongue as I heaved another sigh before clambering back onto my panther. “Don't breath and consciously control my glands. Easy.”

When we entered the clearing, it was with pure adrenaline-fueled swiftness. I'd scarcely had a second for a shaky, ‘calming’ breath...before we were plummeting. Landing with a violent jar, that rattled my teeth and seemed to shake the earth, a handful of meters from One Angry Pussycat. And a plus one.

Yeah…maybe subtlety would’ve worked better here.

Well. No time for regrets!

“Go!” Hitoshi snarled, claws furrowing deep divots into the soil before he launched himself forward in an onyx blur.

Chest heaving, I nodded frantically, casting desperate eyes around for the small figure of Hitoshi’s baby brat.

Only for the bottom to fall out of my stomach at the obvious tiger-panther hybrid that greeted my searching gaze.

*I didn't...think cubs could grow that fast…*

It wasn't a cub that stared at me, yellow eyes like two witch-lamps in the dark, but a hunter. Already half the size of her sire, FuFu’s platter-sized paws let me know that she was in no way done with any kind of growing.
“H-hey baby-girl,” I cooed, hands raised carefully as I trudged closer. I knew I could die at any moment, a brief but bloody end to another short life but...if I didn't do something, I was as good as dead anyway.

Off to the side, MaMa snarled thunderously, almost seeming to echo off the trees, and the noise went straight to my pulse.

Each breath felt delicate.

But then Hitoshi was there again, hissing like a Tom Cat, and, despite being a third of her size, the panther seemed to huddle her back another step.

Slightly to the side, FuFu cocked her great, black head, the white stripes that cut through her inky fur like smoke and snow fading into the shadows around her.

She looked...inquisitive.

(she looked bigger a bloody German shepherd-)

“Come on, baby,” I tried again, reaching to slowly-slowly pull the Summoning Scroll from my shoulder. All I needed was a little blood-

Yellow eyes, deep like honey or topaz or endless golden light, tracked the movement intently.

“Fuji~” I whispered, crouching to spread the large parchment out and kissing my teeth, like I used to do to pet cats before. And still did now, in all honesty.

Her ears, velvet black with wispy white hairs, pricked forwards and, so suddenly my limbs locked in mute terror, she was ambling closer.

Oh shit shit shit-

A damp nose, pink like the tongue that peeked out to blep me, booped my forehead, exactly where
my bangs parted to reveal skin.

Oh.

Huge, liquid eyes stared down into mine, the pupils like droplets of balsamic in rich oil, and I could almost feel my own dilate.

MaMa rumbled angrily, like angry, and made an aborted movement to swipe at her boyfriend. Wow...unhappy couples-

_Berserker Tiger, Kiharu, you idiot! The Contract -_

Fuck, right, er-

“Sorry, pretty baby!” I breathed, even as the too-curious-for-her-own-good cub snuffled through my curls like I'd hidden cat treats in the mess somewhere.

I took a fortifying breath, ducking my neck away from any jaws (incase worse came to worst) and glanced one last time at the vibrant amber animal all but vibrating with rage. As she batted at her baby-daddy.

And then swiped the simple switchblade across one of FuFu's paws.

The reaction was immediate.

The baby - three months, only three months, poor thing - whined, high and confused. Twitching back, even as I smeared the scarlet onto the paper and watched as the Contract completely absorbed it, she gave out what could only be described as...a cry.

Naturally, when my baby girl cries, I cry.

“Done?!” Hitoshi snarled, backing up with every inch of his tense, fur-spiked form screaming ‘piss off. My cub’.
“Sorry!!” FuFu's fur was heart-clenchingly soft, especially the pale ruff wreathing her face, as I gently cupped her head in apology. Bizarrely, the pain hadn't scared her off, gaze still sad and oh so confused...but, then again, she hadn't fled to her mother when Hitoshi was kicking up a storm.

Maybe she was already used to their domestics and knew her folks are just the tough love kind.

Behind Hitoshi, MaMa swiped violently at a nearby bush, dark eyes boring into mine as she started pacing.

“Why...why isn't she killing me?”

FuFu purppped, rubbing her cheek against mine with that same, childlike bewilderment.

Hitoshi slowly lowered his maws, fangs slipping away as something akin to his usual calm returned. His back was still to me, protective and sending out an unmistakable claim. His tail, long and slightly clubbed, curled around Fuji's.

“She knows.”

I blinked, looking up to catch dark eyes again. She did not look happy.

“You carry a trace of my scent, it's part of our bond. Already, a mother can sense a change in her young so she knows, at least for now, that she can't kill you.”

“... at least for now?”

FuFu pressed her forehead to mine, effectively blocking her mother, and slow blink at me. I melted.

“She's still a mother, cub. Just watch your back.”
A good few hours later, well after ten and *well* after dad would've checked up on me, we were on our way back to Konoha Main.

“Yo!” I shouted - *squealed* - when I spotted our front door open and dad coming out to greet us. He'd probably sensed our signatures coming-

“Kiharu! Where were you?” Dad called, more aggravated than truly worried. Judging by the apron tied sloppily around his waist, he was making good on his threat to do all the cooking for *me* today. “The boys are no help with techn- *Oh.*”

Genma-nee, Raidou, the boys and Shisui poured out after him, a range of concerned and impatient expressions twisting their faces.

Only to be replaced with identical confusion at my tag-along.

(And, by ‘confusion’, I meant ‘world-shaking, reality-questioning, is-this-a-dream’ confusion.)

“She doesn't know the way,” I admitted, following their collective gaze with a fond smile. “So FuFu-chan had to hold on to her Papa for the walk.” FuFu, drooling all over her dad's tail, seemed to only preen under the attention. Well, there's no mistaking who she took after.

Behind me, Shisui dropped a crutch when Kotetsu started violently choking.

………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………….

“Koinu”: ‘*puppy*’
‘Hachimitsu’: ‘Honey’. Yuri's last name….it felt fitting somehow.

‘Amaya’: ‘night rain’

‘Ikeru’: ‘revive, resurrect’

For anyone wondering how Seiichi is older than Inoichi but was teammates with his younger brother, Inokumo, it's because Seiichi apprenticed with his father during the war. They specialised in tracking, taught by the Contract, and Seiichi is the only one alive now who knows all the techniques: he was the one to teach Hitoshi about his own Contract :’(c. When Seiichi had learned most of it, he was placed on a team with younger ninja and they got a field promotion of Chuunin together. When Seiichi was 18, his father died in front of him in a battle shortly before the Pride were also killed, leaving Seiichi and Hitoshi the only survivors.

Chapter End Notes

Yoooooooooooooo!

Okay so, first things first (I'm the realist~), Uni has been so so crazy like whoa. If my dissertation supervisor could see this word count here, maybe he’d chill his tits lol. Anyway! I'm just passing through to drop this here and I hope it brings a smile to at least one person's face, maybe something sweet to read on your own breaks like I've been chipping away at this in mine! Thanks for reading and all the support, as always xxx

P.S thanks to Vi and the Discord crew for making me laugh every day and helping me overcome my writers block since the last update

P.P.S- Amaya is a tribute to the ever-lovely Elladora ;)

Follow me on tumblr at 'x-authorship-x' where I reblog utter nonsense and you can ask for a discord invite, drop me a question about my fics or just say hi!
Hana is the Only Intelligent Person Here

Chapter Summary

Ever had a pie leak in the oven and make a huge mess?

I am that pie

....what a terrible metaphor

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Kiharu... what?”

Shisui’s bewildered exclamation really seemed to sum up the general vibe.

Kotetsu chose that moment to stop hacking up a lung. “What is that?”

The incredibly rude finger he jabbed at a still-slobbering FuFu had the baby dropping her dad’s tail (to obvious relief) and lopping closer. I quickly reached hand out and grabbed the thick scruff of her neck, skidding forward a little at her strength.

The display wasn't, apparently, reassuring anyone.

“Isn't she gorgeous !”

As if she could understand me, FuFu puuurped with great relish.

Dad beamed, hopping down the stairs and extending a hand for the cub to sniff, which she did with vigour. “She sure is, hime! Congrats, Hitoshi, you sly old-”
“Don’t, please. Seiichi-sama.” Hitoshi bit out, eyes averted and subtly flicking his tail against the droplets of spit still dampening his fur.

Shisui staggered forward a step, forgetting to glare at Izumo when he caught his elbow. “Wait, wait, wait- Ki-” dark eyes begged mine, “-don’t tell me that.”

“Hitoshi fucked a tiger.” I confirmed, dryly remembering my own descent into madness. As it was, I crushed his innocence under the heel of my metaphorical boot.

Distracted by the extremely entertaining view of everyone lose their shit, I really didn't think my select choice of words through.

“Kiharu! Where did you learn- that word!”

I ducked the lunge my wailing father made for me, under the pretence of shepherding FuFu towards the porch steps. “Nee-san,” I replied blandly.

Genma snapped his very-much-metal senbon between his teeth. “Fuck.”

Once I'd gathered everyone inside, my birthday was, overall, a roaring success.

Sure, Izumo and Kotetsu looked green and couldn't physically look at either cat.

Sure, Dad spent the first twenty-five minutes having an extremely serious and adult conversation with Genma outside which absolutely didn't involve a small scuffle before Raidou intervened.

Yes, Hitoshi sulked in the corner.

Yes, dad's food wasn't the most edible thing and Ensui was so tired he started eating it without looking first but-

Shisui brought me heart shaped cookies that Mikoto had helped him make, icing them a pretty blue that was, actually, almost the same colour as my yukata! (Which I'd picked to match my eyes and
wear with the scarf from Yuri-oba.) He'd blushed furiously but, biting into one, I'd made sure to assure him that baking for a baker was actually a lovely change. They'd been pretty damn good too.

I was so proud!

As promised (threatened), Ino came around with her parents who, in turn, preceded the Nara and the Akimichi.

“Nee-chan!” A blonde blur of squealing child smacked into my stomach, making me bend over with a resounding “ooof!”

“Happy birthday! Look, look, look! Do you like my dress? Kaa-san-”

“Yes, imouto,” I laughed loudly, eyes crinkling at the massive grin that stretched my lips, dimples divoting my cheeks. Over by the island, Seiichi and Shisui stared. Ino, for her part, was dressed in an adorable green frock with emerald shoes. Which, actually, looked a lot like the red T-strap ones I wore to work…

I glanced across at Sora, who shrugged with a graceful roll of her shoulders. “She looks up to you, Kiharu-chan; what did you expect?”

I glanced back down at Ino’s excited sapphire eyes and my heart thumped at the innocent adoration there.

Oh.

Ohhhhh -

A tug-tug-tug on my sleeve and I glanced down, this time meeting the almost-black gaze of one Nara Shikamaru.

I kneeled down to his height when the tugging didn't look like it was stopping. “Yes, Shika?”
The little boy stared at me with obvious impatience for a long second before, with another gusty sigh that was *way* too old for him, jerking his chin towards the back corner, beside the back door.

I twisted to see, taking note of how Chouji had gallantly moved to protect Shika from Ino's annoyed poking at the interruption.

By the back door, which was ajar to let in some fresh air, Hitoshi licked a huge, wet stripe up FuFu's foofy forehead, making the sooty fur stick up oddly. The baby visibly preened under the attention of her daddy.

I choked around the heart in my throat, eyes sparkling. “That's my FuFu. Hitoshi had a baby, just like your kaa-san and Tou-san did, didn't they, Chouji-kun?”

The little redhead - really not so little now, he'd had a bit of a spurt recently and I wasn't exactly up to scratch on my own growth - nodded solemnly and, when the other two shifted to glance at him, I gestured furiously for Hitoshi to take Fuji-chan outside.

“Have you three tried some of my Tou-san's onigiri! They're cat shaped!”

They really weren't - dad was *not* the most artistically gifted.

Shisui came ambling over when I'd shooed the kids over to the table, offering up a silent prayer to the gods that hated me that three babies wouldn't incite their wrath by association via food poisoning.

Why couldn't dad cook more like Chouza-oji or Ensui? Or, better yet, Shikaku? (There was a reason Yoshino was so bitter and one of the main ones was that her husband, despite being a great cook, never helped out with meals.)

On second thought-

“Hey, Ki-chan,” Shisui beamed, apparently recovered from the shock earlier. “Akane-sama told me yesterday that I was coming off my crutches I'm just over a week! I was just telling Ensui-”

Did I say this birthday was going well, I meant terribly-
My mouth opened in unconcealed shock, gazing down at Shisui’s legs and taking in how he was barely even using the crutches to move or stand these days. I’d noticed the improvement, of course I had, but what that meant for Shisui’s sick leave...well, it hadn't clicked.

“Really?” I breathed.

“Yeah,” Shisui’s voice was noticeably softer. “She thinks I'll be in the field by May.”

I swallowed hard. “I'll miss you.”

Shisui sucked in a breath and laughed lightly - shakily - on the exhale before shuffling a little closer. “I'm not going anywhere, Ki-chan. Just because I'll be on missions, doesn't mean things have to change.”

I nodded, knowing he wasn't exactly wrong, before the movement tapered off because he was and I didn't want to pretend things were okay anymore. Things didn't use to be so complex.

It was going to be different.

How could I explain that, everytime he or Ensui brushed off my questions about Itachi or Danzo, it felt like they didn't trust me? They trusted each other but they didn't trust me.

That, without Shisui coming to the stall everyday or going out to dinner every Friday or lazing around together, I was worried I'd loose him even more?

It was almost warm enough to go back to Shisui's field again, the ground firming up and the grass grazed by sheep. The poppies would appear, like always, in summer and the grass would grow wild again, rippling like earthen waves in the wind and sun.

Things will change, Shisui, because I'm worried about Kabuto here and you'll be out there, with Tobi and Danzo, and I don't want you to go out, only to die as soon as you're out of my sight -
“Kiharu! Hana-chan is here for your day out!”

My mouth, half opened with eyes boring into Shisui's - who had also frozen - stuttered for a long, suspended moment before I managed to croak out a simple “be right there.”

Shisui was still staring at me, haze falling away to reveal dawning concern, as if he was only just realising that, for all my bravado, I wasn't okay.

I told myself we'd talk about it later.

But not on my birthday. Not at my party.

“Later, Shisui-kun,” I patted his arm, ducking around him towards FuFu on the back step. “Thanks for coming 'round.”

“A-Always-” Shisui stared, head snapping back towards a suddenly much more attentive Ensui. The Chuunin shrugged but I could feel them both tracking my movements as I joined the two felines by the door. Internally, I cursed my own stupid damn timing.

“Hey, baby~” I cooed as soon as FuFu noticed my approach and, ignoring how Shisui choked behind me, burrowed my hands in the plush fur around her cheeks. “You've been so, so good today - yes you have! Yes you have! -”

“Get to the point!” Hitoshi sniped, flashing his fangs. “You sicken me.”

I ignored him too.

FuFu started bumped her nose against my cheeks, mouthing her fangs along my shoulder in a relatively harmless play. Still, the yukata was new, so I pinched her ear and tugged her away. “You've not made a mess or fussed with all the strange faces-”

“Watch it, brat,” Genma smirked from the sofa with Raidou. I was nice so I didn't mention how close they were sat, plenty of space either side.
“-but it's time to take you back to MaMa, yeah?”

Fuji licked my finger.

“I'll take her back, cub,” Hitoshi grumbled, turning his face away when FuFu scooted closer at the rumble in his chest. “The Girl who smells of Dog is waiting and I have no patience for children.”

I rolled my eyes, well aware that Hitoshi knew everyone's names. He was just being flighty again.

Hitoshi was such a sweetie.

“Okay,” I leaned back, unconvinced by his reasoning but knowing he wasn't necessarily wrong. FuFu had been here for a couple of hours anyway and, no matter how relaxed the little lunchtime get-together had been, I really didn't want to stress her. The only reason she was here was because Hitoshi had insisted that socialisation was fundamental, especially around 'the Pride'.

That Hitoshi had known and acknowledged the love I felt for everyone who had come around to wish me a good thirteenth…

“Thanks ‘Toshi,” I smiled, pressing a messy kiss to FuFu's forehead and stroking the fur around her honey eyes.

“Go on.”

I quickly did my rounds, thanking everyone for their thoughtful gifts and pressing soft kisses to the kid's foreheads - just like FuFu, actually - before I found myself on front for Ensui and Shisui again.

“I'll see you for lunch, Ensui?” I prodded the older guy gently, aware of how irregular his work had been recently. Lunches had faded in the last two months, so my question was a little futile. I asked it anyway, motivated by my sudden thoughts earlier.

“I'll try,” he replied and I didn't push.
“How about you, Shisui-kun?” I turned to the final third of our trio and tried to grin.

A warm, larger hand snatched mine up and I blinked at Shisui’s earnest expression. My fingers twitched, cradled between his.

“I promise, Ki.”

Over Shisui’s shoulder, Genma quirked a single brow and a sudden flush burned my cheeks, almost seeming to slap me with it.

Shisui’s jaw dropped.

“Right, Okay! Hana’s waiting, though, sooooo later!”

“What was that about?” Hana tilted her head, rather like her (currently absent) dogs.

“Nee-san made it weird!” I hissed, pushing her out the door and down the steps.

“‘Weird’?” Hana’s nose crumpled before her eyes popped wide. “Don’t tell me you fancy him!”

I stopped in my tracks and, resting hands on my knees in the middle of the street, genuinely cried with laughter.

“Oh Kami!” I wheezed, the air almost whistling in my lungs with every desperate, hiccuping breath. “I didn't lose my mind when I turned into a teenager, you do realise that?”

Hana, a few meters ahead, jutted out her hip. “What? You've been friends for years!”

“And I've spent most of them calling him ‘sister’ and trying to get him together with Raidou!”
Hands on hips as I straightened up again, I threw my head back with another roar of laughter.

I missed the dawning realisation crossing Hana's face, as if something that had rested just beyond her grasp was finally in her possession...only to be something completely different from expected.

A dawning realisation that shifted her worldview.

“You're actually stupid, aren't you?” Her voice was, strangely enough, filled with genuine awe. “I know you can be a bit silly but... blind? Really?”

“Phew!” I tried to calm myself, stepping up beside the younger girl and pressing my cool fingers to hot cheeks. “That was hilarious, and thank you, but we better get going or we'll be late.”

For the record, the onsen was great. Essentially a huge bath/spa combo? Kami, I could stay there forever.

Hana had certainly enjoyed it too, hair pulled back in a high tail and a strong flush on her cheeks. My own curls were stuffed in a tight ballerina bun but...even slicking it back wouldn't save me from Bushiness™.

On Hana's other side, Akane gently washed her face in the warm water.

When Hana and I had made our joint-birthday plans for today's little trip, we'd had to factor in that neither of us were considered emancipated adults (although Hana would be terrifyingly soon) and, therefore, required an adult.

Yuri was working today but had promised to come around for dinner. Mikoto had given me a lovely hairbrush the other day after work but, well, it was a day off for her too. She should spend it with her own kids. Same for Sora-oba.

So I'd asked and Akane had agreed.

The onsen wasn't busy, a pair of older women in the corner and an elderly lady examining her nails on the steps. Great curls of steam twisted artistically in the air, the water tinted the faintest green with
tea and the wooden walls shining from condensation.

I splashed Hana a little, conscious of disturbing the others present, and giggled quietly when her nose crumpled, one eye peeking open.

Her foot kicked mine, languid and harmless, but we shared a smile anyway.

Resting my head on the ledge behind me, I stared up at the blue sky, the faintest of amber on the horizon as the afternoon faded away. There was a slightest haze of cloud but, for the most part, the sky was an undisturbed void of blue above me.

I felt small but, in the grand scheme of things, the thought almost made me feel better. Like I was just a girl, not a bug under a microscope.

Lips parting, I sucked in a deep, revelling breath.

My mind unwound.

The following week, when Mikoto had commandeered the shop so the new staff could familiarise themselves with the layout, I found the time to catch up with Ikeri-san.

We were sat in one of the more casual tea houses in the merchant's district, a pot of cooled peach tea between us. We were also silent.

Weirdly enough, it wasn't a bad silence...but I just chalked it up to another of Ikeru-san's interesting effects.

Like how she'd made the waitress walk into the table next to us with just a look.

I wanted to learn how to do that!
“Have you thought any more on what I said?” I blurted.

Browsing the menu with great relish, the Kumo woman darted smokey eyes to meet mine over the top of the card. “Do you not possess food colourings?”

I blinked hard, as if I could snap myself out of some kind of trance. “Um. Yes...but I'm looking for a more *decorative* effect and colouring isn't the same. It's watery and, yes, I could add sugar to thicken it, but then it would be an *icing* not a *paint.*”

She simply smiled, a faint and amused lilt to full lips and I almost asked if she could sell me her makeup too.

“I see.” I wondered if she really did. Maybe. “I enjoyed your food...I can do it.”

She was a strange woman but, then again, I supposed I wasn't an ordinary girl either.

I beamed, reaching to tap my cup gently against hers.

The buzz of another good business deal faded slightly when, sat in Yoshino's kitchen, I bemoaned my lack of property.

Why was this always *so hard*!

“You're complaining to *me*,” Yoshino shot back, “as if you aren't here to step in for my wayward godson!”

My head, rested against the kitchen table, shot up at the daring words and, with a burst of adrenaline,
I rushed to reassure the terrifying Nara Matriarch. Leaning against my side, Shikamaru snuffled in his sleep.

“Not at all, Yoshino-sama!” I spluttered with hands half-raised beseechingly. “You asked me to dinner, remember? Nothing to do with Ensui-”

A sharp bark of malicious laughter had both myself, Shikamaru and Shikaku (sat at the end of the table with a newspaper) all but jumping to attention.

“Just checking, Kiharu!”

I shared a quick, wide-eyed glance with the no-longer-sleeping kid beside me.

“Why not buy a house?” A gravelly voice piped up, not quite blasé enough to conceal how his wife's moods affected him.

I grimaced, successfully distracted. “That's a bit of a risk, isn't it, Shikaku-sama? I'd have to completely change the inside, on top of kitting it out.”

“Isn't that the same with any kind of expansion?” The scarred man smirked, crooked and sharp. “Or do you have your heart set on a shop front?”

Unwillingly, my eyes skittered to the side. Shikaku took it as the admittance it was.

“There are a few houses close to the onsen and richer neighbourhoods.”

*He'd...looked into it?*

I hadn't mentioned it to any Nara beside Ensui but, judging from the Chuunin's own stresses, I doubted he'd have pulled his Uncle aside to randomly ask him to intervene. And he wouldn't have heard from Mikoto or dad.

A thought struck me and beetle-eyes glittered.
“You want to invest…?” Even to my own ears, I sounded wondering.

“I take an interest in ventures with good prospects. And you have excellent ones.”

“How much are you looking for?” I cut straight to it, eyes narrowing and deaf to Yoshino's bite about business at the table. “In the business as a whole or just the next shop?”

“15...in all of it.”

I sat back.

“I need a new accountant,” I muttered.

Shikaku's smile was as sharp as the blades that had marked his face. “Yoshino?”

The Nara Matriarch placed a jug of water on the table and grinned wolfishly. “I am excellent with numbers.”

“Surely that's a conflict of interest?” I pointed out weakly.

Mikoto thought it was a great idea.

I wondered if I was the only sane one here. (Hana, when I voiced this aloud, vehemently disagreed.)

Yoshino, conflicts of loyalty aside, was pretty fucking fantastic with maths.

And she was human too, which I guessed was a plus.

What with Kaiya busy with the new baby, Mikoto covering the grunt work of teaching the Fresh
Meat (that was what I called them and I wasn't gonna apologise), I was invited - read: bullied - into many more Nara dinners.

When Tou-san left on a longer than (recently) usual tracking mission, I was actually glad for it.

Sure I was used to an empty house by now but that didn't mean I liked it any more.

Add on my strangely resentful thoughts towards Ensui and Shisui and…

Well. I was glad for the distraction.

Yoshino had completely gone over our budget for the expansion, cutting down on the estimates for equipment (by insisting that I order everything beforehand, despite still lacking a property) and increasing my advertising.

(“What do you mean a banner? In the street? Isn't that a little...tacky, for what we're going for-?”)

I felt more secure than ever with the Nara's involvement. Not only had Yoshino been managing her Clan the same way for a decade but, with Shikaku investing, I felt as though I could really make it happen.

Nara didn't do anything without great consideration and, to have both the financial and literal backing of the Heads was a real boost of confidence.

(It was almost enough to let me overlook Yoshino's coldness when she inevitably bumped into Naruto with Ino near the shop. I'd kept her away from him but...it hadn't been too pretty.)

(I only took her back when knew that Naruto wouldn't be anywhere near and, via Teuchi, made sure Naruto knew his latest Ramen indulgence was on my tab.)

(Okay, so nothing could excuse it.)

(I was proud of Canon!Shika for befriending him anyway, despite Yoshino's coldness and
My birthday had been on a Sunday. I'd met with Ikeru-san on Tuesday.

On Thursday, closing up slightly earlier so I could leave before the other shops started doing the same, I went book shopping.

For the most part, I wasn't a big reader. Partly due to business but the language barrier was still a sad and persistent thing. I'd been a bookworm in my last life...evidently, until things slowed down a bit, that trend wasn't gonna continue in this one for a while yet. However, I did know where the shops were and, from also occasionally helping Sora shop for Ino, I knew where the best baby books were.

The ones that didn't obviously talk about ninjas like they were superheroes at least.

When I came home with a good few books and some flash cards - I know, I know, I was a raving hypocrite with PTSD to my own flashcard experience as a kid - it was to an incredibly sceptical Hitoshi.

“Ooooh could we send her to the academy!” Yeah, I didn't want to indoctrinate the baby either but I wasn't the most suitable teacher and Hitoshi couldn't turn pages very easy. Not that he was proving at all supportive.

Rolling out a the dough, I grimaced when it proved too sticky and clumped all over the countertop. But the sideboard was oiled so it was easy to gently coax loose again.

Sprawled in front of the (unlit) fire, Hitoshi's voice continued with his very rude argument.

“I told you, cub; the chances of her being able to talk at all are incredible slim. Some full-blooded summons cannot manage that and Fuji-chan is only half. Do not expend precious time and resources on a fruitless venture.”

“Hitoshi, even if she can't speak that doesn't meant she's stupid! She can still learn to read and write!
You're great at calculations and money!"

I rolled my eyes, imagining the smug expression on his face from the admission, and added the cinnamon to the butter and sugar. Caster sugar, that is. Icing sugar won't caramelize the same and granulated never melts down enough, leaving you with a very grainy texture.


I snorted. “Tou-san isn't that bad at cooking…” Well.

So long as it wasn't, um, birthday party food.

“Yeah, because Aki-sama refused to do all the housework.”

I smiled at that.

“Sora-oba brought jasmines this week, did you see?”

They'd looked beautiful on the grave, my mothers favourites swaying delicately in the spring breeze and under the clear, blue sky. I could've painted it if it wouldn't have made dad so sad.

“I did.”

I rolled out the dough, snapping on my washing up gloves and started spreading the sugar mix all over it. You could do this with a spatula, yes, but...one, where's the fun in that? And, two, it just worked? Better?

When I’d finished, washing my hands and, shedding the gloves, started to carefully roll one of the shorter sides inwards. Like a Swiss roll.

“...Toshi?”
“...yes?”

I carefully eased the cord under the completed ‘Master Roll’. And, twisting the loose ends together and pulling tight, cut through the dough with a satisfying *fump*. Rather than cutting with a knife, this technique kept the roll's shape better and didn't ruin the spiral inside. It was really soothing to do too.

I bit my lip on my question.

“What was your kaa-san's name?”

Hitoshi was silent for a long moment, long enough for me to finishing dividing the rolls and start nestling them into lined cake pans.

When he spoke, it was so quiet I almost missed it.

“Akira.”

I sucked in a sharp breath, eyes flicking towards the cat, even though he was hidden from view behind the sofa. *So similar to Kaa-san...*

Carefully, I slid the cake tins onto the oven shelves, shutting the door and clicking on the egg timer.

Then I padded around the sofa, into the front room and sunk down onto the carpet beside Hitoshi's prone form. He was still an a statue except for the slow rise and fall of his vast ribcage.

Carefully, I lifted his huge head into my lap, brushing my thumbs over the fur around his closed eyes. He let me.

I wondered if his fatherhood had brought back memories of everything he'd lost. The father he didn't know.

I knew it made me think of mine.
I hugged him close. He let me.

The following weekend, almost two weeks since she'd been born, I went with Shikamaru and Ino to meet the new baby.

They weren't very impressed.

Chouko was, for all her over-due-ness, a rather small baby, still pink and still wrinkly. She was sleeping when we came in and, since I’d had the foresight to clap my hands over Ino’s mouth when she went to yell, she stayed that way.

Oh, it was baby season!

“Why is she so... old looking?”

Shikamaru cast bored eyes over the room before starting to bite his nails.


“Have you held her yet, Chouji-kun?”

The bashful redhead slowly shook his head, ambling over from his dad's side and slipping in between his two playmates. “Small…”

“I held you when you were that small!”

Ino rolled her eyes. “You never let me forget, Nee-chan.”
Shika pouted, leaning into the curve of my arm regardless, as Chouji giggled.

A loud clamour of voices, all calling greetings and congratulations, heralded the arrival of even more well-wishers and, as the group poured into the front room, I shepherded the trio to the sofas. This way, at least, they could avoid being trampled underfoot.

“Ah, Dazai-chan, it's been a while!” A jovial voice called out to me and, popping Ino next to Shika on the big couch, I twisted to see who'd called out to me.

Oh! It's was Kaiya's business partner!

I beamed openly, bowing politely before bouncing upright. “Indeed it has! How have you been-?”

Oh fuck.

...

...I couldn't...remember his...name.

My eyes bulged out but, if he caught my slip, the other Akimichi (oh fuckkk) didn't call me out on it.

“I am well! But what's this about a new shop?”

“Ahh,” I smiled as naturally as possible. “It's still in the early stages but we’re hoping to find somewhere soon.”

“Ah ha, sometimes it's all about the timing, no?”

“Hai, Akimichi-san. I'm house hunting.”

“House hunting...that's an idea.” He snapped his fingers and laughed again. Again. It was like talking
“I know a place up for sale, if you’re interested?”

Eyebrows winging up, I sensed Shikaku's hand on this. Again. But the older man was watching me, so I smiled. “That sounds... intriguing. Would you mind taking an evening next week to meet with Mikoto-hime and I about this?” And Yoshino.

“And you, Dazai-chan!”

“I’ll let you know the best dates via Chouza-oji?” Maybe Shikaku would be an even quicker option, hmm.

“That sounds just fine.” And he wandered off with a polite bow.

Shika heaved a huge sigh, squashed on the sofa between Chouji and Ino. “That was boring.”

“Well,” I turned to quirk a brow, “that’s just business, Shika-chan. I have to talk like an adult because I'm so short!”

“I'll be taller than you next year,” Ino burst out, leaning forward and almost falling off the seat if not for the fist Shika had on the back of her top. Ino continued, unphased. “Naruto says so!”

My mouth dropped but Sora, passing behind me with tea, cut in before I could gather myself. “Naruto- kun, Ino-chan!”

Naruto... talked about me?

“Nee-chan doesn't use ‘em!”

Oh hell.

Shifting away from Sora's quelling glance, I cast around for a distraction before eying the foot and a half height difference between us. “Umm, I don't think that'll work, imouto. Maybe when you're Hana's age?”
Ino looked mutinous, but, then, distinctly thoughtful. “Hana is cool…”

“And,” I almost bit my tongue to choke the words out, “she's the best in her year. Are you gonna be smart too? Smart and tall?”

An unholy fire sparked in Ino's eyes and Shikamaru groaned low in his throat. Already he knew when to spot the early signs of trouble.

I sipped the tea Sora passed me in consolation.

……………………………………………………………………

“So,” Hana squinted at me over the top of the scales. “You're not mad?”

Measuring out the flour, I grimaced. “When did I say that?”

“Oh, thank Kami!” The younger girl immediately groaned, slamming a hand on the island countertop. At the sharp noise, the Triplets skittered over curiously before wandering off when it became obvious nothing truly exciting was happening. One of them plopped down on my foot and I immediately started calculating how I could finish the cupcakes without moving an inch. “At least you're not taking it lying down,” Hana continued, rolling dark eyes heavenward.

Automatically, I jerked my chin back in affront, spilling a little flour onto the counter. “Since when do I take anything lying down?”

Hana swiped a finger through the little pile of flour, dragging the powder across the counter and tracing a flower in the spill. “Not loads, to be fair, but you definitely let some stuff slide.”

“If this is still about my nose-”

“No,” Hana cut in, “But I wasn't wrong then either, was I?”
Okay, so she hadn't been but still. Hana hadn't even given the boys the time of day to be friends, so it wasn't like she wasn't biased. She was surprisingly picky like that and I wondered, passing her a sieve, if meeting as kids had spared me that same scrutiny. Maybe we just clicked like that.

Then again, she did only like Ensui.

Hana dumped the flour into the sieve and white dust poofed explosively upwards, dusting our dark hair slightly grey and spilling loads of the mixture onto the floor where the puppies immediately started investigating it.

“Get out of my kitchen.”

“Pffft-”

When we’d cleared up, removed the dogs from the spill and wiped their paws (I was *not* going to be dealing with floor trod everywhere, thanks), I cautiously handed Hana the sieve again for Take Two.

The younger girl rolled her eyes.

“As I was saying, if you *are* mad at Ensui-san and Shisui, why aren't you guys talking about it? You've been passive aggressively at war with Itachi for *ages* and suddenly Shisui acts like it's all your fault?*

I started measuring out the cocoa powder with more force than truly necessary and noticed, despite myself, how Hana had neglected to use honorifics. Well...she *was* pissed.

“I mean, communication is key and you guys are *bad* at it.”

The cocoa jar was slammed onto the counter with a loud *clack.* “Look, Hana, you're almost a Genin, right?”

“Next week is graduation, yes…” The Heiress drawled, slow and weary.
“So, basically, yeah. You are. And, the stupid thing about ninja is that...they think that, just because I don't know how to kill someone or do fancy jutsus or whatever, that I'm not entitled to knowing stuff.”

Hana's eyebrows spiked up. “They're playing the ‘You Can't Handle The Truth’ card?”

I really shouldn't have taught her those lines but...well, they were perfect.

“That and that they've nothing to even hide, yeah.” Even to my own ears, my laugh sounded tellingly brittle and Hana's own one hardened into something sharp.

“I wouldn't do that.” She didn't even phrase it as a possibility.

I used to think that Ensui and Shisui wouldn't either and I'd been proven wrong. They would bluff and lie to my face. And the smart part of me knew that Hana would most likely do the same. It wasn't just the indoctrination that ran deep but the innate superpriority between civilians and Shinobi. I shouldn't believe her.

I, somehow, did anyway.

Watch this come back to bite me...again.

“Yeah.”

Hana left just as dark was falling, a box of red velvet cupcakes under her arm and with her dogs, now to her hip, scampering after their mistress.

I closed the door after her with a snap, a thoughtful furrow to my brow.

“You're capable, more so than most people.”

“If you have an issue, spit it out. I can't imagine you'd want to resent them, ‘senpai’.”
“You're an idiot, Kiharu.”

My low scoff echoed around the empty house, dad working late at the Tower and ‘Toshi with FuFu and MaMa.

I stood there for a long second.

The hall clock tick -ed.

And I grabbed my keys, shoving them in my pocket whilst spinning back around to shove the rest of the cakes into another box.

Hana was gone by the time I'd locked the door behind me.

But, dammit, I wanted my grandmother.

I ran most of the way there, conscious of the lateness of the hour and the slight, springtime nip in the air, and arrived outside of the seamstresses puffing and out of breath. The streets were empty, most lights off as people went to bed. Whilst those who lived in the neighbourhood areas would be awake for a while yet, the shopkeepers and the like all had much earlier starts to their mornings so settled down earlier. Really, it did make sense.

The pat of my feet in the steps, the knock of my knuckles on the shop door, seemed obnoxiously loud in the stillness of the street.

Gin answered the door.

“What are you doing here?” We blurted in tandem before scowling, accidentally mirroring each other again.

“*I'm* working on tomorrow's display.”
“Well, I'm visiting Yuri-oba!”

“Ah,” The older girl smirked, leaning against the doorway and crossing her arms. Her talon-like nails sparkled in the dull light, her blonde hair shining moonlight silver. “Yuri-Shishou has gone to bed already. Leave the box here, you may as well go back home, kid.”

I pursed my lips but allowed her to take the box. My eyes caught on her bag behind her when she twisted to pop the cakes onto the ledge just inside. So, Gin was leaving too, Huh?

“You live a few streets over from mine, right? I'll walk you.”

One sharp, white-blond eyebrow spiked upwards with a judgemental leer when she twisted back to face me. “You're a kid, surely I'd be walking you.”

I smiled blandly, stepping back to allow the older girl to cross the threshold, bag on one bony shoulder, and lock the door behind her. “Are you going to leave a small child to fend for herself in the dark?”

She kissed her teeth but made no other move to deny it. Gin, for all her serrated edges, wasn't a total Bitch. Well.

“How's Hoshiko and her boyfriend?” I piped up as we headed down the street, the pavement washed blue under the navy sky with the occasional spotlight from the streetlamps, only just flickering on.

“How should I know?” Gin grumbled, adjusting her bag strap. “Ask her yourself, kid.”

I hummed non-committedly, gaze sweeping idly around the street.

We walked in silence a little more before I couldn't take it, still internally itching to blurt everything out onto someone's shoulder. Unfortunately, that shoulder would never be Gin's so I had to chatter about something else.

“How's the house hunting?”
“It's a flat, actually.”

“Oh,” I blinked. “You found one…?”

“What's it to you?”

I shrugged, mind cast back to all the stress of student accommodation before, paying bills and fighting over the dishes. I missed the girls, sometimes. When the memories resurfaced. It was hard not to forget some things, especially when I was completely cut off from them.

“I'm house hunting too, remember?” I gently rebuked, taking in how her defensive stance had yet to relax. Asking about Hoshiko's boyfriend was probably a terrible move. “Why wouldn't I be interested?”

When we turned another corner, entering the darker streets, Gin turned to squint at me. “I've said it before and I'll say it again. You're one weird little girl.”

“Isn't it endearing?”

“Don't push your luck.”

I rolled my eyes, scuffing a shoe on the ground as we dawdled to a stop. “Thanks for walking me home, ‘senpai’~”

We were both a good few minutes away from our respective homes but still.

“Go away, Kiharu.” The older girl rolled her eyes but I smiled at the slight twitch of her glossed lips. “Get lost!”

I snorted, staggering forward a step at the light shove between my shoulder blades.
“Hai, hai…night!”

A scoff was her only reply.

Gin, I knew, lived in a house with her brother and his new wife. Understandable why she'd be so keen to move out. Her parents were from one of the small villages nearby - I forget which one - and had sent their two kids here for their apprenticeships. Gin's brother was a bookkeeper at a shop just down from Ichiraku's. Her sister-in-law was a waitress at the dango stall beside the Academy…

The street was quiet, empty aside from a raccoon snuffling through someone's bins, and I puffed out my cheeks, kicking up some dust. I had so much so to tomorrow, it was insane.

I was working all day at Nekki's most of the week and then going home to do most of the baking for the next day too.

_Hmm_, I mused. _I'll go to see Teuchi-san and Ayame at lunch tomorrow...maybe I'll bump into Naruto or Iruka ther-

I stopped walking.

Awareness, something almost like fear, tickled my spine.

_Like when you're home alone and scare yourself, imagining something chasing you up the stairs or staring out of the shadows of your room-

My hearing was sharp, had only gotten sharper the longer I was bonded to Hitoshi. Maybe it was fear that made it possible. Maybe it was the grave-like silence of the street. Maybe it was because of my recent bond to FuFu.

I heard muffled scuffling.

A life of carrying a heavy torch, of glancing over my shoulder whenever a man walked behind me, of plotting how to make sure all of my friends got home safely after a night out, had made me paranoid in a way almost all girls would understand.
I turned and started running back the way I came.

- I was overreacting, Gin was going to wring my ear with her talon like nails, but better safe than sorry and how many guys copped a feel regardless of consent-

I came barrelling around the corner, the soft soles of my sandals almost silent on the hard packed earthen streets and I'd made a conscious effort to quiet my breathing, to keep to the shadows.

A girl, her blonde hair shining like moonlight in the dark street - Gin, it was Gin - struggled against the arms wrapped tightly around her. A cloth was pressed over her mouth, even as her heels dug into the soil as he pulled her down a side alley and I could see how her arms spasmed-

Feet planted, I did the best thing I could.

I screamed like a tortured soul from fucking hell.

“Help! Help! Fire- Police!? Rapist!!! help!!!”

Gin’s head snapped around to me and the man bodily picked her up, the strength and frantic speed of his response belying his own panic.

Lights in the surrounding houses started flickering on.

“Police! Someone save us! AhhhhhhhhHhhhhhhHhhhhHhhHHHHH-!!”

Gin lashed out and I lunged forwards, throat aching from the sheer volume of my shrieks, gripping her ankle and then throwing myself back with all my body weight.

The man jolted, losing balance and staggering into the alleyway wall. Gin's head hit the rough bricks with a dull, but sickening, thud. Still screaming my heart out, I felt the blow more than heard it.
She went limp.

And my brain screeched to a halt.

The fist came out of nowhere.

Pain exploded from my nose and I felt the bone crack, blood splurting outwards immediately as I staggered back. I felt like I couldn't see and only my bruising grip on Gin's leg kept me grounded. I fell to my knees, arms wrapping around the blonde's sprawled shins with a steely, bitter determination and the man tugged once, twice.

A call in the street, more voices yelling, and, suddenly, Gin was dropped on top of me in a dead weight that cracked our bones together and jarred my teeth.

Squinting against the pain, I managed to peel back an eyelid just as the man turned to flee-

A torch flickered down the alleyway, the thumping of feet and I stared into panicked, grey eyes in a young face.

He turned and fled.

“Can I talk to her yet?” A familiar voice interrupted the healer holding an ice pack to my broken nose. Already I could feel my eyes swelling shut. Fuck.

A faint tremble shook my limbs, had started when I'd been running and hadn't stopped yet. I felt numb, caught between howling rage and voiceless horror.

Gin had been taken away on a gurney to the hospital and I had been escorted soon after. Her head had been bleeding really badly and her ankle was definitely dislocated. I didn't even feel guilty about that because she was still here at least.

The Officer's voice sounded again, murmuring lowly to the healer, and I glanced up, eyes half glazed and wary. My hair, dusty and sticking a bit to the blood on my yukata, was shifted away from my face, where I’d kept it as a kind of shroud against the harsh hospital lights.
Ensui, eyes widening in sudden recognition and running over my hunched, bloody form in disbelief, paled rapidly.

“Kiharu...what..”

I swallowed hard. My throat was tight but, for once, my eyes were bone dry. “It was Gin, Ensui. He tried to take Yuri-oba's apprentice, Gin.”

Slowly, slowly, Ensui crouched to my level, where I was sat sideways on the hospital bed.

“I heard a scuffle and went back...he was holding her and she was crying and-” my voice disappeared and I desperately gulped the water Ensui pressed into my hand, his expression desolate. “A-and he tried to run when I screamed, but I grabbed her leg so he punched me. And then Gin wasn't moving so he threw her.”

“Hey, hey,” Ensui shushed me, helplessly fluttering hands brushing against my knees. “Do you think you can call Hitoshi and talk to my boss?”

Before he'd even finished, I was shaking my head. “No,” I denied thickly. “I haven't learned how to tell if I'm summoning FuFu or Hitoshi so I can't risk it. Can...can someone get Tou-san?”

“Yeah, of course, Ki,” Ensui sighed, setting his hands on my shoulders so lightly I could barely feel the pressure. “I'll be back in a sec, okay?”

“Okay,” I whispered.

I knew Uchiha Ryuu by face alone. I'd seen him with Ensui, talking lowly or not at all, a few times before. And, with an innocent question posed to Mikoto, I was able to identify him as Ensui's 'partner'.

I stared steelily back at him when he entered the room, icepack still pressed to my nose.
“Those bastards went for a little girl? She's the youngest yet.”

He whispered quietly but obviously Ryuu either didn't recognise me or he didn't get the memo about Dazai and their senses.

“No,” Ensui corrected him, his grip around my shoulders tightening minutely. “She's a witness.”

Black eyes flashed back to mine, trailing over the blood on my clothes with increased interest.

Ensui answered the unspoken query. “She fought back for her friend.”

The hospital was quiet, lacking the frantic hassle that I was used to. Then again...they didn't exactly have many patients.

A light rap on the door, courtesy for me I guessed, before a tall man stepped inside. Under his arm, he carried a folder and his police badge was much more impressive looking than Ensui’s. Despite all that, I found my eyes lingering in the stress lines that creased his young face, pinching his brows no matter the effort he seemed to put into looking as calm as possible. Again, for me, I guessed.

“My name,” He almost seemed to smile, careful and low, “Is Detective Inspector Uchiha Osamu.”

“Dazai Kiharu,” I replied, voice pitched low to match his.

“Do you mind answering some questions for me, Dazai-chan?”

I flicked a glance up to Ensui, still sat close on my left side, as Osamu-san pulled the nurse's desk chair to sit opposite me. Ryuu loomed by the door, rather like a security guard. Somehow, the thought made me feel better.

“Thirteen.”

Ryuu blinked but I didn't even take advantage of it. Yeah, I was small. Oh well, I'd be glad for my youthful face when I hit 30.
“Okay, and who looks after you?”

“My Tou-san, Dazai Seiichi. He’s a Chuunin.”

Osamu hummed, jotting the info down on some kind of form.

“Now...can you tell me what happen?” Dark eyes, actually a very deep blue in the merciless light, flicked up to meet mine. “Take as long as you need, Dazai-chan.”

I sucked in a hard breath through my mouth, the tang of copper-blood still lingering in my throat. “I was delivering cupcakes…”

“…”

“Right,” the older man, sighed, finishing his sentence and sitting back from where he'd been leaning on his bent legs. “Anything else?”

“Senpai,” Ensui piped up quickly and jutted his chin towards the door, “the healer wants to see her.” Sure enough, my nurse was waiting on the otherwise, visible through the blurry privacy glass. Ryuu turned, cracking it open to murmur something.

Osamu nodded. “A smell, anything, Dazai-chan-”

“I saw his face.”

The room went very, very still. When I glanced up, Osamu was tense with well-concealed anticipation and it was only my understanding of Uchiha in general that hinted to his underlying tension.

“He was young, no older than you. His skin was pale but not too much...he...he was clean-shaven with a dark fringe…” I glanced up again, remembering how he’d pressed Gin so close to him, how his face had been tucked into her hair until the last second and revulsion curled like toxic smoke.
“His eyes were grey and angry.”

I swallowed hard and turned to look at Ensui. “He wasn't sorry at all. He was mad he couldn't take her. That's why he punched me.”

Ensui's jaw clenched, hazel eyes like stones in his olive toned face.

I waited for the fear to come but it didn’t.

“Thank you, Dazai-chan. You've been...incredibly helpful. If you do remember anything else, please don't hesitate to get in touch. I wish you well on your recovery.”

“Thank you, Detective.” I nodded, not quite able to smile.

With another nod, Osamu-san left. Ryuu waited until his superior was heading down the corridor before turning back to look at Ensui.

“Corridor, now.”

Ensui didn't even twitch. “No, I'll report in later. I'll stay with Kiharu-chan. Maybe you should locate her family?”

Ryuu almost scowled, pink creeping along his cheekbones, but any kind of retort was interrupted by the healer reentering and starting to fuss with my icepack.

The tingle of iryo ninjutsu was a bizarre thing. One I didn't have time to ponder over.

“Kiharu!”

Sora-oba and Yuri-oba came into the room, worried but gentle. The nurse, still pinching my nose as she finished up fixing the ruined cartilage, shot them a quelling glare regardless.
“Any news about Gin?” I asked immediately. But then...the sight of Yuri reminded me and another terrifying thought struck me like ice down the spine.

“Is Hana okay?!”

“Hana-chan?” Ensui blurted, shooting Ryuu a sharp look.

“Sh-she left my house just before I left!” Oh my fucking god -

“I'll run to the Inuzuka Compound and check immediately,” Ryuu barked out but any gratefulness was destroyed when he kept talking. “An Heiress would make this even worse!”

“What?!”

Unfortunately, the Officer had already strode to the window and ducked outside.

This night was a nightmare.

Ensui ripped the tie from his hair to scrub agitated hands through his shoulder-length locks.

“Gin-san is being examined now-” Sora-oba piped up, stress creasing her forehead through her brown hair.

Are we going to ignore that that just happened?!

“The healers are looking at her head now,” Yuri leaned forward to reassure me and Ensui hurriedly gave her his seat, moving to stand near the door whilst my grandmother slipped an arm around my waist. Soft, periwinkle blue eyes trailed over the blood dried to my front. “You were just at the shop, both of you...”

I breathed, slow and shaky, through the knot in my throat. Anger at Ryuu could be set aside for later. Let him find Hana first. “Is,” I coughed, “is Hoshiko-senpai here?”
Yuri-oba smoothed a soft, wrinkled hand through my hair, ignoring the knots and droplets of blood. “She's just on her way now.”

The nurse leaned back, tilting my head from side to side with light brushes of her cool, gloved hands. “I think you're good, Dazai-san. Any bruising, the Nara can sort you out.”


With a sharp nod, the healer swept out.

“Come on, Nekki,” Sora-oba soothed, running a hand down my arm and smiling when I snapped around at the old nickname. “Let's get you changed.”

The corridor was empty when our little group came out of the room and it was a silent walk to the nearest toilet cubicle.

Sora-oba pushed open the door and stepped inside, Yuri following her with her hand still in mine. But I paused on the threshold before hesitantly glancing back over my shoulder.

Ensui, eyes still hard, tried for a smile and didn't quite manage it. “I'll wait right here, Ki. Don't worry.”

Warm fingers curled around mine, gently prying them off the edge of his flak vest and giving them a squeeze before letting go. Oh. I didn't even realise I'd..

I still didn't move, gaze shifting from Ensui's jacket to his eyes once more.

“Will you sleep over tonight? I'll bring my duvet down to the sofa and we can watch TV.”

Ensui was safety. He was strong and an adult and I trusted him.
He also had his Nara shadows and a Police warrant.

This time, when Ensui smiled, it looked a little less like he wanted to kill someone (to kill that man). “Sure.”

Satisfied, I let Yuri-oba guide me inside and to the sink.

Only to stop short at the sight that stared back.

Oh.

I'd been pale when I was younger, mainly because I was essentially a shut-in, but I'd slowly gained more and more of the olive tan like that of Iruka and my dad, Hashirama and Gai, as I made a conscious effort to go outside more and exercise.

Against the garrish crimson smeared over my collar, the half-wiped pink stains on my face and the column of my throat...

I looked like a ghost.

Eyes closed exhaustedly and I staggered forward until the ceramic sink edge bumped my middle.

“Here, Kiharu,” Sora-oba prompted me, coming out of a toilet cubicle bearing a long-sleeved undertop. She must've been wearing it under her dress.

I was bundled into a cubicle, peeling off both yukata and the strap top underneath that hadn't been spared, sliding them under the door for Yuri to rinse a bit in the sink. Maybe they'd be salvageable.

The top was, expectedly, too big, but I simply tilted the neckline higher and pushed the sleeves up. My hair was a hopeless case so, leaving the cubicle, I allowed Sora to pull it into a quick tail.

I was...tired.
“Can I see Gin?”

Gin had a very severe concussion and, yes, I had helped dislocate her ankle. The ankle was healed rather quickly but her head…

She was on bed rest for three weeks. Just to be sure.

Leaving the toilet, I'd found Shisui with Ensui, being berated by a member of staff for trying to enter the female toilets.

The older boy had looked to be on the verge of tears, arms frozen and not quite daring to return my hug when I'd thrown myself at him.

“I'm not spun sugar.” I'd snarled into his collarbone, dangerously bitter.

His responding embrace had been warm and solid and tinged with regret. Even the awkward stab of his crutches, the way he had to lean slightly on me for balance, didn't take away from that.

Hitoshi arrived ten minutes later, preceding a very angry Cat Dad.

I'd been sat beside Hoshiko when he came barrelling in, trying not to freak out as she sobbed into my shoulder. Gin's family, her brother and his wife seeing as their parents lived several day's travel away, sat on the brunette's other side.

On my other side, Hana had threaded her fingers through mine. Ryuu had come racing in with her, her dogs five minutes trailing behind, and dumped the apocalyptically angry Inuzuka almost in my lap. She'd arrived home without issue, having raced her dogs, and, apparently, had thrown her chopsticks into the dining room wall when Ryuu had interrupted the meal with the news.

Hana knew Gin, just as she knew Ayame and Hoshiko.
The double doors had opened with a *bang* that had me leaping upright, tripping over my chair and staggering back a step.

The room froze and my heartbeat, trying to thrum out my chest, seemed to shake my entire body.

“Kiharu.”

When dad started crying, I went home.

Hana had come too and we'd shared my double with plenty of room to spare.

Ensui, as promised, slept on the sofa, wrapped in my fluffiest blanket with his head turned towards my room.

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Mikoto was waiting outside front door by seven the next morning, sweeping inside with a dignity that didn't quite conceal the shake of her palms when they cupped my jaw.

“Kiharu-chan,” she sighed, dark eyes running over my tired features and lingering on the barely-there bruising around my nose and eyes. “How did you sleep?”

Pale fingers tucked my bangs behind my ears. Behind the Uchiha matriarch, Ensui watched us over the rim of his coffee. I'd left dad upstairs asleep, Hitoshi sprawled in Ensui's makeshift sofa bed.

Hana had left half an hour before, picked up by Tsume, who had clasped her hands in my shoulders in unspoken solidarity.

“Fine,” I sighed.

For once, it wasn’t even a lie. I was too exhausted for any kind of pretence and...I’d been too
exhausted last night to do more than collapse on my bed. Hitoshi had curled around me, like he used to when I was even smaller, and rested his heavy paws on my back. With Hana on my other side and the puppies at our feet, which hadn't even drawn a complaint from the resident cat...the weight was grounding and my shudders - shock, Akane had called it - had eventually slowed, allowing me to slip into a dull slumber.

Somehow, Mikoto must've sensed the truth, leaning back with muted satisfaction and turning to survey her 'apprentice'. “Well, Ensui-kun?”

Dark eyes flicked up to meet dark eyes and I was suddenly struck by the realisation that Mikoto looked quelling. She was nonverbally chastising Ensui…?

“Well?”

Lips parting, my gaze flickered between the duo at the sudden tension of the room.

Ensui took another sip of his coffee, tilting his jaw back to drain the mup. His adam’s apple, dotted with a smattering of stubble, bobbed in a long swallow before the cup was set back down with a thud. Mikoto’s gaze didn't falter, except managing to look even more expectant.

“You know I can't, Shishou.”

“You have no excuse now, Ensui-kun. Kiharu-chan will help you, you know this.”

“It’s nothing to do with her.” I didn't think I'd ever heard Ensui be so...curt to the Uchiha Matriarch before. Cool, yes. Respectful, always.

“She is. She saw him. And I don’t want her to be in the dark; it’s not fair, Ensui-kun.”

“I'm right here .”

Ensui’s eyes flashed back to mine and I squinted at the uncertainty I could see there.
“It's too early for this. Tell me what's happening.”

The Nara hesitated.

And I snapped.

“Okay, listen. If Mikoto-hime thinks I should know, they why don’t you trust her counsel? You always seek her advice on cases, what’s suddenly changed there? And me! Do you not trust me, do you think I don’t deserve to be kept in the loop if something involves me?”

“It’s a fucking trafficking ring.”

Mouth ajar, I stared at Ensui's stressed face. His chin was angled down, leaning back from the counter and rubbing one large palm over his forehead. His skin looked poor, uncared for and slightly sallow, as if he hadn’t been eating or sleeping right. I felt guilty for my outburst but…

Mikoto was right.

I’d seen that fucker’s face. If it was an organised crime ring at work, they could try and take me too in order to cut off any loose ends. They could try and blackmail me in silence.

They could react in any way and I couldn't predict this shit. I'd ever heard anything about a trafficking ring or anything in Canon but...then again, it wasn’t like Kishi had been particularly forthcoming about anything regarding civilian or less super-powered crimes or actual police work. We’d barely been allowed to scrape the surface in Canon.

We were - I was - blind here.

For the most part, I hated it. Because I was limited and my knowledge useless and I hated not being able to predict the outcomes of events.

A fraction of my mind though...didn’t. That's not to say I liked the situation any, that it didn't sicken me to my core and shake my bones with a rage that had almost no outlet, but I knew it was healthier this way. To be forced to acknowledge that my memories of before weren't omnipotent. That this
wasn't a story.

And that, as my actions affected people and events and everything, that knowledge would become less and less relevant. Less applicable.

One day, I wouldn’t be able to know the future events at all.

Like with Chouko-chan’s birth, with Danzo and the meeting with Tobi, things already were different. And it was really important that I didn't forget that.

I really, really wished I knew who those bastards were. So I could have prevented it, so I could march over and turn them in right now. So I could end this now.

But life didn't work like that, wasn't supposed to work like that as much as it fucking pained me, so I'd have to do what I could. From a more mundane position.

I closed my mouth, only for the corners to quirk up in an expression no one called call a smile.

“Let me draw him for you.”

There was one of my (many) notebooks tucked into the bookshelf in dad’s office, a cheap flip book of plain paper with a stolen pencil tucked through the ring-binding, and it took but a minute to run and fetch it.

Mikoto sucked in a low breath when I started sketching. I didn’t do it much, preferring to jot out songs and short stories from before, but i wasn't bad. I’d been better before because of muscle memory, practice and a tonne of other influences, but I had the memories of how to draw ingrained. Even if my hand didn't quite know the feel and movements anymore.

Ensui leaned over to examine Gin’s attacker just as I was finishing up, lightly shading in his hair to hint at the dark colour.

“I didn't get to hear his voice,” I sighed through the bitterness. Maybe if I’d hit him back, if I’d started a tossing around verbal abuse, he would’ve at least given away pitch or something.
“You saw more than anyone else has managed too. Previous girls...they were either too traumatised to remember much or didn't get the chance to so much as turn around.”

I pushed those mental images aside. “Okay. What now?”

Ensui sat back down on his stool, hands spread on the island as if to prop himself up under a heavy load. Mikoto shifted to sit beside me.

“Now? Now I break conduct-” Ensui shot Mikoto a mildly aggravated look, “-and tell you everything.”

“Everything about the case?”

The Nara pressed his palms together and rested his forehead against his fingers. He almost looked to be in prayer or about to perform a jutsu. “From the beginning.”

With a nod from me, Mikoto clicked on the kettle.

“Okay, so. After you told Shishou about the possible ramifications of Hitoshi's attack via Sharingan Technique and then went missing, Shisui told me everything. He was also, as you know, bound to inform his Clan - as in, Mikoto-hime - and Sandaime-sama of reasons why you may have been targeted. And so the situation of a traitor or informant inside the village came to light.”

“Nothing's come of it, though,” I pointed out. We'd learned nothing of Tobi, of why he'd attacked or even been in the village. I still stood by my belief that he'd been meeting Danzo because it was way too early for him to approach Itachi.

“Not of the investigation, no.” Ensui agreed. I blinked at the inferred ‘but’.

“Sandaime-sama knew that, if the Uchiha felt they were under surveillance, they would only react even stronger and the possibility of lashing out would become even more dire.”
The kettle clicked and tea was poured all round.

“So,” Ensui blew on the steaming surface of his drink, “a less obvious mode of tracking was needed. The Uchiha would sense ANBU and that would sour relations.”

“It was my idea,” Mikoto piped up. “To send in Ensui-kun.”

I blinked. For once, my brain wasn't whirling out of control.

The word I'm looking for is ‘flabbergasted’.

“He'd been excellent investigating your own case,” my partner continued, smiling faintly when Ensui's sallow cheeks coloured the slightest degree. “And I knew we could trust him. To represent my Clan fairly and to tell the truth of his findings. His connection to Shisui-kun and myself wasn't viewed as a fault because, in identifying anything wrong, he would be saving us.”

Still looking faintly abashed, Ensui coughed into his fist and my eyes were drawn back to him at the sudden noise. “So, I joined the Station. Fugaku-sama knew I was still working with Mikoto-hime and allowed me to discuss my case findings with her. I guess calling myself her apprentice did send out some meaning we'd not fully taken into consideration. Namely that, despite my being a Police Officer, I was learning under Shishou first and foremost.”

“No wonder I used to see you everyday.”

Hazel eyes half-rolled at my dry tone. “You know how shit I was treated, so I'll gloss over that part, but one thing I noticed was that I had a very limited access to the files. The case reports, archives, systems, everything. Osamu-senpai, you...met him yesterday, was helpful but I think he's just the sort of man to get the job done.”

Beside me, Mikoto smiled against the rim of her cup.

“One night, however, I noticed that one of the casefiles was missing a page. At first,” Ensui waved a careless hand, “I thought it was another Officer taking the sabotage a little further but...the pages had been amended. If I could notice it, it would've been apparent to any of the Uchiha. But no-one has reported it. And then, I thought, maybe someone had been counting on the fact that I was used to similar difficulties. So, I went to Fugaku-sama.”
Someone...had been covering their tracks?

My brows furrowed, mind beginning to whirl at the possible connotations. Somehow, I knew this wasn't a case of fraud or protecting a loved one from the law.

“The Chief, as I suspected, didn't know anything about it. I was ordered to investigate, quietly, and not inform anyone except Mikoto-hime,” Ensui nodded to the woman beside me, “without his express permission. My findings were slow, on top of my difficulties and own caseload, but I managed to gather 15 other files with signs of tampering. Most...most I only knew had been altered because of my own notes of what happened.

“Then the Chief brought in Ryuu. We…didn't get on. Still don't.”

Ensui sighed, fingers twitching around his tea. He'd yet to take a sip.

“A week and a half ago another woman was attacked.”

The stone in my stomach dropped to my knees and I gripped my tea tighter. Fuck.

“She managed to escape-” my grip loosened minutely, “-but was only able to tell us a few details. Still, more than we'd had before. Well. Until you.”

“When I came in to *Nekki’s* with a black eye...it was the day after our fight. When questioning the young woman, Osamu-senpai revealed that Fugaku-sama had informed him of what was happening and Ryuu and I were sent down for the files I'd gathered. Ryuu mentioned off hand about the poor skills of traffickers but he hadn't shared that theory with me. I...snapped.”

Absently, I hoped Ensui came out on top. But, for the most part, my brain was just struggling to...compute.

“Needless to say, we got in a fight. Senpai saw the state of us and tore us a new assh-” Mikoto coughed delicately “- a strip out of us, sending us home and giving us the day off.”
Mikoto coughed again and Ensui grimaced. “His exact words were for us to get out of his sight before he showed us what a real beat down felt like and not to come crawling back until he had everything under control.”

My eyebrows shot up and Ensui snorted knowingly. “Yeah, I know. Senpai looks straightlaced - and he is - but he can get very stressed and, well...we all run when he goes on a rage. Usually about organisation or incorrect field reports but...yeah.”

I tried to reconcile that image with the man I'd met last night, the Detective with the soothing voice and neat little ponytail. He'd been tall and broad in the shoulder without being scary, calm and in control without being cold or superior.

I couldn't see him angry or lashing out but, then again, I'd been a victim to be questioned last night. Ensui had known the man for nine months now.

(I never wanted to be a victim again but I knew, a civilian pacifist in this violent world, that was appallingly likely -)

“Has anything new cropped up? Is,” I swallowed, mouth dry and took a quick sip of tepid tea, “Is Gin awake?”

Ensui's eyes dropped to his hands. “No. No, she's not.”

“Are you going to get in trouble for telling me?”

Mikoto hummed, jaw tilting upwards and, in that instant, she looked more like a Queen than ever. Ensui seemed to agree. “No-one will find out so they’ll be nothing to berate.”

“Oh?” My brows crumpled.

“Ensui-kun is free to discuss the cases with me. And I am free to discuss anything I wish to with you, Kiharu-chan.”

“And the cub is free to discuss everything with me.”
Ensu lept a foot in the air, staggering upright from his stool and whirling around to glare at Hitoshi, his huge head now visible over the back of the sofa.

“What are you - I thought you'd left!!”

A large, pink tongue slid out from behind impressive fangs and languidly swiped over the panther's maws. “What kind of predator would I be, Shadow Boy, if I couldn't remain undetected should I wish it?”

Ensu scowled. “You're not gonna tell Seiichi-san, right?”

“No,” I cut in before Hitoshi, from the dark glint in those narrowed eyes, could push Ensui even more. I could almost feel how tightly wound the Chuunin was. “He won't. Tou-san might be his partner but Hitoshi is my summon too and he's not stupid.”

The cat in question sniffed, turning away with haunty indignance.

“No, I licked my lips and traced a silent finger around the rim of my cup. “Mind telling me why-” why Itachi hates me?

The words caught in my throat.

Mikoto was. Sat. Right. There.

I couldn't just-just bitch about her son! Why might be close but, before anything, Itachi was Mikoto's child.

Maybe it was Itachi who made them cut me out. Itachi, one of the most important people I'd been trying so hard to save. He was cold and difficult to read, even more repressed that most Uchiha but with a slither of tenderness. Reserved strictly for his family and friends.

And I'd thought I'd counted as one.
Why, Itachi, why ?!

God, I just wanted to scream. I just wanted to help! Do you know how difficult it is to save the world without being caught?!

Hitoshi suddenly shifted, sofa springs groaning in complaint as he dropped from the leather and padded into the kitchen.

Emerald eyes gleamed at me knowingly. “Ask him.”

When Mikoto and Ensui, having turned at the carnivore’s approach, glanced back at me, I paled.

“Not now, ‘Toshi.”

“Kiharu-chan?” Mikoto’s hand was soft on my shoulder and I crushed the urge to scoot away.

I felt...claustrophobic. Overwhelmed.

“Why not?” Hitoshi continued, frustration broadcasted in every movement as he swaggered closer. “You need support at this time, anyone can see that. So ask for the truth.”

Suddenly, it was too much.

The events of last night. Shisui. Ensui's information dump and Mikoto's presence beside me.

I couldn't stand their eyes on me. Not right now.

“I'm going to see Gin.” I shoved back from the island, making a break for the stairs and dashing up them, for once not even caring for rudeness.
I pulled on the first thing my hands touched - one of Tou-san's huge jumpers - and yanked my leggings on to replace my pijamas. I'd be warm, too warm, but I didn't bother reevaluating.

“Kiharu-chan, I'll walk you there!” Mikoto called up the stairs, surprised and concerned.

I shoved my feet in my sandals, leaving my hair loose to curl wildly and tying a burnt orange bandage to keep it from my face.

When I turned around again, Hitoshi was stood on the doorway.

“You're running from answers again.”

My heart thumped. “No.”

In the corridor behind him, the panther’s tail lashed once, as if he wanted to beat the sense into my head.

“You agonise over ignorance but flee from enlightenment.”

“Oh, so you're a philosopher now?” I laughed bitingly. “I don't need a moral lesson, Kitty.”

“Cowardice, then.”

I almost punched him.

Fists curled and half-raised threateningly for a long second and Hitoshi’s eyes gleamed with open curiosity.

The boiling urge to make someone else hurt lasted for a scant few seconds.

My hands fell, limp, back to my sides but my Summon didn't stop staring. Like he'd never seen
anything like me before.

“You will not hit me, even now.”

“No,” I agreed. “Violence is meaningless. It would improve nothing, only worsen. I’m pacifistic like that.”

Emerald eyes surveyed me for a long second, seeming to understand that my fight or flight mechanism had been triggered.

My fight response wasn’t the violence he understood so...flight was, in his eyes, the only viable option.

The doorbell rang.

Ensui’s eyes closed, feeling as though the shadows he was always aware of were dragging him down. A cloak of fatigue. The weight of the world.

Mikoto, still worried and openly maternal - and didn’t Kiharu hate that, hate seeing her partner like another pseudo-mother and, briefly, Ensui wondered how Sora-sama and Shishou could stand it - opened the door.

At the clack of crutches on the steps, Ensui didn’t bother to swallow his groan.


“Kiharu! Are you here?!” The younger boy called, breathless and anticipating. He’d been gutted that he couldn’t stay over like Ensui and Hana-chan had.

Ensui knew he’d come over but, dammit, he thought they’d have more *time.*
Time. A precious commodity these days.

“Ensui!” At the call, the Sergeant slowly twisted, one foot still on the first step, to look at his best friend. Shisui, picking up on the atmosphere pretty quickly, glanced up the stairs.

Dark eyes flew back to his face, wary and so, so sad. Ah...he gets it.

“What’s wrong? It is last...?” Last night?

Hazel eyes flickered between the Jounin and Mikoto before slowly tilting his jaw to call back upstairs.

“Kiharu?”

No reply but Hitoshi’s tail flicked. Just the very end of it. Cats do that when they're mad, right?

“Shisui is here!”

All quiet again and Shisui shuffled, restless.

Slowly, Ensui turned back to the Uchiha Matriarch, a determined gleam in his eyes and mouth firmly set. “Maybe, Shishou, you should leave this to us?”

The older woman glanced between the two boys before her gaze returned to the ceiling, as though she could see straight up and through to the young baker. Red lips pursed, evidently unhappy, but she eventually acquiesced.

“Don't hurt her. ” The threat was brief but they got the picture.

“Hai.” They mumbled in tandem, gazes skittering to the sides.
The door closed behind her with a snap.

And Shisui burst into action, setting aside his crutches and, leaning rather dependently on the bannister, slowly started ascending the steps.

Ensui’s lips parted, sore from biting, at the scene unfolding before him.

“Are you... okay... to do that?”

Shisui was slow but steady and quickly reached the middle of the staircase. He didn’t turn around, grunting lowly when he underestimated the next step and stubbed a toe.

“I’m off them Monday. It's just been a while.”

It looked like there was a little more to it that that but... Shisui was stubborn. And stupid.

Silently, Ensui started up after him.

Kiharu’s door was still open, Hitoshi stood on the threshold but, when the top of Shisui’s head became visible to her, the door slammed with resounding *bang* that shook the wood of it.

Hitoshi, inches from being smacked, growled. Loudly.

It was a rumbling rasp, that pitched and rose deep in his chest until Ensui was half certain the floor was trembling under the sheer *force* of it.

Without meaning to, Ensui tensed and, beside him, Shisui did the same.

It was the sound of a *predator* and, while Ensui had never truly forgotten how easily the panther could maul him, it was at times like this were the Nara had to remind himself that he *wasn't* a mouse between the Summon’s huge paws.
He didn't know how Kiharu (or Seiichi) could stand it.

But she did withstand it because there wasn't a peep on the other side of the Baker’s door, no hesitation or instinctive spike of chakra.

“Do not fight with me, cub. You will not enjoy the consequences.”

“Oh but you’d love a good ol’ fight, wouldn’t you?” Kiharu called back, muffled through the wood. Despite that, the bitterness in her voice was glaringly obvious. “ Seems everyone wants to fall out with me these days! Glad I’m so good at playing the villain!”

Beside him, Shisui winced.

Hitoshi padded back a step, forcing Ensu and Shisui to move aside and further down the landing, before he reached up and smacked a paw on the bedroom door was a thunderous roar.

The door shuddered but held as the panther’s muzzle crumpled, revealing fangs longer than Ensu’s fingers and the Chuunin backed up again, adrenaline spiking.

And then Shisui - stupid, stupid Shisui - stepped closer.

“What the hell?!”

Hitoshi twisted to glare at the interruption, angling his long body across the entrance to his Summoner's room. “Don’t you get involved.”

Slowly, slowly, as if broadcasting to a caged animal - and, really, where was the lie in that - Ensu reached to wrap his hand around Shisui's elbow.

“Shisui,” His soft voice cut through the tension like a knife, a flood lamp in the fog. “Step back.”

The panther's pupils were like scratches of black, impossibly thin, and Ensu was uncomfortably aware of how much he seemed to want to take his next meal from Shisui's recently healed thighs.
“No!”

*Oh, fuck-

“He’s being horrible to her!”

The bedroom door was flung open, bouncing on its hinges and stopped in its tracks by a small, freckled hand.

“*You hypocrite!*”

Kiharu, wearing a holey red jumper with loose curls flying, looked rather like a cat herself when she was mad.

An uncommon occurrence, to see her *truly* enraged, but no less terrifying. If anything, a mad Kiharu was even worse, a sign of how terrible things were for her to get to such a state.

Ensui rather though she would have stomped over if not for the carnivore blocking her doorway.

“How dare you preach, all righteous, about being rude and mean! You who have been blaming me for Itachi’s coldness for *months! Months, Shisui!*”

The curly-haired boy’s jaw dropped, expression twisted by anger and hurt and, fuck, if Ensui wasn’t uncomfortably aware of just how many nerves Kiharu had stabbed at.

“I’m just trying to stand up for you!” The Uchiha stabbed a finger at the panther and Ensui lunged forward again, ripping the extended hand back before he fucking *lost it.* “Why the hell are you getting angry at me!?”

Blue eyes popped wide. “Are you fucking-” *oh shit* “-stupid?”
Hitoshi chose that moment to butt his great head against his mistress’s chest - as if he hadn't just been trying to break down her door - and shoved her back a foot, further into her room. “He's a thoughtless boy, cub. If he doesn’t realise his wrongdoings, he will not learn.”

Kiharu, completely ignoring how the panther was trying to get her away, proceeded to step over the panther and into the hallway.

“You can cut that protective bullshit, ‘Toshi. Just because you’re of the opinion that I should force things to go my way, doesn't mean I'm going to start demanding stuff.”

The petite brunette, abruptly much more put together, sucked in another breath before twisting back to the other two.

Ensui’s eyes narrowed.

A minute tremble to her fists, eyes as hard as their Sapphire colouring, mouth pursed bloodless.

On the outside, Ensui looked wary, hand still restraining Shisui’s advance with one eyes always trained on the dangerously stiff carnivore.

Internally, Ensui cursed.

*Shisui, you idiot. Itachi’s secrets were his but you could have at least admitted that to Kiharu.*

The Nara knew he wasn't blameless.

He was one the who’d found out, who'd started all this. But, dammit, he was trying to be responsible. And Kiharu, for all her intelligence, was a child.

Except…

Ensui turned thoughtful eyes back to the younger girl, taking in the steel of her expression, how she was unfazed by the enraged panther behind her, Summon or no.
This was Kiharu, who'd saved herself and Hitoshi from an assassin, who'd sniffed out false play with the Uchiha.

Hana was graduating on Friday. Kiharu's friend, three years her junior and soon to be considered an adult. A Shinobi.

And Kiharu, the girl who recoiled at weapons and fighting, had defended a girl from her would-be abductor and succeeded.

She wasn't a ninja and she wasn't powerful.

But Kiharu had power.

“It's not just that you have secrets. Everyone has them. But when you hide them from me because I'm not a Shinobi…!”

Shisui faltered and, finger by finger, Ensui let his grip drop away.

Hitoshi's maws slid back over his teeth.

“It's that you didn't believe me when I worried about Kabuto. All because he was Itachi's teammate and you don't want to upset him. As if I've ever kicked up a fuss about anything that didn't mean something. As if I was just being spiteful.”

Kiharu's hands were limp by her side, eyes dry as they bore into Shisui's. They'd always been huge but, right now, they looked old. Striking against the tan of her skin, the darkness of her loose hair.

Shisui was pale, black eyes unblinking.

When Kiharu's eyes flickered over to his again, Ensui crushed the urge to evert his gaze.
“You made me feel like it was my fault, that I felt this way, and I brushed over it because it hurt. I pretended it was okay because I wanted it to be okay. And that's why Hitoshi's angry,” Her hand gestured limply towards the panther. “Because it's not right. And I...I can't deal with this right now.”

Blue eyes lowered to the floor.

“And...maybe you should go. Both of you. Ensui, you only told me the bigger picture because Mikoto-hime forced you to. And, Shisui...I think you need to talk to Itachi. Because, despite what you seem to believe, I've done nothing to him. And I can't cope with this all right now. It's too much. I'm stressed and scared and...”

Shisui brought a shaking palm up to cover his eyes, shoulder propped against the wall.

After all the screaming and tension, the silence of the house felt desolate.

“I'm going to see Gin.”

Kiharu slowly backed up a step before turning the corner of the stairs and starting down them. Hitoshi, with a final glare, padded after her.

Her small feet tapped lightly on the floors as she crossed the hall.

The door unlatched with a clatter.

A breath.

And then the door shut behind her.

They were silent for a long second, Shisui's shoulders dropping and, when the gate sounded faintly, Ensui didn't bother concealing his own flinch.

What...a fuck up.
Disappointment weighed like a stone, like a drop off a great height, in his stomach. Kami, but Ensui was supposed to be an adult, a Officer. Have his shit together, all that stuff.

But he didn't. He really, really didn't.

He'd had fights with his friends before, small spats and nothing compared to the fallouts of the other two but…

Kiharú had had to cope with an attack last night. And, not just any attack, but witnessing an attempt at assault.

Men feared being murdered more than anything. Women feared rape.

Fuck...

The clock in the hall tick-ed once, twice, and Shisui visibly trembled beside him.

Hazel glanced to the side.

Against the wall, Shisui started crying.
Akira': the light coming from the sun

Itachi: For those of you lost, please reread previous chapters. During Itachi's POV after Kiharu's return, he revealed internal suspicions regarding her motives. It's not a secret in the sense that I'm planning on a plot reveal later with it...it's already out there. Kiharu doesn't know which is why her perspective is so confused about it. The audience has been made aware. Kiharu hasn't.

A/N: Yo! I really, really wasn't going to update for a long time again because, one, work and, two, I was ngl a little disappointed by the reaction (or lack therefore) to a two-month-late update. But I'm gonna just chalk it up to my Americans out there being distracted by Thanksgiving. Yeah, so. Here's an update?

Thanks for reading! <3

Cinnamon Roll recipe: ‘Kanelbullar!’

Makes: 10 (yes, I eat this without help)

Ingredients for the dough:

Sunflower oil, for oiling work surface.
300ml milk
1 teaspoon ground cardamom
50g butter
425g plain flour, plus a little bit more for dusting
7g packet of fast-action yeast (dried)
50g Caster sugar
½ teaspoon of salt (do not use rock salt, you crazies)
1 egg, lightly beaten

Filling shit:

75g butter, softened (learn from my mistakes and don't trust it unattended in the microwave, please)
50g soft LIGHT brown sugar (can be pricey but worth it!!! Yasssss)
2 teaspoons ground cinnamon (no more...trust me, this isn't the Challenge™)
½ teaspoon of (you guessed it) FINE salt
Glaze:

1 egg, lightly beaten with a dash of milk (can do without milk but then I think it makes them smell a bit like omelette. Weird)
Pearl or Demerara sugar for sprinkling (we're being authentically Swedish here, get that icing awayyyyyy)

Directions!

I'm lazy so this is gonna be fucking fast

Preheat oven to 200°C, 400°F, Gas Mark 6
Lightly oil a baking sheet or line, like Kiharu, some cake tins with greaseproof parchment. If you're very fancy, hunt down a YouTube video on life hacks and figure out how to do the latter one prettily.

Put the milk in a saucepan, preferably a small one, and add the cardamom and simmer. Don't boil. Bring off heat and add butter until melted. Set it aside until it's just warm, like a nice blanket. Cute.

Mix all the dry stuff on a big bowl and make a ‘well’ in the middle. Add the egg to the little pond bit and then pour the milk stuff on there too. Like landscaping, yeah? Okay, Now mix it very gently, slowly moving outwards and including the flour bit by bit. Go quick and you'll get lumps and then kill your Yeast when you're beating the shit out of the mixture trying to get rid of the lumps. Trust me. Just follow the damn instructions.
Ta dah! It's dough.

Oil a work surface, on top of cling film if you think you're clever, and turn the dough out onto it. DON'T BE TEMPTED INTO ADDING MORE FLOUR BECAUSE IT'S SO GOOEY. Just knead it softly and it should get it's shit together. You could use a stand mixer with a dough hook but we're not bitches.

Lightly oil a bowl (BTW, oil everything lightly, you don't want greasy bread WTF) and put your dough baby in it. I censored this bit in the fic because it's boring. Cover with cling film or a clean tea towel and leave to rise in a warm place for 30-60 mins. Or until double. Don't put it in a low setting oven, no matter how shit your central heating or if you're low on handy patches of sunlight in countertops. Let's not lose our heads.

While the dough is rising, make the filling by beating the shit out of them in a bowl.

Roll the dough out on a lightly floured surface (shit I should've made Kiharu do this bit in the fic-) until it's about 3mm thick. Thin but, then again, it's gonna rise and you don't want it raw in the middle but burned on top.

See Kiharu ^^^^^ for this bit. Like hell am I describing it twice.

Place the rolls on a baking sheet or pack reasonably tightly (don't be stupid) in a cake tin. Leave to prove for another 30 mins. Again, I censored.

Brush the buns with beaten egg (remember, a drop of milk is optional) and sprinkle with the sugar LISTED.
Shove in the oven for 20-25 mins, until golden brown. Probably better to turn them out hot because they're more flexible then but I'm sorry if you get violent and they fall apart.

Enjoy!

(recipe from 'Lagom' by Linnea Dunne)
Talk is Cheap...and so are Cliff Hangers

Chapter Summary

The title is because Kiharu is, for such a good speaker, shit at expressing herself. Internalisation is, apparently, her Tea.

The author also loves cutting scenes short so much that why would she limit herself to just one?

Same principle for cake slices.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“C’mon, Shisui.” A hand rested heavy on his shoulder, tugging him slightly away from his lean against the wall. Shisui’s forehead was pressed to the cool surface, twisted away in some semblance of privacy.

It was pretty stupid. Ensui could hear his wet, shaking breaths regardless.

Oh, but it was all such a mess.

Kiharu was his best friend. She’d been there when he needed it most and they'd been thick as thieves for six whole years now.

But the thought persisted.

Was it all over now?

He’d been...stupid. Like, really stupid.
But Kiharu was so smart and strong and-!

He didn't realise. He didn't think that she'd be so hurt, so angry and that he'd been doing so much damage pushing her to fix things. Kami but Itachi just evaded stuff like this and…

Shisui hadn't wanted to push him, to make him run from him too.

Kiharu, on the other hand, would push back if he was going too far, would step up if he needed her too.

He'd just failed to realise that it wasn't fair to her either. That it was *his* place to bridge the gap.

He just...really hoped he hadn't ruined things. That their friendship was reparable, that Kiharu would let him talk.

Because, sometimes, it was hard to remember life before knowing Kiharu. Because knowing Kiharu had brought so many things into his life.

He'd met the Yamanaka, Akimichi and Nara beyond just watching curiously from a distance. He'd met Ensui, who turned out to be both the chillest and the most sarcastic friend he could ever have.

Kiharu, the girl who scowled and deflected any topics regarding her lack of friends her own age, was able to wiggle past the walls and facades of the Uchiha. She hadn't even seemed *fazed* by them!

Looking back, he'd taken that for granted.

Kiharu was constant. She'd had a nine-to-five job almost since he'd met her and she liked what she liked and kept a routine better than most adults Shisui knew. Maybe that was another reason *Nekki's* had loyal ninja customers.

It was bright and cheerful and dependable.

“Shisui...Shisui, let's go.”
Ensui's grip was unflinching, fingers twisted in the high collar of his top, and the Jounin allow himself to be guided towards the stairs. There was an arm across his back, like a supporting beam, to steady him as he shuffled down the steps. His knees ached. There must be rain coming in.

Kiharu, he couldn't help but notice, had left her coat. He hoped she wasn't cold and immediately felt guilty for the thought; was it even his business anymore?

He must've said it out loud because Ensui, locking the door after them, cuffed him round the head in a none-too-gentle gesture.

“Idiot. She's still our friend and even if she wasn't, you're allowed to worry.”

The older boy kissed his teeth and Shisui was suddenly reminded of Fugaku-sama.

Oh hell.

Shisui's crutches made a quiet tap tap as they walked towards the gate, loud in the street and the stifling atmosphere Kiharu had left behind. When Ensui turned to latch the gate after them, Shisui started restlessly fiddling with his crutches and trying to avoid looking around too much.

He'd had always been welcome at the Dazai home.

Leaving now, it felt like he was trespassing.

Long fingers suddenly burrowed in his hair, scrubbing through the riot of curls with a roughness that belied tension. Shisui, invalid as he was, could only skitter away clumsily, twisting to stare incredulously at his other best friend (other or only?). “What was that for!?”

Ensui blinked, hand lowering back to his pocket and eyes carefully half-lidded. “You were thinking too hard again.”

Shisui's mouth twisted, brows furrowing. “What's that supposed to mean?”
A sharp brow quirked. “I work with Uchiha, Shisui, even if I didn’t know you so well. Chronic overthinkers. I can almost see your internal, downward spiral into despair.” Hands still tucked away, Ensui took two lounging steps closer and Shisui felt…defensive, like a cat with spiked fur.

He shoved the reaction aside. He was not gonna fight with two friends in one day.

“Over-thinking? Did you hear what she said?”

“Yes,” The Nara nodded, continuing to walk and inclining his head. Shisui slowly followed. “She wasn't just talking to you, you know.”

Ouch. Well, he had to wince at that.

“I'm gonna talk to her. Soon.”

His mouth was dry, almost soapy, but he still managed to swallow. “Al..already?”

They neared the corner and Ensui shot him another hard look over his shoulder. “I have to. There's an ongoing investigation and Kiharu-chan is part of that. If she throws stuff at me, at least I need to be able to meet in a professional capacity.”

( -Blue eyes, stormy as the sea in winter, bore into his. The hurt shining there was sharper between his ribs than any kunai- )

“Do you think I should too?”

Shisui knew the answer even before his friend could reply, turning the corner and sidestepping the newlyweds three doors down from the Dazai.

“Yeah,” Shisui coughed, “never mind.”
Ensui tugged the tie from his ponytail, scraping his hair into a low bun and rotating his neck. The Uchiha wondered if it was so Osamu, his boss, would think he'd actually been home since yesterday. Ensui really was fooling no-one. “Give it a while, a few days at least. Kiharu,” the Sergeant advised, “is slow to anger but she'll boil for a good long while. Like a volcano; go back now and you won't escape so lucky.”

“Should I just...apologize when I can, then?”

This time, when Ensui stopped, it was with a look of undulated aggravation.

He cocked a hip, uncaring for the curious looks garnered by a few passersby. “Seriously?”

Flexing his hands around the grips on his crutches, Shisui sucked on his bottom lip. He felt...ungainly, like a dog with too big paws or a bird whose wings had yet to grow. Weird and awkward. “I'll grovel?”

Olive-toned fingers pinched a furrowed brow. “Right. Right, Okay.” Hazel glared up at him. “I'm not even going to get into it because, honestly, I think you need to realise this yourself. But...Shi? That's a crap idea. Just think about what Kiharu said to us and maybe consider that saying? ‘Actions speak louder than words’?”

The teen’s mouth opened. Closed. Opened again. “Oh.”

“Yeah. Now, I have to get back to the Station, we have some serious shit hitting the fan, but listen.” He jabbed a finger at the younger boy’s chest. “You're coming to mine for dinner, no excuses. I don't care if you have to Shunshin - and yes, I'm well aware you've been practising your jutsu behind Akane-sama's back - out your window into escape The Aunt From Hell. My house. Six, if you can manage it.”

“Right.” Shisui agreed weakly.

Ensui nodded once, a jerk of his chin that, from the hand on his neck, he immediately regretted. “Ja ne!”

And he was gone.
The street wasn't busy, just a few families milling around as they set out for the day. Parents to work, children to either the academy or to play in the street, to the park, to wherever they wanted. Just another day in their peaceful lives.

(That was an illusion, Shisui knew now. An arrogance on the part of Shinobi to think that, just because these people didn't throw themselves into fights for a paycheck, that they didn't feel pain or war or darkness. He knew better. He knew better.)

And Shisui kept walking.

When he'd gotten up this morning, after a night staring into the fuzzy darkness of his bedroom ceiling and mentally recounting all the ways to kill a man, it had been with a jitter of nerves in his belly. Like butterflies. But...made of rusty metal. And caused sickness…?

At this point, he was almost resigned to the fact Kiharu attracted trouble like ants to spilled syrup.

But that didn't make it easier to cope.

He thought about the twist to Ensui's smile, about Kiharu's shakiness, when he'd told them about going back into the field. The worry, the fear. And Shisui understood that he was doing the same to them.

(-when they were younger and Kiharu would smile like the sun coming out, arms thrown wide as she ran towards him every time he came back from a mission, short or long, it didn't matter-)

Okay, so, he was a massive hypocrite.

He skipped off the ledge of crooked cobblestone, circuiting around the shopping districts to avoid the crowds and head back to the Compound.

He'd made it to Kiharu's a bit faster than he probably should have, as shown by the ache of his knees, and-
He'd almost gotten into a fist fight with an apex predator and, towards the end, he'd honestly thought Ki-chan was going to punch him.

But, of course she didn't. She wasn't like that and he'd felt ashamed for thinking his best friend would lash out, no matter how angry.

He was in the wrong, he knew that now but...dammit!

Itachi was skittish! Couldn't Kiharu see that, see how he was backing up from them all? Shisui was meant to look out for him, be a good cousin and have the poor kid's back but...stuck here, stuck on these crutches, he'd been worse than useless.

He could talk from sunrise to sunset, yeah.

But Itachi didn't talk, not like that. And nowhere close to any possible eavesdroppers. So, until Shisui was back on duty and could train in the woods, he was in a tight spot.

But Kiharu, she'd gotten through to the others! Sure, not all of them, but no-one could ever please everyone. But she'd done remarkably well and he'd kinda, maybe, sorta, wanted her to work her magic again.

In hindsight, that had been a horrible thing to ask of her.

Kiharu wasn't some magical cure. She wasn't a therapist or a guru or a diplomat. He couldn't just point her at Itachi and demand she help him, even regardless of their own history.

He'd been...mean.

“Urgh,” hands indisposed to bury his head in them, Shisui could only clench his eyes shut, still tapping on home as quickly as possible. “I'm a dick.”

“I'd say.”
Head snapping up, Shisui swallowed hard at the dark figure swaggering out from a sidestreet, about ten meters away.

“Hitoshi.” The ‘aren't you with Kiharu?’ went unsaid but easily heard.

“The cub is at the hospital with the other apprentice girl. I thought I’d stretch my legs.”

Shisui licked his lips, determinedly walking forwards as if he hadn't been interrupted. *A walk, really? Or did Kiharu continue her fight with you after she'd left and you're in the doghouse too?*

For all his bravado, Shisui wasn't *quite* stupid enough to voice it aloud.

From the dangerous glint to poisonous green eyes, the teen wondered if the panther didn't know his thoughts anyway. Aw, fuck it.

“What is it, Hitoshi?”

*Clack, clack, clack-*

Slowly, the Summon twisted, padding alongside the Uchiha like an unwilling Guard. Or an Officer overseeing his arrest. *What fantastic mental images-*!

The cat merely huffed, neck turning his great head away with all the pomp of a Daimyo.

They continued in silence all the way to the Compound and, when Hitoshi wordlessly followed him inside the gates, Shisui almost managed to convince himself that he wasn't about to be mauled.

Almost.

But it was chilling, that heavy gaze on the back of his neck as, balanced on one foot, he fished for his house keys. Less than an hour ago, this same animal had been roaring like thunder and beating down his mistress's door, fully prepared to chow down on Shisui's legs if it meant getting through.
Then again, Shisui was pretty sure Hitoshi wanted to feast on his flesh regardless of his intervention.

Naturally, this particular morning saw his house empty.

No witnesses. Fantastic.

“So…” The teen twisted in the hallway, turning careful eyes to the Summon in the doorway. “Why are you here?”

For a long moment, Shisui didn't think he was getting an answer. In the street behind the panther, his neighbour, Mikoto-sama's third cousin he believed, eyed them both curiously as she passed with her basket.

“Kiharu sent me.”

The bottom fell out of his stomach, the thrill of nerves stinging his veins and, suddenly, Shisui's grip on his crutches was unbearably clammy.

“Oh?” he croaked.

Hitoshi stepped closer, swaggering with all the confidence of a Lord in his Court, and emerald eyes swept the room with obvious disinterest before he made himself at home in the nearest patch of sunlight.

(it was very weak, the grey on the horizon threatening another storm later-)

(It was also his Aunt's favourite rug but Shisui didn't even care-)

“After all, she can't ignore you if Seiichi-sama, when he catches wind of this all, kills you.”

Rather than slow, Shisui's heart rate only increased. “O-oh.”
Emerald glinted in vicious amusement. “Indeed.”

Beep, beep, beep-

My thumb started bleeding, the tang of copper on my tongue, and I immediately grimaced. The nail was bitten to the quick, a sharp jagged edge pulling at the side in a stinging cut. Bugger.

I sighed, dropping my hands into my lap and fisting them against the nervous impulse to keep picking.

Across from me, Hoshiko didn't even glance up from her embroidery. She'd, rather cleverly, worked out that, if she could complete her workload here, she could spent as much time as possible beside Gin.

Hospitals weren't meant to be exciting or fun of entertaining. And I didn't want them to be but...after my breakdown-

Well, I had way too much time to agonise over everything.

God, but Shisui must hate me!

This was it! I'd fucked it! I'd be spending the rest of my life avoiding the Uchiha and, possibly, dying a lonely old crook with too many cakes and only two friends.

Because, let's face it, the babies didn't count. And Izumo and Kotetsu didn't get on with Shisui so I really didn't want to walk into that minefield-

Hana would stand by me because - in her words, not mine - fuck boys. And I'd have Hitoshi because, as strangely parental as he was, he was my partner.
FuFu was my precious baby-bean and-

A tissue was pressed into my hand, Hoshiko half-risen from her seat to stretch across Gin’s feet. Her eyes were sad, mouth stretched in a grimace that was probably supposed to be a smile.

I grimaced back, pressing the starched cloth to my hot cheeks, my slightly swollen eyes already watering. My ‘no crying’ rule had only lasted long enough for me to send Hitoshi on his way.

I was really quite proud of myself for it.

I’d cried so much into the panther's fur, every time I missed mum or dad was gone or the loneliness hit me so hard I felt breathless. I’d rarely explained myself and, looking at the old sourpuss, you wouldn’t have thought he was good with comfort. Except that he was, because he was solid and real and logical and I loved him. It was a strange bond. Like another parent, but also a brother, but also a teacher as well as my partner, a bodyguard and a friend.

I’d let him carry me here before insisting he stop dad from doing anything stupid. Bad enough that he’d scared the shit out of the boys over my damned nose, he wasn’t allowed to intervene this time around.

Honestly, it had only taken seeing Hoshiko-senpai and being swept up into another wet embrace for my own tears to start up again.

I was...I was just so tired.


“N-” The word caught in my throat, dry and thick, and I swallowed against the lump there before trying again. “No, thank you, senpai.”

The door latched softly after her.
Gin, still sound asleep in the bed before me, didn't even stir at the sound. She hadn't so much as twitched the entire time - almost an hour - I'd been here, moping like the selfish dick I was-

She'd been washed, her blonde hair carefully brushed back from her face. They'd taped the gash at her temple, a souvenir from when she'd been smacked against the wall.

If you ignored that, and the deep bruises under her eyes, she looked peaceful.

Revulsion curled in my stomach and it was only when my knuckles cramped, nails stinging my skin, that my fists loosened.

I had purple crescents pressed, throbbing mutedly, into the soft flesh of my palms.

Being pacifistic didn't mean I didn't feel anger, the thrum of violence in my limbs and the ache to lash out. I hurt and I cried and I bled but-

We were allowed to feel. Our emotions are valid and we should always be free to feel.

What wasn't okay was to take them out on others.

It was the thought that stayed my fist, bicep relaxing and arm dropping. The poised blow that never lands.

Because, honestly, what did violence do? What fucking good does it do?

You kill someone who has wronged you? Yes, you have sought and achieved that revenge but...in doing so, you've ruined yourself.

You get into a fist fight and you're both hurt, maybe some innocents too. Your parents are worried and you have to get bailed out and so very little is learned.

I was a great believer in self defense, of course I was. I didn't believe in violence but, above anything, I didn't believe that anyone had the right to hurt you. Had the right to take something from
you, as if you were worth so much less than them.

I’d never wanted to lash out, to hurt someone as much as the man from last night.

*How dare he, how fucking dare-*

But he was out of my reach and I was running out of options.

Shisui...kami, but I couldn't even go there right now.

Ensui...

Hitoshi...

I cast my eyes, that I'd not even realised I'd closed, back to Gin's pale face.

She looked young like this. Like any girl.

Nothing like the Bitch I'd almost grown to like, that I was pretty sure didn't hate me as much as she wanted me to think.

(-her stupid talon nails were badly broken, some of the cuticles bloody from fighting back-)

My gaze, cool and calculating now that I had something to focus on, swept over her features one more time before, pushing my chair back, I stepped out of the room.

I burst into tears on the first nurse I found.

Lilac eyes, pupils blown with exhaustion, popped wide as the state of me (swollen eyes were *not* pretty) and the young woman, she looked like a mother to be honest, immediately rushed towards me.
Obviously my reputation had died off a bit. Either that or she was new.

“Oh!” Her hands, chapped and worn from work and the gross anti-bac spray they used here, fluttered around my shoulders before carefully drawing me into a hug. “What's happened?”

I hiccuped, chest heaving quietly. The tears were easy, only half-faked, and I mentally resigned myself to a visit to my uncle. I'd put it off long enough and, as evidence of the shit show that morning, I needed to talk. “M-my f-f-f-friend was attac-k-ed. No-one...understands-”

“Oh…” her breath caught in her throat, hand smoothing over my back in firmer strokes and slowly drawing is both back to her work station. A couple of healers swept past, clipboards in the crook of their arms and stress staining their brows. Restless eyes darted glances at us as they sped on down the hall. “Oh, I see, you came in last night…”

I nodded jerkily, fumbling with Hoshiko's hankie and scrubbing it over my eyes. I'd learnt from Kaa-san that blowing your nose wasn't polite, which was a bit novel for me. “But everyone is looking at me...did we do something wrong?”

A hot stab of guilt to the chest. This was low, even for me, but...I had to know.

“No, no, it's not your fault!” Her hair, cut into a professional bob that curled at the jaw, flared out as she viciously shook her head. She poured me a drink from the water tank beside us, pressing the plastic cup into my hands and not taking her eyes off me. “It's never your fault, it's theirs, and I say that to everyone. It's never the girl's fault, Okay?”

I stared at my water, cupped between hands bitten down from nerves. “Others?”

This was the hard bit. Finding stuff out without blowing it...or hurting the nurse.

She visibly hesitated. There was a drawing pinned under the ledge of her desk. Absently, I wondered if it was from her kids or if a patient had drawn it for her. Genin were heartbreakingly young enough.

“Yes…” her tone was careful, slow as though walking along a tightrope. “Yes, there are other girls. You're not alone.”
Easy does it, I internally chanted. I wasn't doing this meanly. I had reasons, valid ones.

“I thought...only Shinobi were treated here?”

She glanced away, hands now loosely clasped in her lap but her body language still open, knees twisted towards me and shoulders dropped. “Yes, that's right. But, like with your friend, sometimes people have to come here and we help them. Just like how your friend is being helped and she'll soon be all better.”

My lips felt dry but I resisted the urge to lick them. “Do they sleep like Gin, too?”

The nurse - I abruptly felt guilty for not knowing her name - looked lost for a long moment, eyes blindly scanning the corridor. She was obviously at war with herself about revealing these details to me and I kept as still at possible, not want to spook her and make her clam up.

“No, no they don't.” She finally spoke, almost intoning it.

I bit back on the immediate question of who. “Do they talk, like I did last night?”

Lilac, so similar but so different from the Hyuuga that I wondered if she was distantly related, turned back to me. Her eyes were suddenly careful, shrewd as any mothers and I wondered if she knew what I was doing.

I really think she did know.

She spoke up anyway and I breathed.

“No...not always. It's hard to trust men, to trust others when you're hurting.”

Lips pressed together, I nodded, climbing to my feet and sweeping into a deep bow. “I-thank you, Healer-san.”
“Don't be silly, now.”

I straightened, abruptly ashamed under that knowing gaze, and nodded before dashing out of there as quickly as I could.

I didn't breathe right until I was in the stairwell, half a case down.

Well, fuck.

So, girls came here, did they? Did they not tell the Police everything or was it that they didn't report it at all?

Ensui has said there had been another girl, last week. She'd fought him off by herself, got herself to the Station and blurted out the whole thing.

He hadn't said her name, probably couldn't, but he had mentioned a stay in the hospital. And, last week, had he not been delivering flowers?

I snapped my fingers, the sudden noise echoing off the walls.

“The blonde teammate.”

My feet thudded down the steps, one hand ghosting the railing whilst my other braced against the wall.

I was rosy-cheeked by the time I burst out into the reception area.

And Kami, for all they fucked with me, was merciful for once.

“Hi!” I called, catching the eye of the blonde behind the main desk. “I don't know if you remember me-”
“Ensui-kun’s baking friend,” she nodded, setting down her tea and quirking a brow. Her pink lip gloss glimmered under the panel lights. “What’s up?”

I made a show of resting against the side, fanning a hand to my hot face and puffing my cheeks. “Phew, sorry! I'm in a rush and I can't find him - Ensui-kun, that is - anywhere! Have you seen him? He said he was bringing the flowers again this time-?”

The Nara's old Genin teammate, name on the tip of my tongue, visibly soured, lips pouting like a Kardashian. “Oh, he's visiting that brunette again? She was checked out a few days ago-”

“What!” My eyes popped wide, mouth dropping. God but I was hamming this up. “He didn't tell me! Honestly, Ensui-kun would lose his head if it wasn't attached to his shoulders these days!” I rolled my eyes, smirking when the blonde seemed to agree with an ironic twist to her painted mouth. “You couldn't give me directions, could you? It's just that...I've not been to the new flat yet and I'm obviously really late…”

The blonde - Yuko! Yuko, that was her name - grimaced in consolation. “Sorry, kiddo, but I can't reveal patient information. Are you sure Masaru-san didn't send you a card or anything with a new address? That's what my Oba-chan did a few years ago-”

I ignored the rest of her ramble. Masaru. Masaru...where have I heard that name...

“-completely waylaid with housewarming gifts! Eating leftovers for days!”

I blinked. “O-oh, right! She must've, I'll take another look around then...thanks anyway, Yuko-san. I'll tell Ensui-kun you said hi?”

“No problem and yes, please! Tell him to drop by in my lunch break?”

Her eyes gleamed and I twisted away before she could see my answering grimace. Ew.

“Okay, bye!”

The food vendor was still posted on the street outside and, with a kind of harried frenzy, I bought
myself a few pork buns for the road. My stomach felt hollow, face pale.

Too many revelations in too short a time. Like a bloody rollercoaster but without any of my usual insane enjoyment.

A handful of Shinobi were crossing the rooftops around me, leaping around each other in a strange kind of flow of traffic. One of them had longer hair and a blue bandana.

I waved without care and was rewarded with a friendly nod, Genma wiggling his fingers casually before he leapt onto a window ledge, the Jounin offices I thought, and slipped inside.

The bun wasn't very flavourful but it was something hot in my belly and I ate without tasting.

If the terrible night and bad morning were any indication, it was going to be a long day.

.................................................................

It took two cups of coffee, the beans abused so much they tasted like bloody tar, for Ensui to feel some semblance of alive.

His hair was re-tied, skin smarting from a splash in the ice-cold fountain on his way to the Station and he was wearing yesterday's clothes. He'd already eaten at Kiharu's, so at least there was that.

And speaking of...he'd-he'd speak to her tomorrow. He hadn't lied to Shisui about that, after all. Obviously they could all use a little more honesty.

He did need to discuss things with her, give her a chance to both work through her anger and digest the information he'd dumped on her.

He just didn't have the words yet.

The Nara walked up the steps, knees creaking like some kind of old man, and kept his hands tucked
into his pockets to hide the faint tremble from the caffeine...and exhaustion.

Maybe he should take up smoking, would that help? Sooth his nerves a bit at least, right?

...Yoshino-sama would kill him.

And, as Akane-sama liked to lecture, so would his lungs in a few decades.

...He'd end up outside, taking smoking breaks with Ryuu.

*Nah...not worth it.*

The Station was a flurry of activity, papers all but flying as, in a lull of tangible action, everyone tackled the piles of paperwork that built up aggravatingly quickly. A glance around, sidestepping more than one fellow Officer, and Ensui could see Osamu-senpai in his office, Ryuu at his own desk (filing his nails and lazily flipping through a file) and-

A shoulder slammed into his, sending him spinning from the momentum and then all the Nara could see were papers, flapping through the air and there was a sheet under his foot and he was slipping-

A hand wrapped around his wrist, another around his waist, just as Ensui's froze his own shadow to halt the fall.

“Sorry!” A man - an Officer, of course - breathed into his ear, pulling them both upright and immediately dropping to collect the mess of paperwork. “I'm in a hurry!”

It took an embarrassingly long moment for Ensui's Nara brain to kick back into gear and another before the neurons connected, dropping him into a mirroring crouch and casting out his shadow to collect every wayward scrap.

“Ohh...,” the other man breathed, somehow sounding endearingly awed, as if he'd never seen a Nara's shadows at work. Or he didn't think Ensui would use them like this. “Thank you.”
It was honest and mildly spoken and Ensui blinked. Well. That was...new. Especially around here.

It was enough, however, to have the Nara glancing up to focus, properly for the first time, on the man who'd ran into him.

Thick black hair, an Uchiha standard, was cut close at the sides, slightly longer on top for his fringe to brush long lashes. Dark eyes, another usual for the dojutsu Clan, and skin that was a shade or two more Olive-toned than other Uchiha present. His face, pleasant but not overly pretty, was appealing in a civilian way and Ensui almost smirked at the pink tint to shaven cheeks that appeared under his scrutiny.

He was familiar but not anyone Ensui really interacted with. Hmm.

“It's no bother. Accidents happen to us all,” Ensui sat back on his haunches, passing over the papers and standing up.

The other Officer, a fellow Sergeant from his armband, rose up after him. “Right...Uchiha Kagen, Sergeant.”

“Nara Ensui.”

Finally, a smile quirked the other man's - Kagen's - lips, revealing a charming gap between his front teeth and a dimple in his chin.

“Nara! I thought I told you to get some rest!” Osamu, ponytail neat and shirt buttoned wrong, strode up the aisle to meet them, sweeping between the desks with stressed authority.

“Hai, senpai,” Ensui stepped back from Kagen, arms by his side and a smile quirking his lips ruefully. “And I did, last night-”

“You were in late, even without certain events, and the night before, and the night before that. You have to sleep at some point, Sergeant.” Osamu sighed, hand on his neck and brows crumpled as he drew to a stop at Ensui's shoulder.
The older man glanced to his relative before doing a double take, eying the mess of papers with open confusion. “Sergeant Kagen? Aren’t you supposed to be in a meeting with—”

“Oh shit!”

Kagen-san paled rapidly, bizarrely expressive for an Uchiha, and immediately bolted towards Fugaku-sama’s office. Fuck, he was late for the Chief. Fuck.

Ensui and Osamu, as one, turned to watch him, sandals twisting on the laminated floor to jerk around, dark eyes finding Ensui’s across the office space.

“Ensui-san! Coffee later?”

Ensui blinked.

Heat crept up his neck, a fuzziness in his ears. Was he—?

Half a dozen Uchiha-dark eyes looked up in nosey interest, peering between the two men and no doubt planning on gossiping as soon as he answered.

Kagen shuffled his armload awkwardly, expression uncertain.

Oh, right, he had to reply—

“Sure?”

The other Sergeant immediately relaxed, smiling crookedly. “Great, so—”

The door behind him jerked open and Fugaku, expression drifting somewhere between aggravated and resigned, filled up the doorway with his broad frame.
“You're late as it is, Sergeant. In.”

The door snapped shut behind them.

“A laughing voice piped up and Ensui, already feeling put on the spot, didn't even bother to turn around.

“Problem, Ryuu?”

The older guy lifted his hands, feet still propped on his desk and crossed at the ankle. “No, no,” Black eyes gleamed like oil under the desk lamps and sunlight streaming through the high windows. “Just interesting.”

Hazel eyes glanced to the side to meet navy, aware of his boss's silence through the entire thing and shared a sardonic look. “Oh?”

“Figured you'd go for the bleeding heart type,” his ‘partner' continued. “The noble one, like-

“Ryuu.” Osamu barked. “Be professional for once.”

What is going on today? What is with everyone?

“-but Kagen is bitter.” Sandalled feet were lowered smoothly, Ryuu leaning forward with a wicked twist to his pretty red mouth and a voice dropping to a conspiratory whisper. “Never developed his Sharingan, see? Very angry about that. Something of an Underdog. If I were you, Ensui-kun, I'd be very careful with that big brain not to bruise such a fragile ego.”

“It's just coffee.” Ensui pointed out, backing up blindly to lean on the corner of his own desk and crossing his arms. No, he wasn't feeling defensive, he was tired.

“Right.” Ryuu leaned back again, picking his nail file back up and examining his flawless cuticles. “Coffee.”
“A caffeinated beverage, Ryuu, not a euphemism. Did you leave your brain behind this morning, as usual?”

Said Uchiha's jaw clenched tellingly. “Fuck off, Ensui.”

The Nara snorted, twisting around the corner of his desk and into his office chair. A win was a win.

He hadn't even glanced at the files sat waiting for him when he realised Osamu still hadn't moved, frowning down at Ensui with careful scrutiny.

The Chuunin, hands rested lightly on armrests, met his superior's gaze unflinchingly. The morning had been insane enough, he was pretty prepared for anything. “Senpai?”

Behind the DI's back, Ryuu mouthed the honorific mockingly and, out of sight of the older man, Ensui flipped him off.

Osamu had only ever been fair to Ensui. He wasn't going to be a dick (Ryuu) or gossip (everyone else).

Onyx brows furrowed, a divot forming between them and tightening the skin around his eyes. “Ensui-san, Kagen is a good man but, as with everyone outside of us, please do be mindful. We all must be but...bare in mind that, if you do date, you can never work on a direct case together.”

A dull flush warmed Ensui's cheekbones, the bridge of his nose, whinsanelyavoided meeting the Detective's gaze at all costs. Wow, he'd not even realised the far windows had blinds and not just shutters-

“It's just coffee but...er, thank you, senpai.”

They both coughed awkwardly.

“Yeah - I mean - yes, right. Well, do get Dazai-chan's witness testimony from last night written up
and on my desk by today, hmm?"

Ensui's shoulders relaxed minutely, glad to be back on familiar territory. “Hai, senpai.”

With one last tug on the little ponytail at his nape, Osamu spun on his heel and, with strange purpose, strode back towards his office, sidestepping Rikari on his way.

“Fuck, well okay.” The Nara muttered under his breath, sitting back and ignoring all the pesky, lingering gazes. He was not in the mood for all the bloody nonsense. “That was...something.”

“You're telling me, this is like a fever dream,” Ryuu snickered, pulling out a bag of tobacco and leisurely rolling up a cigarette. The sight made Ensui scoff; the other man probably hadn't been on shift more than an hour and he was already prepping for a break. Typical.

“You dream of me? Ryuu, I never knew you cared-”

“Oh piss off!”

Mercifully, the rest of Ensui's shift was nothing out of the ordinary.

Well…

Two hours into the mountain of paperwork - that Ensui was pretty sure was one-quarter Ryuu's too, the Bastard - and Kagen-san finally left the Chief's office, still half-crippled under the weight of his files and looking decidedly less flustered. Absorbed in his paperwork, which may or may not have included a sketched brainstorm of what to say to Kiharu next time he saw her, Ensui didn't quite register that fact until the tell-tale hush of almost-whispers swept the office. Oh, but he could well imagine who was approaching to garner such a gossipy reaction.

The clearing of a throat stayed the Nara's pen. Hazel eyes flicked up to meet black.

From this angle, he was undeniably related to Itachi.
“Ensui-san-” and that was another thing. Due to the fact that, well, everyone but him had the same surname, it was just normal to use given names straight off the bat. It would be pretty cold to only use Ensui’s last name. But still, in incidences like this, not that he’d had any before it the Station, it felt weird. “Are you still free for coffee? We can go now, or closer to lunch or maybe this evening, if that suits you better.”

Neck stretched so his expression was clearly visible behind their visitor, Ensui’s asshole of a ‘partner’ smirked. Nastily.

“You know what? Now would be great -”

“Sergeant Ensui-san!” Rikari, bun windswept from wherever she’d just been on her lunch break, strode between the desks. Her shirtsleeves were rolled to mid-bicep and her red lipstick was slightly smudged. “A moment, please?”

Half risen from his chair, the Nara flopped back down, Kagen awkwardly shuffling to one side. Kami but he was getting more callers than he’d had the last month.

If this was popularity, he didn't want it.

“I just wanted to express my condolences-” Her what? “-I didn't realise your young friend knew Masaru-san. Two friends attacked in as many weeks and to have been present at one of them… I've only just spoken to her but, if you could keep me informed of her progress, I'd be thankful.”

Lips parted, a knot of tension cramped like an iron fist in his sternum. “Kiharu…” He mouth formed the words slowly, rolling them around with dripping incredulity. “You mean Kiharu-chan.”

Rikari frowned minutely. “Yes? The baker, small brunette? She was just coming to pay her respects when I left, had the most beautiful well-wishing basket I've ever seen. Masaru was very surprised.”

His eye twitched. Oh, he bet she was; it wasn't every day, after all, that a midget 13-year-old turned up at your door and bluffed that you were friends. What the fuck is she playing at-

“Right, yes, of course.” Ensui bit out. “Indeed, how could I forget? Kiharu talks about her all the time. Actually! I'm surprised I didn't recognise her immediately! Ha ha ha!”
At this point, even Ryuu was staring at him like he'd lost his mind.

“Would you please excuse me?” Ensui shot up from his seat, fist snatching up his flak jacket and throwing it on in one smooth motion. His eyes fastened on Kagen's. “Maybe coffee another day, Kagen-san?”

Black, distracted by the bunch of his shoulders shrugging the vest up his arms, snapped up and blinked rapidly. “Oh, right. Yeah, that's fine, just...let me know?”

The Nara's mind was already spinning ahead, locking up his desk and, with barely a nod, he booked it out of there.

“I'll guess I'll fucking cover for you then!” Ryuu's dry call was the last thing he heard before Ensui was jogging out the doors, past the receptionist and leaping the steps clear.

Rikari had obviously just been with Masaru so -

He wasn't sure where the civilian woman lived but-

Kiharu...that little sneak.

He didn't know how she did it, how she'd found the other victim... Kami, he'd only told her yesterday morning and Kiharu had found her by Rikari's lunch break.

That kind of ridiculous productivity...she was up to something.

Masaru-san's house was lovely, all clean lines and gentle pastels. There were bouquets filling every surface in her kitchen and beans soaking in the sink.
The woman in question, sat opposite me at the table, was dressed in pretty pastels too, with flowers braided into a crown around her head and lose petals caught in the wispy strands.

The effect was rather ruined by the yellow bruising around her throat.

That and the carving knife.

“-it's an original recipe! Just matcha and cream and other natural stuff. It was one of the first - actually, I think it was the first - of my desserts that Mikoto-hime, Rikari-san's Clan Matriarch and my business partner, tried. Honestly, between you and me, I think it's this cheesecake that made her take an interest in the whole baking thing. Well, this and that time Iruka-kun, my friend who recently became a Chuunin, sent my tiramisu flying. Kami but I almost set my Tou-san on him for that stunt! It was supposed to be for Mikoto-hime's tea party-”

Pink painted nails rested over the handle again, stiff with nerves. “Please don't avoid the question.”

My smile was decidedly more forced. “I told you; I heard about what happened, Masaru-san, and I wanted to drop some things by. You're a regular at my Oba-san’s shop. You know, Yuri, the seamstress?”

Her eyes were slightly wide still. Obviously stressed.

I made sure to keep both hands visible, body lose and open and to smile as genuinely as possible when I had a knife across from me.

Okay so some slight oversights. I really hadn't expected this when Masaru had let me in, waving off the Policewoman that had been drinking tea in the seat I was now sat in.

Fuck but that just made it worse. Imagine having the audacity to attack someone dating an Officer. To me, that spoke of both a reckless overconfidence...or a possible vendetta.

Unfortunately, I hadn't taken into account that some traffickers used small children to lure women into a position to be grabbed. Fuck.
Eyes still fixed on the kitchen knife, that looked pretty damn sharp, I decided that honesty was the best policy.

“Right. Okay, listen. Last night? My friend Gin - yeah, the blonde girl from the store? - was attacked.” Masaru jerked and I rushed to continue, rambling with nerves. “She got away! She’s okay as she can be. But I interrupted the man and I... I saw him, Masaru-san.”

Her eyes were like holes in her face.

“I saw him and I need to find him before things get even worse. So I need to know...how tall was he?”

The older woman, slowly drawing away from me in subconscious defensiveness, paused. Half turned, like she couldn't bare to look at me whilst I said such things, pure confusion rippled across her face. “Pardon?”

“In relation to yourself, how tall was the man?”

Masaru, in a flurry of motion that had me jerking back, wept from her seat, stabbing the knife into its slot in the block by the oven and began washing her hands in the sink. Her knuckles were white. “Taller than me. He-” Her voice, starting off hard, rapidly disappeared and I could only sit there, helpless, as she raised one wet hand to brush away a tear. “He fit my shoulders under...under his arms.”

My lips parted. *Fuck...he'd been big then. How scary must-*

“Wait.” My eyes snapped back up. “The guy who attacked last night...he was shorter, the same height as Gin. There's more than one person?”

Masaru shut off the sink. “This is a *trend* ?”

The doorbell rang.

Fuck but it felt too perfectly timed and I rose on ready legs, twisting around my chair to put the table
between me and the door. I grabbed the wooden chopping board off the side for good measure, testing the weight in my hands. Solid wood? Yeah, this could knock someone out in a pinch.

Masaru obviously had the same idea, picking up her knife again (not a cleaver or bread but still pretty big) and slowly undoing the latch.

I readied the board, arms bent and propped it against my shoulder for the best momentum.

The door opened and-

“Threatening an Officer with a weapon is a chargeable offence, Masaru-san, and Officer Rikari wouldn't be allowed to post bail.”

The strength left my shoulders, chopping board dropping to squish against my cheek. “Ensui?!”

The Nara, still blocking the light through the half-opened door, sighed. “May I please come in?”

Masaru lowered the knife.

I didn't lower the board.

“What's going on?”

Hands casually made visible from an aborted move to put them in his pockets, Ensui stepped into the kitchen. Dark eyes, made black in the light, swept over the water-splashed sink, the empty space in the knife block and the way I was positioned behind the table.

“I was at the Station,” the older guy started idly. “Doing some paperwork, as you do. And Rikari-san comes over to offer her consolations. Imagine my surprise because I didn't know you were such good friends.”

I smiled, fingers sticking slightly to the wood. “Ah, no-” triumph at the admission danced in Ensui's gaze and I had to crush it. “I only met Officer Rikari this afternoon.”
Ensui clicked his tongue. “I think we need to talk. Fancy a bite?”

I glanced over his shoulder at Masaru, who, thankfully, appeared much less stressed and much more confused.

“Sure. I could eat.”

“Thanks, Teuchi-san,” I grinned widely as the Ramen Chef popped my bowl down in front of me. Aromatic curls of broth drifted over the immediate area, warm and homely. “Where's Ayame-chan?”

The crow's feet around the older man's eyes, no doubt from years of laughter, crinkled at the thought of his beloved daughter. “She just popped out, Kiharu-chan. We had a little ramen-addict in earlier for breakfast-” I rolled my eyes fondly, sharing a smile with him at the notoriety of Naruto “-so we're a little low on veg.”

Snapping my chopsticks, with a rub for good luck, I started fishing around for the pickled ginger. “Vegetables? Don't tell me he eats them now! Have I entered an Alternative Universe?”

Ensui, sat on the stool next beside me, twisted to stare with quirked brow when I cackled a little too hard at my own joke.

Okay, c'mon, it was ironic!

Sighing at the tough crowd, I stuffed some udon in my mouth. And beside me, Ensui sighed.

“Listen, Kiharu. I'm-” The Chuunin gruffly cleared his throat. “...I'm really sorry I haven't been a good friend to you. I do trust you. But...Itachi's secrets are his own and the thing with the Station is really sensitive...but Shishou was right. You do deserve to be kept in the loop.” Ensui’s hazel eyes, previously fixed to his own untouched bowl, met mine. He sounded...genuine.

“This isn't,” I quirked a smile, eyes a little misty, “just because you want my info?”
A smile broke the solemnity of his face, helpless and soft, and Ensui raised a discreet hand to wipe his own eyes, slipping his free arm around me and hugging me to his side for a long moment. “Maybe only 20 percent for the info?” he joked.

I fished out a shrimp. “Lucky for you, I do have a tidbit to share.”

Ensui released me, twisting in his stool until our knees bumped and he could rest an elbow on the counter. “Oh?”

“Okay so, first little something - you're welcome, by the way-”

“Charmed.”

“-is that the man who attacked Masaru-san and the guy Gin and I met were of two different heights. Ergo they're different people.”

Ensui sighed, finally taking a bite of ramen and chewing impatiently. “Ryuu figured it was traffickers but evidence to support that just curls my stomach.”

I eyed his tense expression. “Maybe you shouldn't eat much more until I'm done telling you then.”

The Nara's chopsticks hit the edge of his bowl with a clatter. “Fuck, what now?”

I bit my lip. “One of the nurse hinted that Masaru and Gin aren't the first girls to have come to them.”

“Domestic violence and beatings are rare, yeah, but not uncommon, especially in older households or after wartime-” The older boy frowned, eyes fixed on the middle distance.

“She hinted,” I slurped up some both, “that they were unreported. And...well, not every crime is reported. Assault and Rape etc. particularly more so. People are scared...and ashamed. They might not come to the Police so we may be working with more victims than we think.”

Ensui's fingers started twitching.
Do they even have HR here? If so, Ensui is gonna be reported. First the insomnia and then the forgetfulness. Now he's getting spasms?

I covered his fingers with my own, warmed from cupping my ramen bowl. “Hey.”

He glanced at me from the side of his eye. When was the last time I saw him with his hair styled? When...when was the last time he put on his eyeliner?

“Let's go back to yours, Okay?”

Hazel dropped to our hands, the tremble still visible even anchored under mine.

“...okay.”

“Hey Teuchi-san! Can we get the rest of this to go?”

The walk was made in silence and, when we arrived outside the Nara's building, the first thing I noticed was the dead flowers in his window box, several floors above us.

“Hey, Akane's roses died?”

Fishing for his keys, Ensui almost jumped, twisting to squint upwards as if even he didn't know that. “Oh. Yeah...dried out in the heat, I guess.”

I dropped my arm, staring a hole between his shoulder blades with a skeptical twist to my mouth. Heat, huh? With all the rain?

Now, I hadn't been to Ensui's flat in...pfft. Six weeks? When he was so busy, going to his place was almost counterproductive to finding him as any downtime Ensui had was either spent at mine, Nekki's or Yoshino's. I mean, at this rate I was pretty sure Shikamaru thought Ensui actually was his brother. Yoshino and Shikaku had certainly done nothing to deny it.
I mean. I'd known Ensui how long? And I'd never met his actual parents.

Found families and all that goodness.

All I knew about his father was that he was...traditional. And Ensui was...not.

When Ensui cracked open the front door, I was immediately hit by how stale it smelled. Call me sensitive or whatever but-

“You've barely been here.”

The Chuunin, stooped to gather a handful of mail, tensed under my gaze. I was still stood on the threshold, eyes scanning over the half-pulled blinds, visibly dusty and illuminating the dust in the air, the used coffee cups by the sofa. There were stains on the low table and the TV screen was, you guessed it, dusty.

“I've been busy, Okay?”

God, I was getting PTSD to university all over again.

It was just like student houses during-

“Exam season.” I muttered, finally stepping inside and swinging the door closed behind me. Nothing smelt off but I was overwhelmed with the odour of skin and dust and generic musk.

And coffee. God but Ensui must've been coming here to literally collapse into bed and drink caffeine between shifts.

Well...even smart people have a limit to their own functionality.

Ensui had yet to turn around, no doubt poised for a rant about cleanliness and looking after himself. I did neither of those things. At this point, it wouldn't just be rude but unproductive too and I'd only hurt his feelings.
It wasn't anything Ensui hadn't heard before. He needed help, not to be told off.

“Crack the windows, will ya?”

I stepped forwards, dancing around my fellow brunette and snagging up the empty cups from the table. It wasn't until I was dumping them in the sink, alongside a couple of bowls (which looked to have been used to microwave mine and Yoshino's leftovers) and a handful of chopsticks that Ensui moved, silently doing as I said.

The taps squeaked as I turned them on and, a moment later, I could here the boiler groan in protest as the gas fired up. Score!

At my prompting, Ensui quickly got the livingroom and kitchen to straights, running his secondhand hoover around and then a duster whilst I finished up in the sink and then wiped down all the counters. Mercifully, although aggravatingly, the fridge was bare so there wasn't any food stinking it up. I added a grocery shop to my mental checklist.

I hands down refused to touch his bedroom, however. That was private and...Ensui was an adult.

If I found his porn stash, I don't think my sanity would survive the experience intact.

So, whilst Ensui's cleaning accumulated a dizzying pile of laundry, I tackled the bathroom. Which was, as expected of a dinky one person flat, small and, therefore, pretty quick.

It was a wet room so I'm not ashamed to say I took the mop to the walls.

By this point, it was almost 3 and Ensui's ramen was still sitting, neglected, on the kitchen counter. So, whilst I shoved the Nara into his squeaky-clean bathroom with a towel and some briefs, I shoved the takeaway container in the microwave.

“Sit.” I tossed him some chopsticks and gestured to the meal waiting for him by the sofa.
Ensui, hair in a wet bun and looking about a billion times more alive than he had in weeks, sat.

“I didn't want to say earlier because, well, we were in public, but Shisui gets his crutches off tomorrow. Will you go with him?”

Slowly, I lowered myself onto the sofa next to the Chuunin, tangling my fingers in my lap and conscious of his gaze on the side of my face. Ensui's windows, now gleamingly clean, opened out

“You're not going?”

I smiled, fake as plastic. “I'd rather our first conversation be a little more...timely.”

The clatter of chopsticks and then Ensui was replying, unashamedly, through a mouthful of noodle. “Stick around for dinner. Shisui's coming at six. Talk then.”

“Ensui. ” I snapped, still staring ahead, and immediately regretted it. My shoulders, that I hadn't even realised I'd tensed defensively, slumped in defeat. “I don't think it's as simple as that. Shisui and I…

last time we fell out, I was just so grateful he believed me.”

“And you never addressed the actual issues did you?”

Lips clamped together and eyes unfocused, I shook my head.

Shisui and I...it was just so easy to forgive each other. And a considerable part of me was scared that, as soon as I saw him again, we'd go flying into each other's arms and crying and waving it all away. In the end, it would get us nowhere. You had to face your problems proactively. And come up with solutions and make sure you learned from mistakes. Covering stuff up or pretending all was well was how explosions, like this morning, happened.

Often times, parents pretending that things are okay for the sake of the children or whatever for years...it was actually how cheating and divorces come about. Because the communication breaks down.

With Ensui, I understood that he was wading through red tape and he was much older than me. In a
different part of his life. He wasn't even a teen any more and I'd only just become one. And I'd mainly been insulted by his lack of faith in me, in my ability as a friend to help shoulder his burdens.

But with Shisui...we both needed to reassess some things. And I liked to think I was mature enough to step back and see where my own actions had been harmful.

“Not tonight, Ensui. I'm gonna go see my uncle, we have some things to talk about. So...will you?”

Movement out the corner of my eye and Ensui was extending his chopstick, a strip of beef offered solemnly. “Sure thing, Kiharu. I owe you plenty.”

I sincerely doubt my week could've gone worse after Gin's attack and my fall out.

Thankfully, on the work front at least, I was somewhat correct.

Mikoto, bless her heart, didn't have the Spanish Inquisition waiting to spring on me when I returned to Nekki's two days later, face healed and heart still bruised. She didn't pounce at the chiming of the door, didn't start flinging accusations as to why her favourite nephew was anything but sunny.

I wasn't wearing my usual, which Yuri-oba was still trying to salvage, but a lavender yukata instead. My thick hair was in a tight French braid, running all the way down the curve of my spine and with butterfly clips pinning back my bangs. Dad was a surprising quick learner on that front and my shoulders, sick of twisting to try and do if myself, were grateful.

Mikoto was washing down the tabletops.

“Morning…!” The Uchiha Matriarch glanced up, hands spread on the gleaming wood as she lent across to wipe down the pale surfaces.

My lips twisted into a lopsided, awkward smile. “Morning.”
Organising the cold fridge display, Eiko-san looked up and smiled.

Ahh... *time to feign professionalism.*

“Ohayo, Kiharu-sensei!”

Oh *fuck.*

I slapped a hand, unashamedly, to my forehead, groaning loudly in embarrassment. I was like... five foot nothing! Eiko was taller than Tou-san, with hair almost longer than I was (not really, but you get my drift) and as black as her lipstick. Which looked insanely dark and perfect compared to the powder she used to take the grey of her shave off her jaw.

Ergo she was so cool it made the honorific all the more painful. This wasn’t a *spoof.*

“Please, please, *please.*”

Dressed in a deep red yukata with a navy and white bib around her waist, Eiko blinked innocently. “Yes, sensei?”

I whined.

The 19-year-old laughed, low and throaty with jaw tilted back and I welcomed the distraction from meeting Mikoto's warm gaze.

Well... for about 2 seconds before she spoke up again.

“Cheesecakes or hot puddings today, Kiharu-chan?”

Okay, Okay, I could do this. I could *do this.*
I slowly relaxed, tying my apron with a looping bow and washing my hands in the sink.

“Cheesecakes,” I sighed, turning to meet dark eyes. “I should think, Hime.”

The day sifted slowly, time sludging on and unbroken by the usual (normal for any business) hiccups. I was...grateful. Easy. After talking to Masaru and finally clearing a lot of things with Ensui, not to mention helping with the case a bit, I'd composed a kind of fragile peace.

Inoichi-oji had been pretty exhausted last night, when I went around to chat as I'd promised Ensui and myself, so I'd agreed to come back later in the week.

Maybe the extra time would prove even more helpful too.

Call me an idiot but whatever.

I did breathe easier every time the bell jingled, my gaze snapping up and heart thumping and palms sweating-

It was never Shisui.

Part of me...mourned. That it wasn't him. That I didn't have his visits to look forward to, a lunch to split and a voice, still cracking occasionally, to make me laugh.

But, mostly, I was quietly glad. Because I wasn't ready yet and, honestly, I was ashamed.

I'd said the hard truths, yes, but it had hurt that I had to. That it had come to that. Especially with how happy he'd been coming inside, smile audible in his voice when he called up the stairs and unwittingly interrupted my argument with Hitoshi.

But it wasn't good, wasn't healthy to internalise these things. People weren't mind readers. You couldn't expect them to just look at you and know what was wrong. Friends weren't there to be a crutch. They loved you and supported you but...No-one had to put up with that. It wasn't a job. It
wasn't fair.

Friendship was a two way street.

I'd been keeping quiet for a while now. Because I was private, yeah, but a lot of my issues I couldn't talk about. Reincarnation was a topic that could never come up, not to mention my struggle with the knowledge garnered. I'd been quiet about Itachi too. I worked with Mikoto, was close to Shisui and I was on good terms with the gatekeepers and a number of the Officers, not to mention Elder Akane. Talking about Itachi, how he'd suddenly started avoiding me...not to mention my fears for his future...

Well, it felt wrong. Cheap and bitchy and I didn't want to put anyone, myself included, into an awkward position.

So I'd put up and shut up.

Until I just couldn't.

And here we were.

“Good afternoon and welcome to Nekki's! How may I help you?”

Cakes, customers and cooking was something I could do. I felt...capable. less like a train wreck and more like a functioning person. Who just happened to own their own business.

And had woken up to a chin spot this morning too. Absolutely fan tastic.

Honestly, I better walk out the other side of puberty with dewy fresh skin or I wanted an anime-refund. Heads up peeps, spots don't stop as soon as you turn twenty and one of my professors had had braces in her forties.

It was an hour to closing when a very much welcome head of scruffy brown hair ducked inside the door.
“Raidou,” I smiled, relaxing into a much more genuine expression instead of my beaming customer one. “How are you? I'm glad you came in.”

The Guard smiled back, pink tinting his cheeks and obviously pleased at the attention. “I'm good, so's Gen’.” He nodded over his shoulder and, a moment later, the Tokubetsu in question was ducking inside too. “We're just off patrol so some churros, please?”

I was two steps ahead, dropping the batter in the fryer and flapping a hand for them to sit at the bar and keep me company. It was just me left at this hour; Eiko only worked from opening to one, because she was new and I wasn't mean. And because she was also still working as a singer at night in a bar four streets over. And Mikoto? Well, she'd been slowly taking over my baking quota that I filled each evening for the following work day. If we were gonna expand, it was all hands on deck.

Also she'd really covered my ass here recently, so I figured she more than deserved to head on home early.

“What's with the conspicuous absentee?” Genma smirked, tucking his senbon into an empty ear piercing whilst he ate. He reminded me a bit of Violet Beauregard when he did that.

My expression must've fallen because, suddenly, I was facing two much more serious men.

“Ahhhhhhhh,” dark eyes glanced to share a look with their partner's before flicking back to mine. The look on Nee-chan's face was aggravatingly knowing. “You've fallen out with Shisui-kun again.”

I dipped the prongs in the hot oil, turning the churros with my other hand propped on my cocked hip. “At least phrase it as a question.”

“I don't have to, so why kid yourself, kid?”

“Raidou, Nee-chan's being mean.” I didn't glance up from my work, bland as plain rice.

“Sorry, Kiharu-chan, that's out of my jurisdiction. However, I might be persuaded to beat someone into the ground in our next spar.”
I was turned away, ladling out the warm chocolate sauce into a dipping pot, but clearly heard the brief scuffle that broke out. My teeth sank into my bottom lip, beyond tempted to blurt out a comment about getting a room but- Nah. I wasn't quite that mean.

The operative word being 'quite'.

Genma, lips parted with an answering jibe, shut up real fast at the unholy glee in my gaze. 
*Hmm...he'd learned.*

“There!” I finally popped the plate down between them, the two Shinobi not even waiting for it to have left my grasp before they were scolding themselves on the piping-hot dough. “You paying or is it a tab kinda day?”

“I'll get it,” Raidou fished for his wallet with his left hand, his right currently swirling half a bite in the sauce.

I glanced at Genma, lips curling. “How honourable.”

The assassin breathed the wrong way, spluttering whilst Raidou, looking suitably abashed, slapped him between the shoulders and I, not ashamed in the slightest, passed over a cup of tap water.

Kami but I wasn't even *trying* or even being obvious! It wasn't like I'd cupped my hands around my mouth and hollered ‘gayyyyyy!’ down the main street at them!

If Genma, of all people, couldn't take a smidgen of dry humor, then the unresolved sexual tension must be *insane.*

Pfft.

It was then that the bell jangled again and, glancing at the clock that read half-four, I stifled a whimper. Why must people come in so close to closing?

It was then that I clocked the two blonde heads, illuminated by the low afternoon sun coming in from the windows and beamed.
Fuck stress and Shisui and stressing about stress and stressing about Shisui-!

“Imouto! Naruto-kun!”

Ino was evidently in an excellent mood, daisies messily stuck in the hair as her temples and grass staining her knees. Clasping her hand, even Naruto looked content to be here, which was a steady improvement over the past few months.

“Nee-chan, look! Look! Naruto-kun did my hair and it's not very neat but I think he's getting the hang of it so-”

I ducked around the counter before bending as if to examine her hair, noting for the first time the two small, if a little uneven, plaits behind her ears. It was into these that the daisy stems had been slotted and I'll admit to being even more impressed. Ino's hair, I knew from experience, could be quite fiddly with how fine it was.

“Wow, Naruto-kun,” I breathed, making sure the admiration in my low voice was nothing but genuine. “It's lovely. Well done.”

The jinchuuriki beamed, bright and simple as the sunlight outside, which was just brushing the rooftops and the mountains.

“Right!” I straightened back up and scrubbed my hands together. “I'd say you deserved a pancake for that, right, Ino-chan?”

“Yes!” The blonde bounced forwards before freezing, seemingly struck by a realisation. “Do I get one too?!”

I leaned back on the side, scrunching my face up in feigned consideration and tapped a finger to my chin. “Oooh...I'm not so sure about that. What do you say, Naru-chan?”

The poor blonde barely had a second to open his mouth before Ino was on him. Beside me, Genma, and beyond him Raidou, snorted into the last of their churros.
“Well?!? Tell her yes!!”

“I no!” I spluttered, backtracking and stooping to loop my arms around her little waist, heaving her up and away before popping her down into Genma’s unsuspecting lap. “No strangulation!”

The Tokubetsu, although faintly taken aback, good-naturedly curved an arm around the petulant heiress.

“I was trying to!” Naruto complained, even going so far as to stamp a little foot and crossing his arms. Ahhh, this was familiar territory at least.

Repeating my actions with Ino, I bent over and heaved the Uzumaki onto my hip. Compared to the last time I’d done this, Naruto barely tensed at all and I just had to beam in triumph.

He was blushing though, so I decided to put him out of his misery.

“Keep an eye on the rascals?” I blinked, fluttering lashes and all the works, and Raidou conceded. I was glad because if he’d made a fuss…

Well. It wouldn't have been good for the poor kid.

By the time I'd swung back behind the counter and washed my hands, pouring the batter on the hot plate and fishing two plates from the cupboard, Raidou was gently tying his own hitai-ate to Naruto's forehead.

I stopped dead, breath pausing in my throat.

Raidou had his back to the sunlight, the hazy golden glow to the bakery softening the scars across his cheek, and, coupled with his startlingly tender expression, he looked...paternal.

I’d seen Genma look like that plenty. When he’d first taken the boys in, when he’d checked over their bags for missions or their various Chuunin exams or that one time he’d come home to find that the
four of us had already made dinner.

I didn't even know if Raidou in Canon had ever resented Naruto. All the other times they'd interacted here, it had always been with a kind of tolerant amusement, like when you were sat next to someone else's kids on the train. (Nice brats, not the horrible or screamy ones, of course.)

Without even meaning to, I glanced at Genma.

His lips were parted, jaw relaxed and brow unfurrowed. The expression itself was almost blank, this side of surprised or maybe even incredulous.

But his eyes.

I'd spent years joking about it and I'd shipped the characters they'd once been but...it was different to see it.

The scent of burning suddenly intruded and I yelped, jumping like I'd been prodded. Whipping around, I groaned at the burned mess on the hot plate.

Ino giggled and the mood was shattered.

“Sorry, sorry!” I slid my spatula under the ruined...thing...and pulled it off the heat.

Raidou chuckled, almost immediately turning back to his temporary charge and started explaining why he couldn't just give the headband to Naruto, but Genma merely blinked. Brown eyes glanced over and I was suddenly struck by the realisation that Genma had only just realised and he knew that I knew that he knew.

Distractedly, I wiped down the pan (if you wipe fast, it can't hurt you - this is terrible advice, don't do this, fuck-) and started the crepes again.

But fuck if I couldn't stop thinking about how Genma was honest-to-Kami in love with Raidou.
And, by the looks of things, he'd only just realised it too.

Seiichi-san didn't come to kill him that day.

He didn't come the day after either.

It was more than a bit tragic, the way Shisui had literally been cooped up at home. Kami but even Hitoshi had called him pathetic that first day when he'd basically tossed kunai and shuriken at the tree in the garden. And practised everything until his fingers were red and sore.

Granted, the panther had called him lots of other things too. No wonder Kiharu had started swearing pretty young, Shisui had picked up words from missions so-

The huge circle of dead grass where the three of them had burned Shisui's wheelchair didn't help his mood much either.

And, to make matters worse, Ensui had already spoken to Kiharu!

(-Ensui's flat was surprisingly tidy, the younger boy being used to seeing it in a state of a casual, lived-in messiness. Dinner was simple duck pancakes and a bunch of other veggie dishes. If his friend hadn't been looking so pale recently, Shisui might've even complained.

As it was, he was a tad distracted by the miso broth he'd breathed the wrong way.

“W-w-what?!”

The pats on his back were steady, soothing. Calm. Basically everything Shisui wasn't.

“You already talked to her?!”
“Shisui,” The older boy sat back, templeping his fingers and resting forearms on knees. Red faced and still a little teary-eyed, Shisui just wheezed. “Shisui, I need you to listen very closely: whether Kiharu and I have talked doesn't have much to do with you. It may sound harsh but you shouldn't feel like it puts a stopwatch on you and Kiharu resolving this shit because we're already talking.”-)

Honestly, he'd understood where his friend was coming from but-!!

Okay, so he had no excuse.

Shisui hadn't ever really had an issue with being proactive. If things went wrong or he was involved, he was fully capable of tucking in with both hands. Most of the time the inconvenience was other people.

Damned red tape.

But...Kiharu was different.

He knew what he had to do. He just...he was reluctant to do it.

All this time, for months now, he'd been gently, gently, encouraging Itachi back out of his shell that Danzo had shoved him into. What with graduation and his new team, the younger Uchiha was finally socialising a bit. Talking to other people again, not just his trainers and Sasuke and him. Kami, but he could even have friends.

As it was, Shisui was reluctant to disrupt that.

But, it wasn't just the situation with Kiharu this affected. And she certainly hadn't demanded or even asked Shisui to get answers from his cousin (not in the way he was taking it, at least). Shisui needed to know stuff too.

Like if that Kabuto kid was weird.
“I'm gonna talk to him.” The words, spoken out loud, seemed more binding somehow. Like a promise or affirmation he was held to.

“I am gonna talk to him. I am. ”

The skies were dove-grey, bustery and speckled with flocks of birds. The Jounin didn't know what kind.

He was wearing his old training trousers, bound at the thigh and everything. Honestly, if he was going to this, he wasn't going into this prepared.

Oh Kami, he was going to talk to Itachi.

The muttering garnered a few looks but Shisui was both shameless enough and distracted enough that it didn't bother him. Just a normal fifteen year old muttering in the streets. Nothing to see here…

“I'm going to talk to him .”

“Priority on the outstanding doctor's appointment, I think.”

The quiet sass, unmistakable even if it sounded slightly nervous, had Shisui's head whipping up and 'round.

Kiharu, standing on the steps of the clinic, bit her lip. “Hi.”

His heart thudded.

( was that dread or joy or what? He couldn't even tell-)

“H-hey.” He even sounded breathless.
At least Kiharu looked just as nervous, blue eyes skittered to the side and hands clasped behind her back. Her toes, just peeking over the edge of the step and in her usual red shoes, bounced with restless energy.

He'd staring at her for a long second before he realised they'd fallen silent for a beat too long and, stepping forwards, he immediately tried to smooth things over again. “Shall we go in?”

He hopped up the three steps but Kiharu just blinked, ocean eyes meeting his for the first time and she didn't move an inch.

“Um, Kiharu-chan...the door-”

The handle was directly behind her.

“What? Oh!”

The younger girl was a sudden flurry of motion, twisting around - the momentum swinging her hair into his face but it was such a familiar thing that Shisui, embarrassingly, actually liked it - and tugging on the door to no avail.

“Um-” Catching his other crutch, Shisui hesitantly raised his now-freed right arm and, reaching around the slighter brunette, pushed on the glass of the door. “It's a push door, Kiharu-chan…”

When she didn't answer, - merely freezing long enough for him to realise he was almost hugging her, oh fuck - Shisui internally panicked. Oh god, way to patronise someone, oh heck-

Her ear, peering out from her loose, curly hair, was cherry red. After another moment, Kiharu tried the door again, pushing it open successfully and-

“Oh! Er- thanks-!” she squeaked.

-and they blustered inside, avoiding looking anywhere near each other as Shisui walked, barely using his crutches, to the receptionist desk and checked in with the very amused girl there. Who'd seen everything. And was, even worse, only a couple of years older than them.
Kami, this was bad!

She was wandering around the waiting room, now boring and familiar after the past few months, and Shisui might have bought into her coolness. If he hadn't just scrambled at the door with her.

Her shaking hands were unmissable too.

That was a thing about Ki-chan. He wasn't even sure she knew she did it but she kinda...trembled? It was like the smallest shiver, a bounce of her knee if they were sat down or a shake in her fingers. It was only when she was nervous and he'd mentioned it to Ensui before but the Nara hadn't even noticed, frowning at Shisui like he was chattering nonsense.

(Ensui only started shaking when he was dead-beat exhausted, like when he'd been training for the Chuunin exams a good few years ago and he'd been revising the written exam with a faint tremble shaking his papers.)

(Shisui only shook when the adrenaline hit too hard, all bouncing nerves and restless energy.)

“I...I didn't think I'd see you here.”

It had sounded...so much better in his head. But the words were out there now and-

“I almost didn't come.” Shisui turned, patient, but Kiharu had her back to him and gave no indication of turning around any time soon. “I even asked Ensui-kun if he could be here for you, because I didn't want to but you shouldn't have to come alone.”

Shisui wet his lips. “Why did you?” he asked, hushed.

Kiharu's shoulders dropped. “Because I couldn't bear the thought of, after all this time, you coming here without me. Shisui…” Her head twisted, almost looking around at him but stopping before their eyes could meet. “Shisui, you've talked about walking again for months. I wasn't gonna miss it.”
Throat working silently, the Jounin's mouth pursed, fighting the urge to cry or grab her in a hug or anything.

Kami but she was a better friend than he deserved right now.

“I'm sorry.”

This time, Kiharu did turn fully. Blue eyes wide and pink lips, worried red, slack. “What?”

“I'm really, really sorry but I know this isn't the best time. I'm not asking you to forgive me and I know it's all well and good to say it but if nothing changes- I. I'm working on it, Ki-chan. But I'm,”

Kiharu only looked more upset, breathing slightly quicker with moisture gathering along her lower lash line and Shisui lost whatever dodged momentum he’d managed to scramble together. “I'm. I'm, uh, really grateful.” He swallowed hard. “So, thanks for being amazing, Ki.”

The receptionist sniffed loudly.

They both froze.

………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

It was a bad week all around.

Pulling shifts at the missions desk was a...a trying thing.

Because, for all the Shinobi were soldiers conditioned to follow orders and commit deeds for the sake of the village and a paycheck, they got really fucking pissy over their jobs.

It was almost enough to make him miss Maito Gai because you could hand that boy a mission to shovel shit in a ditch for three months and he's thank you for it. Genuinely, too, as if it was the deed for a Villa in Tea.

Then again...maybe, for the sake of his ears and his innocent daughter, he was better off on ANBU
for a while longer.

Hyuuga and Uchiha were particularly entitled about the sorts of missions they were assigned. Civilian born were always either insulted, incredulous or both. And the smaller clans, don't even get him started.

In actual fact, everyone was terrible and Seiichi would quite like to quit.

Unfortunately, it was a choice between tracking missing-nin across six different countries or sending other people out to do it. And, considering the horrors going on disgustingly locally, the Dazai was fervently glad he'd been thinking of FuFu when he'd decided to stick around this month for Hitoshi.

He couldn't imagine what it would've been like, to hear about the incident at the start of the week, days later and so far from home.

He'd snapped his pen just thinking about it and, even several washes later, he still had the faint ink stain to prove it.

So, in lieu of reaching across the desk to deck the next complainer, Seiichi set out to Inoichi's later that afternoon. His baby wouldn't be home, despite how she'd insisted she wasn't going to Shisui's appointment.

He wasn't too impressed with either of the boys recently but Kiharu was loyal like that so he truly doubted she'd have managed to keep herself away. And, if she had? Hitoshi was heading back anyway. It had been a while since they'd last been out to see the new baby so Seiichi figured his partner would most like push for another visit tonight.

The Chuunin, on the other hand, was itching to do something much more productive.

“Evening, Sora,” Seiichi grinned when the door was answered, bopping Ino-chan (perched on her kaa-san's hip) on her little button nose. “Is Inoichi in? I hope I'm not interrupting anything.”

“Seiichi,” The graceful woman smiled back, warm and tired. “He's just in, actually. Do you want to come in or should I send him out?”
The Dazai bit the corner of his lip for a split second. “Out, I think. Thanks again, Sora.”

“Ino-chan,” Sora turned to her daughter, crouching to set her on the floor and resting thin hands on her little shoulders. “Run and get your Tou-san for me please?”

With a precocious nod, the tint blonde scampered off and, when she’d disappeared round the corner, Sora turned back. “Has something happened?”

“Nothing like that,” Seiichi dipped his head respectfully. “Just some work, is all.”

Sora quirked a sharp, sculpted brow and her lips pursed but she didn't call Seiichi out and for that he was glad.

“Seiichi?” Inoichi called, coming down the hallway with Ino perched on his shoulders, chubby fingers steadily tangling in his hair and brushing curiously over the scar along his temple, where he still kept his hair shaved close. Kiharu had declared that undercuts were cool and, seeing Ensui-kun nod in agreement, Cool Dad Seiichi had been sold.

When he finally came to his senses, Seiichi was never letting him live this down. (It did look pretty dangerous, though, and really ramped up the T&I intimidation factor, he couldn't deny.)

“I wanted to talk about the case, if you have time?”

The Yamanaka’s eyes immediately hardened in understanding, lowering Ino from her lofty position and, when she inevitably complained, dropping a kiss to her head. Sora took her back and then they were stepping onto the porch, bidding quick goodbyes to the women of the house.

The ‘Compound’ was pretty still, sun dragging low in the sky and no-one out on the sidewalk.

“What is it?” Inoichi inquired, hands clasped behind his back and expression professional. “Did you hear back from any of the lines you’d cast?”

Lips pursed, Seiichi jerked his chin and they descended the porch steps, moving off to the side and away from any unwitting ears.
Then again, in a ninja village, was anything ever truly private?

“I had a thought on the-” here, Seiichi dropped his voice discreetly, “-blackmailing front.”

“Go on,” Inoichi urged.

“Well, we tore his files apart. And his desk. But we didn't check his home Office.”

“I did, actually, but he'd not been home for almost two months before he died. The house, except for the bathroom, bedroom and the kitchen, is almost stale. Natsuko isn't truly living, Seiichi, and it shows.”

“I'd like to check, again. If that's alright.”

Because Inoichi, for all his fervour, had also been deeply wounded by his brother's death and the subsequent mess unearthed. Seiichi didn't doubt his friend but...if the house was as bad as he feared, he wouldn't have lingered.

In his grief, he might have missed something.

The blonde stared at him for a moment, teal eyes openly scrutinising, and Seiichi just looked back.

“Okay, Seii. We can do.”

Natsuko and Inokumo had lived a little out of the way from the rest of the Clan. Their house had been built further back from the street, with a front garden that almost matched the back in size. Seiichi could remember when they’d first moved in. Heck, he'd helped paint the kitchen. And his Hime had spent so many hours here as a kid.

Kami, how time flies.
The house still looked immaculate on the outside, even if the garden was both a little barren and a little wild, but that was just because Seiichi knew Sora liked to hire Genin to keep the ‘Compound’ looking the part a few times a year.

But the windows looked a little dusty and, nose forever sensitive, it all smelled...stale.

Kiharu-chan had told him about Ensui-kun's apartment the other day and the irony of them both finding themselves in these circumstances was not lost on him.

They drew to a stop at the base of the porch. “So, are we knocking or going round the back?”

Inoichi hesitated so slightly that, had he not known him better, Seiichi definitely would've missed it. “Knock, I should think.”

And he proceeded to do just that.

Seiichi, abruptly aware that he'd wandered over straight from the desk, tugged on the ends of his jacket, running a hand through his hair and basically made sure he didn't look like a total mess.

He was struggling to remember the last time he'd actually seen Natsuko, let alone spoken to her. After that time she'd started screaming at Kiharu and Ino-chan, well…

It wasn't looking good.

The door latched and both men straightened, shoulders back and jaws tilted.

His composure was warranted because, without it, Seiichi was certain he would've reacted poorly.

Hair almost white and hands shockingly frail, a face aged beyond her years peered out at them. Her eyes, which had always been a friendly spring green, glared like watery marbles.

Internally, Seiichi was reeling.
He'd ran after Aki had died. He could admit that now. He'd run and run and almost thrown away everything else, even the daughter that his beautiful wife had left to him, for that grief. He'd been selfish and cowardly and self-destructive.

But, whilst he missed her so much every day it hurt, Seiichi was in a better place now. He'd learned to live in a world without Aki.

Natsuko had not learned to live in a world without Inoko.

She'd wallowed in her grief, embracing the pain until she found no energy to face each day. Until she was bedbound and couldn't distinguish dream from reality. She was borderline suicidal.

And it physically hurt to see her because she was everything Seiichi had almost been.

It was different, of course. Because Natsuko had carried Inoko-chan to term, had birthed her and given her life. Her womb, Inokumo had weepingly admitted on a drunken night out, had been badly scarred in labour and they'd never conceive again. Inoko had been their blessing.

“Inoichi. What?”

Neither of them winced at her bitter tone but...it was close.

“Can we come in, Natsuko-san? Seiichi needs something from the Office and I'd appreciate tea, if you have it.”

From the steady (and rude) turn of his speech, Seiichi could only presume that Natsuko wasn't in the habit of entertaining guests.

(-she'd loved dinner parties a decade ago, inviting all their friends and settling the kids in the corner-)

She stared for almost two minutes (Seiichi counted) before finally stepping back.
Seiichi, undeniably spooked at this point, wasted no time.

Natsuko shuffled back from the door, making way for the duo to enter, and didn't even wait for the door to snap shut before she was off down the corridor again. Seiichi cast careful eyes to his friend and was greeted by an expected, but no less worrying, hard expression. Evidently, Inoichi was trying to put up a wall of professionalism to fend off the heartache.

Somehow, the Chuunin didn't think that was an effective coping mechanism at all. But who knows, maybe it was. He wasn't the mind specialist here.

Turquoise eyes met his, nodding to the left, towards Inokumo's old office space, and, with silent fingers, signed that he'd keep his sister-in-law busy.

Nodding along and gesturing for the blonde to follow her, Seiichi stifled a sigh. Mission style it was, then.

He trod carefully, even though Natsuko knew he needed ‘an errand’ in her late husband's rooms, but aware of creating too much of a disturbance regardless. It was almost like walking through an abandoned house or a tomb. Ghosts seemed to peek around every corner and the tracker was waylaid with old memories.

There was evidence of Sora trying to help, a rug here and silk flowers there and someone had, very thoughtfully, packed away some of the larger family photos. It wasn't an attempt to forget but Inokumo and Natsuko had always been incredibly proud of their little girl and these corridors had almost been murals of photographs. Days at the park, birthday parties, new years celebrations...all the kind of things that Seiichi and Aki had made books of, the other couple had enshrined on every wall.

It hadn't been melancholic until Kyuubi.

Inokumo's office door was tightly shut and the handle was freezing to the touch.

He'd prepared himself for anything; clouds of dust, stale air and even stale scent tracks.

So he was rightfully surprised when, cracking the door, the room looked relatively lived in.
And, with a huge, assessing breath, Seiichi understood why.

Kami but Inokumo must've come here a lot before he died. Regardless of his apparent absence from the house, he'd certainly been in here. The scents were cold and well faded, of course. But, unlike out there, where Hitoshi and himself had searched high and low through the elements for weeks on end, this room hadn't so much as cracked a window in that time. It was dizzyingly preserved.

The only disruption that the Chuunin could detect was Inoichi's, weaving a clear path around the room and brushing over every surface. Some people might've found it contaminated the entire scene but, after so many years, it was almost as easy to overlook as his own and Hitoshi's.

Right. Time to get cracking.

Inoichi, he could tell, had been just as thorough as promised and as expected. Every draw in the two bookcases that bracketed the door had been checked, revealing receipts and accountancy stuff and various papers. There was a collection of newspaper cuttings - a novel concept that most Shinobi didn't bother with because, honestly, were civilian tabloids really going to print something they weren't aware of? - and some old case files. They didn't look like anything from T&I and they couldn't have been from the police so, Seiichi decided with furrowed brows, Inokumo must've put them together...himself.

His old teammate had always been clever, picking at cold cases and even having solved a few when their girls had just been babies. Seiichi had always chalked it up to a restless mind and hobbies.

Lips pursed, he set the files to one side.

There wasn't much else left in the room, in all honesty. All of the Clan business, mainly budgeting, that Inokumo had done for his brother had been taken back to Inoichi's place already. And, because of the private contents, they'd been scoured extremely thoroughly. No doubt with Inokumo's own surprise debts playing in the back of his brother's mind.

The desk was a clean one, which honestly made for a bizarre sight. Kami knew Seiichi's own desk at home was a sight.

A random collection of clutter piled up on it, no matter how much he cleaned. Somehow, he was always finding Kiharu's earrings there, once even a cookie cutter, and some clothes pegs from who-knows-where.
Sharp ears suddenly caught the raising of voices, volume increasing from the dull murmur of conversation (which had been 80% Inoichi with low grumbles from his sister-in-law) to pitch just below shouting.

“-if he died then why bother?! He didn't love her as muc-”

Seiichi forcefully tuned them out, keeping tabs on their signatures so he could intervene if things went really bad but...this wasn't a conversation meant for his ears.

It was hard though and, try as he might to suddenly turn off his hearing altogether, a few words slipped through.

And when Natsuko accused Inoichi of not understanding the love for a child, Seiichi flinched. Fuck, well, he'd better speed this up.

Frantic eyes ran over the desk, feeling around the ornate underside for anything out of the ordinary. The top two shelves just contained stationary, empty filing wallets and calligraphy brushes and a small switchblade.

He flipped the knife open and ran it under his nostrils. Cleaned, and not recently, but a small dot of brown soaked into the wooden handle turned out to be blood. Inokumo's to be exact.

Seiichi stood back, rocking on his heels and frowning at the tiny, innocuous blade in his palm.

The brushes, the blade…

... sealing?

Fuck but since when did Inokumo know fuinjutsu? Yeah, he'd been smart and-

He'd run back up for Uzumaki Kushina plenty of times in the war. The famous Redhead would definitely have indulged Inokumo's famous curiosity.
“Oh fuck-.”

How could they have been so blind? Inokumo had always been a disgustingly fast study, something Seiichi had resented him for as a Genin on a team with two much younger ninja. And he's always been fiddling with something.

He'd never seen him seal beyond his own storage and explosion tags but, honestly, Seiichi had never thought much of it. Most Shinobi with a basic grasp of fuinjutsu could do one in a pinch. Kami knew that Hitoshi could draw with a single, sharp claw.

The Chuunin turned fresh eyes to the rest of the room, keenly taking in every single corner for a hidden etching or - anything.

Then he started turning out the desk draws, piling them out on the floor and knocking for false bottoms, even going so far as to run every corner and seam under his nose for a give away. Just in case the seal was that good.

Then he thought about the knife, staring around the room with the cold realisation they needed a dead man's blood to know for sure.

Bracing one hand on the floor, Seiichi reach to rest a fist on the nearest wall. And quietly tapped his knuckles.

The shouting had lowered by this point and Seiichi could make out his friend's low murmur. Probably trying to offer some comfort or convince her, for the countless time, to find something new to live for.

Natsuko's silence was expected too.

And - there. There it was, a subtle tapping back, like a single knuckle knocking discreetly.

what - find
Seiichi bit his lip.

He'd expected the other man to make his excuses and join him.

What he didn't expect was for a spike of chakra - yes, that was definitely a clone, he could tell this close, and more than one? - and the tingle of a switch before the expected blonde was coming in and latching the door beside him. A shadow clone stood shoulder to shoulder with him.

“What's with the clones?” Seiichi frowned. “Did Natsuko not want you to leave?”

“She's started crying.” Inoichi corrected him and Seiichi immediately grimaced, pity clenching his gut. It was a terrible move, to leave someone hurting with a paltry clone for company, but they really did have a bigger issue here. Didn't make things less awful.

“Fuck, Okay. Right-” Seiichi hurriedly explained his findings, leaving the homemade files for now, and showed Inoichi both the knife and the now-empty draws.

“What are the chances of getting our hands on some blood?” The Chuunin asked dryly, mouth twisted as he gazed around the dusty room from his crouch on the floor.

“Good.” Inoichi replied, nodding to his still-waiting clone when Seiichi blinked in surprise. Without any further prompting, the bunshin left.

“My wife has a sample of every Clan member's blood in the family safe. In case of emergencies.”

“Right.” Seiichi swallowed, trying not to find that a little intimidating. What would you need someone's blood for, anyway? A signature or...to frame them?

Somehow, he couldn't see Sora doing either, funnily enough.

Whilst they waited, Seiichi drew their attention to the files he'd met aside.
“Did you know he made these?” The brunette asked, splitting the pile in two and handing Inoichi the bottom half. There must’ve been thirty or so in total.

The blonde immediately started thumbing through them, joining Seiichi on the floor in a kneel. “No,” he confessed, “but it does seem like him.”

Whilst Inoichi cracked the first file, Seiichi paused to sniff them again, feeling rather like an Inuzuka hound on a drugs bust. They smelled just as he thought, like old paper and ink and Inokumo. Nothing suspicious there.

Without further ado, the Chuunin started digging.

And very quickly realised what they were actually looking at were criminal profiles. Some of them having been already apprehended by police, some of them...not.

“Did your brother become a vigilante when we weren't looking?”

“It's not possible,” the other man looked just as bewildered. “Any kind of law enforcement would definitely have been noted on his file in the Tower. And do you really think Uchiha Fugaku wouldn't make a fuss if he thought the Yamanaka were undermining the Police Force?”

*Urgh.* “Touché.”

A moment later, Inoichi breathed a faint noise of interest, flipping the page in his grasp so that the brunette could see the squat man on the photograph pinned to the top corner. “This is a mobster in Wave Country. Creating a lot of tension, rumoured to be something of a money launderer too. New but someone to keep our eyes on.”

Seiichi accepted the file, squinting at the grainy photo, obviously taken whilst the short man had been moving. Certainly not a Shinobi photo. It smelled very faintly of tobacco and Inokumo had never smoked.

“What? So he's not only looking at mobsters in other nations but buying civic photos too?”
Inoichi sat back on his haunches. “He's in debt, and not in gambling. He's going out of his way to avoid using official channels and he's put together files on every established criminal from here to the mountains of Iron.”

It was at that point that the Clan Head's bunshin returned, slipping in the door with silent steps and with a small vile cradled in his hands.

Seiichi swallowed. “What's the plan? Just chuck it everywhere and pray?”

The Dazai figured he could be forgiven for his tension. Inoichi certainly looked grey.

“I think we should start with the desk.”

There was probably a good few tablespoons of blood in the vile but, understandably, both men were extremely reluctant to waste a single drop.

And they had to find a seal arrangement first.

Natsuko was speaking again, telling the clone about Inoko's fifth birthday party is though it was yesterday. It had been a proper little get-together and Aki had helped Kiharu-chan make the cake. Grief welled in his throat and Seiichi clamped down on it, blocking out the voices and shutting his eyes. Now wasn't the time.

Their searching fingers found nothing however.

Well, until Seiichi noticed something.

His desk at home was a mess of paperwork but certain things never really moved; the family photos and his pencil pot and a few books on the edge. And Kiharu, a blessing but still bizarre, was a bit of a clean freak. Something about idle hands and idle minds, she'd once muttered. Regardless, she dusted in there pretty regularly. But, despite that, there was always a ring of dust around the things that never moved.
Staring down at Inokumo's desk, the dust was completely even.

“Inoichi.”

“Hmm?”

“Has this room been washed down?”

The blonde turned, hands pressed to the wall where he was feeling for anything under the paper. “No...why?”

“The desk…” Seiichi waved an expansive hand over the surface, the same faint coat of dust covering everything beside the finger marks they'd left. “It's like everything’s-”

“-been moved.”

They shared a glance. “You don't think-?”

“Let's clear it.”

The papers were moved to the floor, in a neat pile beside those from the draws, and, when it was clear, Seiichi couldn't believe his eyes.

“I didn't think you could do that to a seal.”

It was genius.

Now, most fuinjutsu was done on parchment with ink infused with chakra and either activated with chakra or with blood too.

In desperate times, Seiichi had seen them crafted completely from blood, fingers dipped in wounds
and scrawled with desperation.

Seiichi wasn't an expert or even competent and neither was Inoichi. But, fuck, he didn't know you could paint over them.

Ink, scratched with what must've been the tiniest pen nib, traced a discreet design. No larger than the palm of Seiichi's hand, the design was washed in the same mahogany varnish of the desk itself, fading the seal into barely anything. Even to the Dazai's keen gaze.

Wordlessly, Inoichi dipped a finger in the vile, skin glinting crimson in the low afternoon light.

As cruel as it sounded, but they were lucky Inokumo was dead. If he hadn't been, the chakra would've still been live in the seal and they'd never have broken it by themselves.

Inoichi, his older brother, was close enough for it to work.

There was the click of a lock catching in the quiet room, broken only by the faint sounds of Natsuko, and then the table top shifted minutely to the side.

The two men shared a long glance before, as one, they grabbed the wood and heaved it aside.

Underneath the desktop was a hollowed space, filled with notebooks and scrolls.

Well. I guess this is what he was hiding after all.

Moving like he was trapped in some terrible dream, mind fogged, Seiichi reached for the largest scroll. Unravelling with numb fingers, the tracker found himself staring at a heavily annotated map.

There were lines and numbers, some scratched out so hard he'd pierced the paper.

What....what on earth was he doing?
Inoichi's voice was thick, as if spoken in deep water and the brunette turned, poised as if for a blow. Kami but he was ready for everything after unearthing this shitshow.

“Seii...Seii, look.”

The notebook was turned towards him, Inoichi's fingers pressed white into the binding the keep the pages spread. Inokumo's familiar scrawl greeted his eyes and it had been so long that Seiichi had to blink before the words themselves registered.

“You're telling me...that all of this-” the Chunin cast an arm around the room, taking in the files and the maps and the secrecy. “Is some kind of desperate manhunt?! After all this bloody time?!"

“Seiichi.” Inoichi glared, glancing pointedly to the door and, beyond that, towards Natsuko.

‘-no leads in Southern Kumo. X searched through all warehouses, as requested, and none of the girls found matched the description-’

“This is insane.” Seiichi snapped, tossing the diary down and twisting to face the windows.

He couldn't believe it. He fucking couldn't-

“Like it or not, we have to deal with the consequences of his actions.”

“All this time, every time he came to us and we talked about things, and he said he was better. He promised me he was looking after Natsuko and he was handling it and I tried to be better too. It was a lie, Inoichi. What are you going to fucking tell Sora, hmm?”

Seiichi scrubbed his hands through his hand, grabbing the back of his neck.

“That he'd lost his mind long before anyone noticed? That it took a murder for us to see?”
“How do you think I feel, Seiichi?” Inoichi snapped, cold and furious.

“I was the one who declared Inoko dead! And my brother spends the last decade hunting her down from every lowlife from here to the bloody North Sea?!”

Chapter End Notes

A/N- Happy Holidays!! I hope everyone is having a lovely winter and has survived the final week as intact as possible!! Ensui is like Student!Me haha but don't take him as a good role model here. Remember the Golden Eight rule! (8hrs sleep, 8hrs work, 8hrs play) Also, I may or may not have watched Criminal Minds and Strong Woman Bong Soon whilst wrapping Christmas presents whilst writing this! Oops? Anyway, enjoy and thanks for reading <3
Chapter Summary

Unfortunately, whilst neither smoke or mirrors are recommended for consumption, they do make a snazzy title.

This chapter was almost called "I'll find what I have to do, 'Cuz talk is cheap"... You'll geddit by chapter end.

Happy....first...anniversary....fourmonthslatesurpriseeeeee~

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

_Smoke and Mirrors_

“There you are, Uchiha-san. All done.”

Shisui lifted a leg, only a few inches off the floor, and swivelled his ankle, eyes wide and gleaming with something like triumph.

(Which was pretty ridiculous seeing as he’d been in physio for ages and had been using his legs almost normally for the past week and a half-)

A smile quirked the corners of my lips regardless, my nose still a bit snuffly from the earlier tears and my eyes a little fuzzy. Those crutches had been a shackle, there wasn’t any doubt about that, and I had no doubt that Shisui would cry in a few decades when he had to get a cane again. Fuck, he hadn’t been ‘free’ two minutes and I was dreading it already.

I sighed internally, still sat opposite the nurse whilst Shisui visibly preened at his new-found liberty.

The older boy rolled onto the balls of his feet, bouncing a bit, and grinning like a loon. His nurse, although I supposed she was just ‘the’ nurse now, smiled good-naturedly and passed me the paperwork that Shisui was a touch too distracted to accept himself.
“Make this one take it easy, please?” She dipped her head in Shisui’s direction and discomfort curled in my stomach. Bad enough that she’d walked into the waiting room to find the both of us standing at opposite ends of the room, crying, but I didn’t want to think about what was gonna happen now.

“C’mon, Shisui-kun,” I steadied myself, reaching to snag one of his wrists and wrapping my fingers around the limb, pulling us both towards the door. “Thank you so much, again!”

As soon as we were out on the steps, avoiding the gaze of the smiling receptionist - who looked far too invested, I was just glad it wasn't that redhead -, I dropped Shisui’s wrist and turn to face him.

“So-” He cleared his throat.

And I threw my arms around his waist and squeezed him hard.

Shisui jerked in shock, torso beneath my cheek twitching with an aborted reflex, before freezing. I didn't move, regardless. His top was well worn and soft to the touch and Shisui's chest was hard; he was...growing up, and the thought made be strangely wistful. His heart thumped against my ear, warm and strong and a little fast and familiar and I pressed closer.

Then, the older boy's arms were coming up to hug me back, hands splayed across my shoulder blades and pulling me up onto my tiptoes.

I huffed, nose burrowed into the divot of Shisui’s collarbone.

I loved this boy, this utter idiot, and knowing he was all healed and well put a lump in my throat and an ache in my chest. Both happy and sad. He was going to be leaving again and we still weren’t okay and he wasn’t going to be in Nekki’s every day. I’d miss this, had been spoiled in a way. As Ensui became busier, I’d always had Shisui to fall back on. It had been...novel, at first. Like every day was a holiday, somehow; but I’d grown dangerously used to seeing that goofy grin at work. I mean, I’d seen Shisui more than my own dad these past few months.

His top smelled of skin and warmth and gingerbread and, without the hunching crutches, I finally noticed that he was almost a whole head taller. He was growing like a weed whilst...whilst I stayed the same.
After another endless moment, maybe a second and maybe an hour, I stepped back, swallowing a bit when Shisui’s hands lingered, reluctant. His palms, big like a puppy that hadn't grown into its paws, cupped my shoulders for a moment before falling away.

The relieved joy was gone from his face now, replaced with something sad and knowing and tender in those dark eyes.

He looked older, more knowledgeable. I’d never felt more my age, an awkward teen a few years behind the Jounin before me.

“I’m really glad you’re okay now, Shisui-kun.” I let my eyes meet his, the genuine relief shining in my own gaze. “So, I’ll let you be on your way.”

I meant it. I honestly to Kami did, however which way he chose to interpret my words.

Shisui seemed to understand that too. He’d talked before the appointment, when I’d found him, about meeting up with Itachi and I was almost able to see the moment in my mind; how he’d smile, all awkward and worried about upsetting me, and explain that Itachi was waiting.

“A-are you working today?”

I blinked at the random stutter before swinging my arms slightly, as if to draw attention to my outfit. Which wasn’t my uniform, nope. “Um...no?”

Shisui shoved his hands in his pockets, seeming at loss with what to do with his hands now he wasn’t constantly holding crutches. Bizarrely, I wondered if I should hold them for him, so maybe we’d both stop being so damn uncomfortable.

No, no, that would probably make it weirder-

“Tomorrow, then?”

“I-” I racked my brains, “-yeah, Mikoto-hime is taking the day to help Sasuke with his target practice, so, yeah. I’ll be working.”
There was something determined, almost stubborn, about the set to his mouth. “Can I come in for lunch?”

I wanted a phone. Right here, right now, I wanted a phone. Purely so that Ensui could call me and I’d have to take it, walking away for ‘privacy’, and playing the ‘oh no, there’s an emergency that I have to see to right this instant and you don’t need to be involved at all’ card. I wasn’t above calling someone myself and bluffing that they’d been the ones to dial.

Long story short, I wanted an excuse. I wanted a bird to drop dead out of the sky and distract Shisui. I wanted to have a spontaneous allergic reaction to the damn anything. Something. Give me something -

“I never turn away my regulars,” I hedged.

Shisui’s shoulders didn’t drop and neither did his expression. That he’d expected nothing more was a relief as much as I felt guilty.

I’d come today to support him and be there. He’d said his piece inside and we’d cried our tears but-

I valued us too much to stick a plaster over a stab wound.

“I’ll be sure to come in then, okay?”

His arms flexed for a second as if he wanted to reach out before thinking better of it. Instead, he descended the steps before turning back to me.

My own arms almost ached to fold across my chest but I resisted the urge, not wanting to look defensive. Body language was such a thing and most of the time you didn’t even realise how it transferred.

“Okay.”
The older boy’s mouth finally relaxed, curving into a hesitant smile that I was helpless to return, before trotting off down the street, seemingly unable to help breaking into a light jog.

I watched him go, eyes lingering even after he’d turned the street corner, and something unfurled in my chest.

……………………………………………………………………

Shisui made it two blocks before he threw caution - or, rather, the nurse’s words - to the wind and, with a flex of chakra, sent himself onto the nearest roof.

The energy, both chakra and pure adrenaline and freedom, sang in his veins and, coupled with Kiharu’s hesitantly encouraging response on the steps, he couldn’t help the breathless laugh that bubbled up in his chest and passed smiling lips.

The good mood lasted up until he remembered, skipping in frog leaps over the shopping district, exactly where he was supposed to be heading.

Some progress made and then another problem. He’d lost the crutches and managed to speak to Kiharu (and she’d hugged him and smiled and-) but he still had to have a talk with his cousin…

“Fuck,” He bit out, jaw tilted back and hands on hips.

“Let me guess-” a sudden voice drawled, sending Shisui whirling around. “-You’ve got legs but now you’ve fucked your back?”

“Ensui!” Shisui groaned, even as he stepped closer to the older ninja and clapped a hand on his shoulder. The Nara, propped up on the chimney with ankles crossed, swayed slightly from the motion, only responded by slipping his elbow through Shisui’s. “I thought you were working today?”

The arm looped through his squeezed for a moment. “You think I’d miss you getting off your crutches?”
The Uchiha’s eyes dropped, embarrassed, for a moment. “It’s not a big deal.”

He was still watching the streets below when Ensui spoke up again, his tone steady and deliberate.

“Well, Kiharu asked me to go to your appointment, you see. She didn’t want you to go in alone but...well, it wasn’t necessary in the end. But I’d already called an early lunch and I wasn’t going to stick around to hear Ryuu whine, so figured I’d catch you after.”

Shisui’s mouth opened. “Y-you could’ve come in, you know?”

Sharp eyes, hazel green in the bright daylight, rolled towards him, half-lidded and amused. “And why would I interrupt?”

A blush, hot and mortifying, burned across the Uchiha’s cheekbones, radiating warmth from his ears and crawling down his neck. “It wasn’t like that,” even to his own ears, he sounded weak.

“Wasn’t it?”

Shisui’s hands were mercifully cool pressed over his eyes, his arm having been released, and the darkness gave the illusion of safety, privacy. Only one of which Ensui was good at providing. “Why are you doing this to me-”

“Because working with Ryuu drives me insane and he’s your cousin. Besides, it’s funny.”

Oh, Kami, of all the days for Ensui to find himself in a savage mood-

“Oh, relax. If you want to survive the next decade or so-” Shisui bit down on a whimper, “-You’re going to need a bit of immunisation. Anyway, how was the nurse?”

“Fine. Good.” Shisui inhaled, dropped his hands and blinking at the lingering fuzziness from the slightly too hard pressure. “Need to take it easy for a bit.”

A child started crying in the street below, his mother immediately scooping him up and onto her hip.

“You're going to see Itachi, aren't you?”

Shisui tore his eyes off the scene, scattering thoughts of his own parents. He barely recalled their faces now. “Who told you?” The Nara gave him a look. “Does everyone know what I'm doing but me?”

“Nah,” Ensui looked like he almost wanted to laugh. Either that or yank his hair out. “But I figured, if you had any brains left, you’d go.”

Shisui's voice was very small, almost lost to the breeze. “Are things that bad?”

A hand, warm and large - Ensui was endearing, as Kiharu would have said, like that. Big hands and long legs and a long nose - settled on his shoulder, tugging the younger man until he fit under the Nara’s arm. “No, no, its not.”

“Really?”

“Well, I mean,” Ensui’s brows furrowed but Shisui felt better that he was giving his answer such thought. “You both fucked up but, so long as both you and Kiharu want to fix things and you actually do, I don't see how things can't be good again. Kiharu has her own issues that need dealing with.”

Shisui ran a hand through his curls, fingers catching in the tangles. “Not the same, though.”

“No,” Ensui agreed. “Not the same. But things aren't supposed to go back to the starting point. It kinda defeats the point of growth. Relationships are constantly changing. I mean,” and here his mouth twisted like he’d tasted something bitter in his throat, “look at that bastard Ryuu and me.”

Shisui side-eyed him. “If you tell me you're best friends and plan on moving in together, I quit.” As if to illustrate his point, the younger boy jabbed an elbow into the older’s ribs, snickering when Ensui’s head jerked back in obvious affront.
“Kami no, what the fuck, Shisui? No. I mean, we started off passive aggressive as fuck and Ryuu always shoved his work onto me at the last moment. Then we had that fight—”

“I knew it! ‘Scuffle with a thug’. yeah right—”

“-and now, well. It's a better working environment.”

Shisui's eyebrows threatened to disappear into his hairline. “Mikoto-sama said that Osamu says—”

“Bloody gossips.” Ensui gnashed his teeth.

“-that you cuss each other out all day, every day.”

“Yeah, well, he's still a stuck-up drama queen but at least he pulls his weight. The point is, Shisui, that you need to go talk to Itachi.”

“...That was the most convoluted advice I've ever heard.”

A hand lashed out and smacked him hard between the shoulders and Shisui was sent staggering from the force, biting back a yelp and twisting an arm to get free in the process.

“Oh, go on.”

Shisui went.

Itachi was supposed to be training by himself today, at the insistence of Fugaku-sama when Sandaime-sama and the teachers had had the audacity to assign the Uchiha Heir a Hyuuga sensei. Which, Shisui thought, was more than a bit stupid. A Hyuuga, whichever one aside, would be incredibly helpful when working with chakra regulation when using a Sharingan, nevermind the ridiculously long list of other things a Byakugan could help with.
Hiashi-sama was as terrifying a man as he was an easily offended one too. Shisui didn't know what the Elders had been thinking.

(Oh, right, he internally moaned. They probably hadn't been, too busy being stupid-)

Shisui had some issues with his Clan Elders, he'd admit.

Regardless, Itachi had ‘individual training’ twice a week. Shisui hoped the other two Genin still met with their sensei anyway; they were both at a disadvantage as it was and it wasn’t fair if his cousin held them back by being more advanced.

The training fields were, mercifully, empty when he arrived. Despite his obvious reluctance, Shisui wasn’t dragging his feet. The area where Itachi liked to go was well-known to the Jounin, near the treeline...they always, when they trained together, inevitably ended up in the woods. Whether that was running between the huge trees, sparring upside-down on the sprawling limbs or whatever, these woods were filled with happy memories of easier times. Itachi wasn’t a social butterfly by any stretch of the imagination but, here, away from ever-watching and ever-judging eyes, he’d seemed to unfurl from himself.

Landing in the clearing, Shisui took a breath before stepping into those very trees.

It wasn't hard to find his cousin. (A part of him wished it had been.)

“Itachi-kun,” the Jounin spoke up, letting his mouth curl into a delicate smile.

The younger boy, kunai poised to throw from his shoulder, turned just enough to catch his cousin’s gaze. “Shisui.” His eyes dropped to his legs before, rising again, they warmed considerably. “Glad to see you well.”

“Thanks. The appointment was more symbolic than anything, really.” Shisui chatted, making sure that every gesture, every movement was as natural as possible. He was a ninja and a damn good one; he wasn’t going to give his nerves away. And, as good as Itachi was right now, Shisui was still better. That probably wouldn't be the case in a few more years, but as it was now, he was. “Ensui and-” he stepped up beside the younger boy, eyes on his face, “- Kiharu-chan seemed to think so at least.”
Itachi’s mouth shifted, minute and missable...if he hadn’t been looking for it.

The trick with Itachi, just like with so many of his clansmen, was to look. Microexpressions, tone, what little words he did speak.

He wasn't angry. He looked...discomforted.

Shisui’s heart dropped a little at the sight of it.

He didn't ask if they had made up; he didn't have to.

“I’m taking things slow with them-” grouping Ensui and Kiharu together helped, made it seem like it was a general friendship issue than isolating Kiharu-chan by herself. “-trying to see where we went wrong, where I went wrong.”

Itachi’s lips tightened this time, the skin around his eyes stiff. He didn’t agree that Shisui did something wrong then. Considering that his cousin didn’t even know the details of what had happened, Shisui was a little flattered in his faith...as much as it exasperated him.

“What do you think?”

Itachi tossed the kunai, the weapon whistling through the small clearing between the trees to stab the target, half an inch from bullseye.

Shisui’s eyes narrowed.

“About, Shisui-nii?”

The older boy smiled patiently, his expression as open as possible. His performance, for what else was it, threatened to twist his smile into a grimace. He always liked to be as genuine as possible with his loved ones. “What do you think I should do?”

Itachi was obviously thrown by his words. It wasn't like he had a lot of experience. Even now, after
a short time at the academy with no friends and having lost a team already, he was only starting to learn these things.

In the end, after a solid minute, he simply picked up another kunai, testing the blade’s weight in his small hands. He looked like any other kid at the academy, far too young to be training like this-

Kami, he was starting to sound like Ki-chan.

“Maybe it's better this way.”

The words, so softly spoken, were almost missed. Shisui kinda wished he had.

He swallowed, throat bobbing, and the leaves shivered in the gentle wind. “...what?”

Solemn eyes, liquid and so dark a grey they almost looked black, met his. “Maybe it's better this way.” If there was one thing Itachi wasn't, it was hesitant once he’d made up his mind.

But Shisui had to try. And he had to know. “I know you don't like her,” he started off slowly, “but-

“It's safer this way.”

Shisui lips parted, breath puffing out. Safe...r?

“Safer?”

Itachi's mouth tightened. Oh Kami but he meant it.

It was willpower that kept Shisui's jaw from dropping right then and there, eyeing how Itachi carefully selected yet another kunai and lined up in front of his target. As if he hadn't just insinuated that Kiharu was what? A threat? “Safer”? Itachi-chan, I'm not in danger and from Kiharu? She's a civilian!”
The kunai hit the inner ring with a dull ‘thump’.

Shisui shoved his hands in his pockets so he wouldn't be tempted to reach over and fucking rattle the sense back into his little cousin.

Itachi seemed to choose his words carefully. Or, rather, even more carefully than usual. Shisui wasn't sure if that made it even worse. “...Are you sure?”

Worse, definitely worse.

Shisui was flabbergasted. It was like some bizarre dream, the ones where nothing makes sense but reality appears almost normal. Those were the worst, Shisui thought, because he always forgot they were just dreams and waking up felt more like the fantasy.

“What?”

And, suddenly, Itachi was whirling back to face him, expression pinched and dark gaze bottomless. “Are you sure? How can you be so sure-”

“**Itachi.**” Shisui gently rested his hands on the younger boy's shoulders, taken aback by his sudden fervour. A quiet panic that had left almost as soon as it had come. “Is that what this is? All these months of ignoring Kiharu and pulling back...you think she's- what? A plant?”

The idea was so alien, it might've made him laugh in any other situation. But not when Itachi was so spooked and Kiharu had cried.

The small shoulders in his grip, still childish and soft despite Itachi's considerable training, twitched. “Haven't you ever wondered? She's involved with so many people, a prime location like no other.”

“That wasn't of her own doing,” Shisui pointed out in an even tone. He was the elder here and Itachi was his kid cousin. He couldn't just pick a fight, like he'd do with anyone else. “It was Hitoshi that brought the trouble calling and, without that mess, Danzo would still be around. And she's clever, just like you.”
“Yes,” Itachi agreed but his eyes narrowed shrewdly. “Just like me. How is it, then, Shisui-nii, that she's not been recruited?”

“It's different for her. She's not in a Clan, she doesn't have a dojutsu and she’s never been to the academy. And you’ve seen yourself how against being a ninja she is.”

He hated how pleading he sounded. It made him feel like he was losing, somehow. Even though Itachi was so wrong it almost hurt.

The doubt in Itachi's eyes had yet to falter.

The worst thing was that Shisui, now Itachi had planted these thoughts, could see where he was going with this. Kiharu and that mysterious figure, Kiharu and Danzo...how she’d known about the Clan troubles and how she sought out Naruto-kun, the orphaned jinchuuriki. How she was so damned clever but slipped through the cracks.

It was a good cover, would make an excellent one for a plant.

But Shisui knew better.

He was shaking his head, slow and final, without even realising it. “You're wrong, Itachi. I'm sorry and I know you mean well but you're wrong.”

He didn't step back but, somehow, it felt like he had.

“Is this because of Danzo?”

Itachi looked away first, stepping out of his cousin's gentle grip and picking yet another kunai. He ran a thumb, barely touching, along the sharpened edge but didn't draw blood. He aimed and released. This time, it was only a hairsbreadth from the centre mark.

“Ensui?” Shisui tried again.
A smile, rueful, curled Itachi's mouth very slightly. “Not your Nara friend, no. No-one told me these things.”

Shisui closed his eyes for a long moment and, lids still firmly shut, started speaking. “I'm not asking for an informant, Itachi-kun. I'm asking...what made you feel this way?”

The thing about having your eyes closed...was that it helped elevate your awareness of the other senses. An Uchiha was considered nothing without his eyes. But Shisui had grown up with Kiharu, who pretended everything was normal but still sniffed out her ingredients more often than not, and Ensui, who listened intently above all things.

His might've missed anything visual...but his ears picked up the slightest crunch of Itachi's feet, shifting minutely. How his breath barely stuttered.

That was nerves.

*Oh, Itachi*. Shisui's stomach clenched slightly. *Who was it*.

Hands limp and unthreatening by his sides, Shisui's lids peeled back and his gaze settled on the younger boy again. Steady. “Who were you talking to, Itachi, when you came to these conclusions?”

*One of the Elders? No, I can't imagine a casual conversation between one of them and Itachi, except Akane and there's no way -*

“One of the Elders?”

Shisui's confidence stuttered. Kiharu's...pseudo-sibling? The assassin may put on a reluctant front but he wouldn't spend so much time town Kiharu, freely, if he didn't care. And he did, it was obvious.

“What did he say?”

Itachi just shrugged and Shisui felt the first real stirrings of impatience.
Yes, they were ninja, but a conversation between cousins shouldn't have felt like an undercover mission or intelligence scouting.

“Well, he must've said something?”

“It doesn't matter, it's unrelated.”

Shisui sighed loudly through his nose, mouth set unhappily. “Why-” Why won't you talk to me?

He knew better than to say that. It would only make things more difficult.

But Shisui wasn't done yet.

“By rights, if you're so similar,” he tried again, “then you're involved in something too, Itachi!” gesturing around the clearing, Shisui couldn't help the incredulous laugh that bubbled up. Itachi stared at him with something like pity, defensiveness in the slant of his shoulders. “This is- is this why you've been avoiding her? Because you think she's a plant? Kami-sama, Itachi, I've known her almost half my life.”

So had Genma. Even longer, actually, since Kiharu's not-friendship with the frickin Yondaime. Urgh but what had Genma said?

...or, maybe, it had just been the sight of him. Seeing Kiharu with Genma...Inoichi-sama...Mikoto-hime...

So many important friends and family members. But, in a village like this, the strong tended to band together; it wasn't surprising that the almost-niece of the Head of T&I would have the means to befriend ANBU and Jounin alike, bumping into and talking to Clan Heads.

Maybe Genma hadn't said anything really at all. Maybe he hadn't had to.

Itachi spoke up and Shisui snapped from his thoughts at the sudden harshness to his young voice. “I am part of something, Shisui. I fight for the Sandaime. She's above suspicion because she's a civilian but she's close to my kaa-san, has a friend in the Force and two on the Guard, an Uncle in T&I.”
They'd been thinking along the same tangent but...on opposite sides of the scale.

“Almost everyone knows someone!” Shisui threw up his hands, frustrated. “This may be the largest hidden village but almost everyone has a relation to someone of importance. Kiharu hardly designed for this to happen. Her Tou-san was friends with the Yamanaka in the war and Yondaime-sama was the one to approach Kiharu-chan! Over a dessert at Ichiraku’s. You’re looking for something that isn’t even there.” Itachi stepped back and Shisui’s heart hurt. The anger was gone as quickly as quickly as it had arrived, simmering low but just barely there. Now, Shisui just sounded scarily close to pleading. “You can’t think everyone is an enemy, Itachi-kun. That’s no way to live.”

“Listen. I know it's been hard and your teammates are new and everything is changing. But trust me.”

The forest was quiet after their raised voices and, to Shisui, it felt more like the eye of the storm than the aftermath.

“Do you trust me? You know I'd never betray you, Itachi.”

He stared for a long moment but, when Itachi failed to immediately reply, Shisui tucked away the hurt. He was just a kid, scared and too smart for his own good.

That he was standing here and having to ask hurt, though.

“Talk to your kaa-san about this,” he sighed, stepping back and waiting for any sign that Itachi was listening or even a tiny bit convinced. He saw nothing. “She's been with Kiharu from the get-go.”

“...Okaa-san always wanted a daughter.” Itachi was barely louder than a mumble.

Something like fear, trepidation, fizzed in the older boy’s stomach.

If Itachi wasn't talking to him…
If he felt he couldn't go to his mother, and certainly not his father…

He didn't really think it was like that. Sure, Mikoto-hime was very maternal but...maybe it was more like a close Aunt/niece relationship. On Kiharu's part, he knew she thought of the Matriarch as a much older sibling. Maybe because she remembered her mother so closely, maybe that's just the way it was.

“Itachi, Itachi, listen. Mikoto-hime, Inoichi-sama, Shikaku-sama...they'd know. Even if I was blind, they wouldn't be!”

Itachi didn't move away when Shisui wrapped his fingers around his elbow, a gentle grip to reassure, not trap. “You can't do about you life not trusting anyone. You need to believe in other people too and, even if you don't believe me, have some faith and some trust in your Kaa-san.”

Moving slowly, Itachi peeled his cousin's fingers loose and stepped back towards his weapons and the target. His eyes didn't meet Shisui's, fixed somewhere between the trees.

“I think you'd better go. Your friends probably want to celebrate.”

Shisui swallowed, throat bobbing. “Itach-”

“Go away, Shisui.”

By the time I got to the station, two take away coffees in hand and a bag of donuts (some jokes never died), Ensui was just walking up the steps.

I blinked in surprise, mentally checking the time and confirming that Ensui’s break should have just been starting...not over? “Where have you been?” I wondered aloud.

“Break,” he replied smartly, plucking one of the coffees and holding the door for me. The Uchiha receptionist didn't so much as glance at us but the intern stationed just inside the next door perked up
at the sight of me and my labelled goodies.

“Not a delivery, sorry,” I threw over my shoulder, walking quickly to keep up with Ensui's longer strides, and almost smiled at the way he wilted.

Ryuuu was at his desk, opposite Ensui's and just outside of Detective Osamu's (if the door plaque was to be believed) office. He visibly perked up at our approached and I felt my eyes widen.

Ensui didn't so much as spare his partner a glance, flicking through the small collection of papers on his desk that had probably appeared whilst he was out.

“Ryuuu-san,” I nodded politely.

Black eyes, that had a permanently wicked glimmer, flicked to me. “Dazai, right? Kigali?* The kid with the nose.”

Said nose wrinkled. “Uh...Kiharu and...most kids have noses.”

Ensui grinned into his coffee. “Alright, alright, moving on. What brings you here, Kiharu-chan?”

*I needed to take my mind off Shisui and Itachi. “Here to lend another set of eyes,” I shrugged.

Ryuu smirked, lips tilting in a vicious line. “Oh?”

Ensui ignored him, hazel eyes boring into mine.

Oh.

Ohhhhhhhhh -

“I thought you were on break and wanted to help you pick out beads.” I explained, bland as rice.
Ryuu squinted, mouth still twisted in that evil little grin. “Beads?”

Evidently the older man wasn't aware of Ensui's small-scale but popular jewellery side-gig. I decided against enlightening him. He was far too…gleeful…for my liking.

The skin around Ensui's eyes crinkled in amusement as he flopped into his desk chair. “No.”

Oh. My input was to be off record then.

“How’s your morning been?” Ensui inquired idly, prying the still-warm paper bag from my arms and rifling through for a jam filled donut.

I hummed non-committedly, eyeing the way everyone around us was pretending to do work and definitely not eavesdropping. For Kami's sake, Ryuu was reading the recycling information on his coffee cup.

Sighing, and deciding that note-passing wouldn't be worth the hassle in a station filled with Dojutsu users, I decided to fuck it. “You saw Shisui-kun yet?”

Ensui swivelled his chair slightly, thighs spread and donut in hand. His free hand moving a pile of work so I could prop my hip on the edge of his desk. “Just bumped into him, actually. You guys had a talk.”

He didn't phrase it as a question, just as I didn't need clarification where he'd spent his break now.

“The secretary started weeping with us,” I grimaced, fiddling with a stack of colourful post-it-notes.

“How touching.”

Ryuu turned a snort into a cough. We ignored him.
“Have you thought about what happens now?”

Why did Ensui get to be the mature one?

“Most people would ask if I'm going to forgive him or if we're going to forgive each other,” I pointed out, now digging through his pencil pot and emerging with a hot pink highlighter. I swatched a stripe on my wrist, pleased with the rich fuchsia colour.

“I'm special and I'm glad you agree.”

Just for that, the highlighter was going in my pocket. “...Yeah.”

“Yeah?” Ensui quirked a perfectly groomed brow.

“I mean, yeah, I think things are better. They certainly look it and I want them to be.”

Ensui smiled, a simple curve to his lips. Uncomplicated. “I'm glad.”

I smiled back. “Me too.”

“Well, this is touching,” a sharp voice commented behind me and Ensui and I rolled our eyes as one. “But save the dramatics for a rainy street corner. You're on shift, Ensui-kun.”

“You've been inside ten minutes; aren't you due another hour smoke break, Ryuu?” Ensui threw back.

Sensing the lightning crackle between the duo's locked gazes, I decided to cut my losses before I became a casualty of war.

“Come over for dinner sometime,” I straightened from my lean. Ryuu's mouth opened “-Ensui.”
With a final nod, I picked my way back out of the station, ignoring how Ryuu immediately started bitching about respect and I'd only met him a few times, how could I be so cavalier?!

Just before I left, I managed to hear Ensui’s reply:

“Respect? That's rich coming from a guy with a stick up his a-”

I clapped a hand over my mouth, snorting into my palm, and ducked down the steps.

But, once I'd made it to the end of the street, I realised I was at a crossroads. Both literally and figuratively.

Obviously Ensui wasn’t going to be an option to keep my mind busy…

A fruit vendor trudged past with his heavily laden cart and, spotting a certain tropical fruit, I immediately perked up.

When in doubt-

“Yoshino-sama, I don’t think-”

“Tush, Kiharu-chan! You’re an entrepreneur, you’re more than capable!”

Dubious as fuck, I peered at the older woman who was currently bending her spine in a way that looked frankly unnatural. “I’m not sure how business equates to that …”

“If you spend all your life behind a counter, you’re going to go crooked before you get to my age and give your old man grandkids and we both know what a crier he is.”

My mouth popped open incredulously. I was thirteen. I bit my tongue on the spiteful remark that i wasn’t ever gonna have kids; I sure as fuck was (dying early made life-planning much more important, I guess) but anyone who thought I was gonna retire or slow down for it needed re-educating. Yoshino...I expected better from such a badass.
“I thought I was going to babysit Shika-kun, Yoshino-sama?”

Said Heir was currently huddled in a fetal position on the porch, as if his mother wasn’t fully capable of dragging him down (obviously head elevated, she wasn’t a monster) the three steps into the garden. Which I had seen her do before. On multiple occasions.

“Tch,” Yoshino clicked her tongue, grabbing her calf and pulling her leg almost over her shoulder. It was both awesome and disturbing. “He needs to learn this stuff too.”

Dark eyes immediately appeared over the top of small, folded arms. The pleading sentiment there was met by my own grimace. Sorry, buddy, but you don’t try and talk down a hurricane.

The Nara household had been in a state of peace when I arrived, a little sweaty from the walk but fingers cold in the spring breeze, and I’d very foolishly thought I was in for a nice afternoon.

Oh, hindsight.

Upon knocking and slipping in the front door (ninja houses, especially in Compounds, rarely ‘locked up’ because it was a futile endeavor for those with their skillset. Their security was much more… err...effective. Yoshino had probably been aware of my presence since I’d walked through the gates), I’d found Yoshino knocking back tea like it was a spirit and Shikamaru griping over the maths sheet she’d insisted he start learning.

Nursery wasn’t a thing apparently. Heaven knows how much Kaa-san had had to blackmail me into completing my own worksheets.

That was one thing I’d found entertaining, however. Seeing Shika actually learning. The Nara supposed ‘genius’ didn’t pop from the womb after all; Shikamaru hated the rudimentary classes kids were subjected to. It was a gem to see Chouji-kun complete his number sheets faster. Truly, this life was a blessing.

“Ohayo,” I’d greeted cheerfully, in ignorance.

“Nee-chan…” Shikamaru had immediately shoved his numbers aside, arms rising impetuously like
he was still a baby.

He ended up on my hip regardless.

“Kiharu-chan,” Yoshino had smiled, ankles crossed and smirk as wicked as usual. She wasn’t dressed in her usual yukata but in cropped, loose-fitting trousers with a cross-tied blouse. The warning signs should have been ringing at this point but never let it be said I wasn’t trusting. “What brings you over today? I was under the impression today was your day off. Aren’t young girls supposed to get up to trouble then?”

I’d smiled through another shrug, bouncing Shika lightly on my hip when he started to slip. He really was getting a little big for my comparatively short figure. “Can’t a girl see loved ones when she’s free?”

Yoshino sat up. “That calls for a bonding activity then.”

I had paled rapidly when she pulled out what could only be described as the narutoverse-version of yoga mats.

“This is something everyone should really do,” she had started, laying out the ratten rolls and kicking aside stones in a clear patch of earth just beyond the back porch. “It’s not a Nara ‘thing’, so don’t look so shifty.”

Shikamaru grouched from his slump by the door.

“Sit, sit!”

Trying not to look like an utter brat (and probably failing), I could only follow her lead, folding my legs into an ungainly cross-legged pose.

“Shikamaru!”

The Nara Heir, when he failed to respond, was promptly hauled over and plonked on my other side. With no means of escape, he gave an almighty sigh (that rather belonged to an old man than a kid)
and slowly copied my stance.

Glancing over, we shared a look of commiseration. Misery loves company after all.

“Now!” Yoshino smiled, a truly terrifying sight. “Deep breath and arms up on the exhale.”

Maybe it was the cool air, protected as we were in the shade of the house, but breathing in so deeply made me feel rather light-headed. Fuck my life.

“And down again. Breathe in-”

I sucked in a lungful, chest cold, as my arms slowly lifted again. Somehow, the almost-constant-yet-easily-overlooked tension of my shoulders, the plague of a baker, seemed so much more present.

“Do it three more times….okay, good.”

With all this breathing, Shika somehow managed to look that much more drowsy. I had to give him credit for consistency.

“Now, Kiharu-chan-” I jolted slightly, bent double for our second stretching position. “There’s a house on the market, the paperwork came in yesterday. It’s a fast sell, the family upsizing for twins due in the new year. It’s not a shop front but houses are so easily convertible. I think you should apply for a viewing.”

Fuck the not-yoga. I straightened up, hands falling limply into the valley of my lap as I gawked at the older woman. She can’t just- just- drop that kind of thing so casually!

“What?”

Yoshino merely stuck a leg out, grabbing her ankle and leaning into another stretch. “It’s not in the marketplace, but if it was you might have been competing with yourself a bit there. A nicer neighbourhood has less traffic but the customers will come.”
“Whoa, whoa, whoa-” I flapped my hands, a little bit whiplashed. “Back up- you want me to buy a house?”

“Modern houses have lovely living spaces, the dimensions are good for a more ‘boutique’ atmosphere.”

She was quoting my own words back at me, what vibe I’d envisioned for the new branch. The devil.

“Can I even afford a house?”

I got a look for that one.

“Who here is your accountant, Kiharu-chan?”

“Right - sorry, Yoshino-sama.”

Said Matriarch sniffed pointedly, looking appeased nonetheless.

Something inside me was still balking at the idea, blabbering on that it was too big of a risk and too soon. It was nerves, the proper kind that heralded a life-changing decision.

“You’re running away, Kiharu-chan. This is your business, your dream. If you cannot take the initiative, you cannot expect anyone else to support you.”

Kaiya-hime was right. I was running. I knew this. But knowing my problems and actively combating them were two very different things. I had a… thing… for running.

Maybe it was because everything I’d ever worked for before had been wiped away, like pen on a whiteboard, by a car running a red light. It was funny to think but Nekki’s had never felt like a risk, or at least not like an expansion did. People opened little stalls all the time, lived their lives by them and that was it. But growing a business, with specific trade deals and a plan for the future… it was suddenly like shit had gotten real. And as much as I wanted it, I also wanted to stop.
Like practising and practising for a contest but as soon as it came to be your turn, wanting to bolt.

Maybe that had been my issue all along. Convincing myself that inactivity was better. It sounded too deep, too philosophical, for what it was. Surely I should’ve had these thoughts in a dangerous situation, like a hero that flees or flings themselves into the line of fire, but that wasn’t me.

I’d made it this far.

Maybe it was time to make things simple again.

“Do it.”

I didn’t have to repeat myself. Yoshino simply smiling (truly smiling) with the faintest trace of smugness.

“Good,” she praised. “...Now, stretch your shoulders, they look tense as rocks.”

_____________________________________________________________________________________

Returning home with the setting sun, legs shaky and shoulders as weak as jelly, I almost tripped over Hitoshi in the dim light.

“Gahk-!” I squeaked, barely catching myself on the door handle, the panther himself stretched over the porch like a spill of ink. “Toshi, what-”

“Hmm.” Emerald eyes bore into mine, half-lidded and unimpressed. “So you did go.”

Oh, this bloody sour-puss.

“Well?” I quirked a brow, opening the door and stepping over the great lump. “What’s it to you?”
Petty, yes, but valid.

Making absolutely no motion to follow me, Hitoshi allowed his eyes to slip closed again. “Urgh, teenagers.”

“Um, is it any wonder that teens get crap for speaking up?” I voiced out loud, his tone rubbing me the wrong way as I slipped off my shoes and deposited my keys by the door. “I’ve literally been a teen for a week, Hitoshi. Try again.”

“I give you advice and you toss it aside… how typical.”

“I believe,” I smiled. It wasn’t a very nice smile. “You merely said that panthers only drag worthwhile carcasses into trees. Maybe you should save those nuggets of wisdom for FuFu?”

Dangerously lethargic, the cat finally heaved himself up, padding far enough inside that I could close the door and make my way up to my room. Yoshino had fed me and Tou-san wasn’t due back tonight (he was long overdue an evening with Ino-Shika-Chou, in my opinion), so dinner was going to be a miss tonight.

Still huffy, Toshi followed me up regardless.

“What’s the point in making my bed every morning,” I griped as soon as I stepped into my room, “if you just make a mess of it anyway?”

Already slinking passed me and hopping up into the rumpled pile of duvet - which I had, meticulously, made pretty from nerves this morning - Hitoshi sent me what could only be called an incredulous look. “I’m a cat.” The ‘you dumb fuck’ was unspoken but still obvious.

“Yeah,” I peeled off my sweaty - thanks, Yoshino - top and dropped it by the door for washing. “But you’re supposed to be civilised and stuff. An adult. Parenting 101 and all that.”

“What drivel.”

Pausing in pulling on my pyjama top, I blinked. “Wait, have you just been chilling in my bed all
“My partner simply licked a long stripe up his paw.

“You insisted that I ‘don’t wait up’.”

“Then, how did you-”

Emerald eyes cracked open, white teeth flashing in the pitch-black of his face. “I can smell him on you.”

“Oh.”

Hitoshi’s eyes were careful, tracking me as I gathered up my washing, slipping bare feet into slippers, and immediately following me again as I went down to the washing machine. “Is that all you’re going to say for yourself?”

I stuffed the wash into the machine barrel, frowning without turning around. “No-one else is trying to stop me.”

A heavy weight, hot and tense under plush fur, suddenly leant into my hip as Hitoshi sat right into my space but, when I glanced over, the cat was stubbornly turned away. My heart softened anyway.

“No one else cares like I do.”

My fingers, occupied with pouring out the right amount of detergent, abruptly fumbled, spilling the sticky liquid across my knuckles. Swallowing a swear, I shoved the draw closed and cranked the machine on. “Repeat that in front of Tou-san.” My half-hearted joke fell flat.

Hitoshi spared me and didn’t respond.

“Oh, come on,” I bumped his shoulder with my hip. “Don’t be so dramatic-” how hypocritical, “- when I fell out with Kotetsu-kun and Izumo-kun, you just bit them!”
“You’re older now.”

Subconsciously, I felt my lips quirk up in a little, kittenish grin. “Has fatherhood changed you so, Toshi?”

Moving away from the carnivore, I quickly rinsed the detergent from between my fingers before it could dry sticky. What was with him? And honestly? There was only room for one drama queen in this household and we both knew that was my dad.

The tap splashed dully into the sink, a thrum of water against metal that echoed loudly in the tiny utility room. My hands were going to stink of white lily soap now.

“Seriously, though,” I glanced at the hulking form from the corner of my eye. “You’re the only one who’s been so against me making up with Shisui-kun.”

Those huge shoulders heaved a put-upon sigh.

“You haven’t helped each other, cub.”

A thrill of awareness danced down my spine.

Without prompting, Hitoshi continued, no doubt aware of my eyes glued to the back of his head. “You’re too anxious, it clings to your scent for weeks on end. And, for months, you’ve spiked whenever close to the Uchiha Heir brat, even randomly with no discernible cause.”

My throat bobbed, dry.

I… didn’t like where this was going.

“You’re stressed. More stressed than you have to be. And the Uchiha make you stressed. The solution, cub, is therefore simple.”
“Th-” my voice cracked, so I tried again. “That’s not how it works, Toshi.” My voice, without even meaning to, was soft, cradling the words as if gentleness would soften the blow. “I know I have… issues.”

I had almost… anticipated them. Trauma didn’t just disappear and the guilt of a decade could not be internalised to this degree without ramifications. But it was a useless argument to have with myself? Who could I talk to? Noone, absolutely noone and that’s what made everything so much worse. When you felt yourself in that trap, could see the door, but options were so so...limited.

I didn’t want to think of it, to be honest. Thinking made it so much more real, like I would drown but there were no life rafts or rescue boats to tug me from the water. Or, at least, none that I could grab.

“But,” I continued, belatedly. “Cutting my losses and running isn’t the solution.”

“I want you to live.” The words rumbled, like ripples in the air, deep from Hitoshi’s throat.

I could almost imagine what it was, with that single sentence, that Hitoshi wanted me to do. Cut all ties to the Uchiha, leave the Clan to their troubles, internal and within the village, and continue on my life like I hadn't come to love them deeply. Like I hadn't sworn to myself, after Minato and Kyuubi, to take action with the knowledge I possessed.

It would be so hard, damn near impossible perhaps. Because Uchiha loved fiercely and they were stubborn and Mikoto would never let me, business aside. And Shisui, I hoped in some crevice of my heart, would come around every single day. Maybe even keep an eye out from a respectful distance. And Akane...

But Hitoshi wasn’t thinking of the schematics, of his plan in real terms.

He was thinking like an animal and he’d smelled my fear, born witness to my sleepless nights and tears, and he wanted me to run.

Shisui was the final straw on the camel’s back.

I licked my lips, eyes dancing around the room. Long, amber shadows cast from the fading sunlight, the bruise-purple shadows… the house was silent. Our neighbourhood was always a peaceful one, with little disturbance to the quiet except ourselves and, now, it almost felt suspended in time.
The house existed in a bubble, seeming so secure as my eyes trailed from the dust-speckled windows to the panther’s broad back.

...like I would drown but there were no life rafts or rescue boats to tug me from the water...

And, for the first time in what felt like a while, I did something recklessly spontaneous.

“Itachi is vulnerable.”

A plush, rounded ear flicked just enough that I knew he was paying absolute attention.

“I’m... worried. Something changed after Danzo escaped and I don’t know what but it involves Shisui-kun, Ensui and Itachi. They started almost...checking in on each other. And I don’t trust that it’s just.” I floundered for a second, breathless that, holy shit, I was saying this. “It can’t just be shared trauma, or whatever. They, they watch each other. And I’m so obviously not in the know.

“And then!” The words, like a crack in a great Dam, were suddenly spilling out. My fingers, still dripping, clenched onto the counter-edge to ground myself as I blurted out my suspicions like a sinner in confession. “Then Kabuto is slinking around and he stinks of death, like no one I’ve ever met and I don’t believe for an instant that Itachi’s teammates weren’t chosen with utmost scrutiny…”

To my mortification, my eyes started burning, even as they stayed dry. I was all out of tears. “Dad’s up to something too and Ino and Shika and Chouji are already starting their lessons and-”

“Stop.”

I stuttered, breath caught high in my throat.

A velveteen warmth smoothed along my arms, along my side, across my back. Rubbing against me like a common housecat, Hitoshi’s next words reverberated straight from his chest into mine.

“You are not responsible.”
Slowly, uncaring for their wet state, my fingers sank into the panther’s plush pelt. “Surely,” I started slowly, “if I know these things- that is, how can I do nothing?”

Hitoshi turned his head, nudging with his jaw until I conceded and cradled his head (truly an armful) against my chest. I was far too short if this was still comfortable. “I did not say ‘do nothing’. I said that you are not responsible. People do as they wish, you cannot anticipate and control these things.”

Somewhere inside me, the stone in my sternum eased slightly, a cramp with tension released.

_I… couldn’t orchestrate events how I wanted them._

One of the rarest moments in life is a true revelation. So often, things lack true surprise because you anticipate them. And I don’t mean events but words, interactions. Truths, particularly about yourself. In a fight, people throw names and accusations and it’s the most obvious example of that kind of...reflection of self, I guess you could describe it, you get. Maybe if you read a particularly poignant, self-fulfilling prophecy of a horoscope or have a loved one devotedly describe why they love you.

These truths are often either distinctly positive or negative. Maybe they make you confused or deeply thoughtful if particularly moving.

It’s _rare_ to hear something resonate so _profoundly_ that you are able to reflect so objectively.

As it was, this instant could perhaps be described as an out-of-body experience.

If Hitoshi continued talking, I didn’t know. It was like a static in my ears and I felt _guilty and stupid_.

Because, like with so many revelations, it seemed to obvious. I’d been conflicted for years and how could this cat, without even knowing the truth, pierce me so succinctly?

I was living in anxiety because, every step of the way, I was, consciously or subconsciously, drawing links and comparisons to my fore knowledge. I was _living_ one step in the past and one in the future.
Which left no time for the present, for me.

Abruptly, like flipping over a marked exam or opening your eyes in the Morning After, I knew what I’d done.

Hitoshi didn’t know, couldn’t possibly understand the ramification of those few words but, for me?

It was like it was all written out for me, a neat bullet pointed list of the domino effect my mentality had had.

I didn’t know how to even go about fixing it, didn’t know if I even could. How can you reverse self-inflicted paranoia and anxiety without confessing all? I’d never sought this kind of help in my first life, hadn’t really needed to, so there was no format for this.

I-I-I-

I’d looked at everyone here, no matter how much I loved them and how much better I knew them, through the veil of before. Maybe I had succeeded in moving passed that but it had still coloured both my initial intentions and my perception of them. I hadn’t been necessarily wrong to do so but… it was like living life in sunglasses. The sky wasn’t quite that shade of blue.

And, like anything under pressure, I’d finally had my ‘moment’.

Shisui… Shisui had asked too much of me but only because I had allowed it. I should’ve had it out with him when he first made me feel guilty but I’d been scared and stubborn and I’d panicked.

Sometimes, I wished I knew jack shit. Like I really was a little girl with a high understanding and creative ingenuity to make these recipes from scratch. Maybe that was the root of it all; I’d been faking it until I’d made it but as soon as shit got to me, the girl before Kiharu and the girl who would always be Kiharu now, I’d just… lost it.

I didn’t know why this hadn’t happened with Tobi or Danzo. Or, even, with Kyuubi and Kaa-chan.
I doubted that I would ever know the reason. Sometimes, these things didn’t make sense. You could have such strong foundations but one stone to a window and smash.

I’d died before, after all.

But what I did know, right now- 

I felt fragile.

Not delicate, like there was nothing substantial. Nor like I could shatter if handled too roughly, like spun sugar.

I was like an icing-wet gingerbread house, the roof at risk of caving in and a messy, tricky affair but...with the potential to harden into a sturdy little building given a chance.

Breathe in… out… I glanced down at Toshi again, a tremble to my fingers still smoothing the hair around his green, green eyes.

Well.

They did always say that knowing there’s a problem is half the solution.

........................................................................................................................

They had resisted turning on a single lamp as the evening drew in, shadows deeping to plum and then indigo before settling on the deep navy of a sickle-moon night. Natsuko was probably asleep but.

They were ninja. Working in the shadows was, in many ways, easier to them than working in the sunlight.

Inoichi’s clones (one, naturally, disguised as Seiichi himself) had left well over three hours ago, with
a fake file under one arm and an excuse about paperwork on their lips as they bid goodbye to the grieving widow.

The ease of the ruse, to one so close to them as well, left a bitter taste on Seiichi’s tongue.

But they hadn't been able to leave as soon as the desk's secrets had been discovered. Ninja learned the hard way that you couldn’t leave a source, even re-covered, and expect to find it again. You took everything on the spot.

And Inokumo’s desk was a trove.

Well. In comparison to all other routes of the investigation so far.

In amongst the sheath of notes, which detailed seemingly anything and everything from trade routes to produce on sale in the marketplace, were scraps of Inokumo’s thought processes. Scribbled in the margins, on the back of photographs, the whole display screamed ‘desperation’.

“Kami,” Seiichi finally dared to break the hushed silence that had fallen over the duo, breathing the curse as he stepped back to survey the extent of research before them. “What happened…’Kumo…”

Grief coiled like a snake in his throat. Inokumo looked… like he’d lost his mind.

“He kept this hidden extremely well,” Inoichi admitted, running a hand through his hair, fingertips grazing and lingering on the scar at his temple.

The diaries, Seiichi discovered, were well-maintained for the most part. A new entry at least every four or five days, Seiichi gazed, appalled, as Inokumo’s hand had become more and more illegible.

“Inoichi...look at this.” The blonde set a pouch of photographs aside, stepping around the displaced desk on silent feet. The tracker allowed his finger to graze the line in question, eyes following the motion as he read aloud. “The records of metal deposits told of a delivery 5pm 10/10. The day of Kyuubi.”

“He was tracking who entered and left the village.”
Lips pressed tight, Seiichi merely nodded.

“Fuck,” the blonde cursed, plucking the notebook from the older man’s grasp and thumbing through the pages with skillfully quick eyes. “It’s all about traders.” He snapped the book shut, the thud of the cover barely audible. “Are there any others, perhaps they’re topical.”

Already nodding, Seiichi gestured to the small collection he’d rooted around for, rested on the lip of the discarded table top at his hip. “Just scenting them, Inokumo has been the only person to ever touch them. They must’ve been wrapped when sold to him… or bought so long ago, that the shopkeeper’s touch has long since faded. It’s mainly dust now anyway. And knowing where he bought them would tell us precisely nothing regardless.”

“Right. How about I take a look at them, maybe we can glimpse what he was planning. You take a look at the desk itself, maybe start organising the rest of the shit in there.”

Under any other circumstances, Seiichi probably would’ve responded with something along the lines of a half-sarcastic ‘aye, aye, captain’ but-

Well.

Stepping aside to let his friend at the books, Seiichi ducked to bend almost double, nose running along the edges of the hollowed desk. It had used to feel stupid, like he was some bloody sniffer-dog, but whatever got the job done. A cat’s nose was not to be underestimated.

Beside the constant stifling musk of dust, which was mainly skin and acrylic fabric fibres, there was nothing of consequence. Wood, naturally, with a tang of varnish and glue. The faint metallic hint of discreet nails embedded into the frame.

The papers inside smelled no different, although there was the faintest lingering trace of Inokumo as well. Paper was so much more absorbent than wood, and things he had touched most frequently smelled minutely stronger.

Fuck, but if only they’d found this earlier. Maybe he would’ve had more to say than simply ‘dust’, ‘Inokumo’, ‘nothing’.
The hollow inside the desk couldn’t have been more than a quarter of a foot deep, just enough for the structure to look sturdy without being obviously intentional for any other purpose than strength.

But the thought circulating through Seiichi’s head wasn’t the technicalities of a hidden compartment.

*What was he doing right up to his death that got him killed?*

Inoichi closed the sixth diary with a silent sigh and, at the finality of the motion, Seiichi glanced over.

In the deep shadows, clearer to his eyes than to the Yamanaka’s, the faint moonlight through the windows highlighted the bags beneath exhausted eyes. “Anything?”

Calloused fingers grazed, almost wistfully, over the cover of the top book. “He investigated everyone, Seiichi. It’s all in here… The farmers, the merchants, the civilians… even the families of Inoko’s friends.”

Seiichi’s eyes flashed to the books themselves, as though his keen eyes could peer straight through the bindings to see for himself. “Are we in there? Is Kiharu-chan?”

Inoichi paused for a moment. It was all the confirmation Seiichi needed and it fell like a hammer blow to his already bruised chest.

He’d lost his wife that night, Ki-chan had lost her mother- and yet, Inokumo had *checked up on them*.

He’d known Inokumo for most of his life.

The conspiracy theories, the secrecy, his death- that had all ached like an old, half-healed wound in poor weather. But this? The paranoia that extended to even *him*?

The Summoner swallowed roughly, feigning blindness to the sorrow in Inoichi’s gaze. Pretending that his eyesight wasn’t quite strong enough to pierce the dark solemnity of the night.
“We should move the evidence.” Inoichi had the kindness, the discretion, to ignore the roughness of the brunette’s voice.

“Where?”

Lips pursed, Seiichi surveyed the amount. Six journals, eight folders and then several sheaths of maps and packets of developed film. “My office would be best. There’s a safe in the floor I can give you the combination for. The only one who knows it’s location besides myself is Hitoshi. Kiharu had her curiosity sated years ago...she knows nothings changed in there, so she won’t even enter.”

Inoichi aquired. “Let’s go. We can come back to them in finer detail once they’re secured at yours.”

It took barely five minutes to gather the evidence, brushing careful fingers over the wood to make sure nothing was forgotten and carefully placing everything back where they’d found it. Seiichi made sure the photographs were placed back in their exact markings in the dust. They didn’t bother with fingerprints. No-one would be coming here for a culprit and, as the deceased’s old teammate and brother, their prints would rouse no suspicion anyway.

Inoichi took the books, wrapped carefully in evidence bags the blonde had mercifully had the foresight to start carrying around since the investigation started, and Seiichi handled the loose papers.

The run across to the Dazai house was manufactured with a heavy dose of paranoia; fast enough but not so much so that, if they were spotted or recognised, they would look out-of-sorts.

The temptation to Shunshin was pressing.

The house was dark when they dropped down into the garden, unlatching the back door and slipping into the kitchen without turning on a single light.

The only noise was the dull beep of the washing machine, signifying a completed cycle, and it was such a bizarrely domestic contrast - that Seiichi mentally reminded himself to hang the clothes out later, even as he planned to hide evidence in the safe - the Chuunin felt his lips twitch in an amused smile.

“Seichi-sama,” Hitoshi greeted them, padding down the stairs with such absolute silence, he
appeared more of a Nara jutsu than a corporeal animal.

“Hitoshi,” Seiichi returned, nodding Inoichi into the study. “Is Kiharu-chan asleep?”

Waiting until his summoner had entered the room before following, the panther nodded. “She tried to stay up but nocturnal she is not.”

Crouched on the floor by the furthest bookshelf, Seiichi twisted to feel for the latch just underneath the lip and spike his chakra into it.

‘Click’.

“I thought she’d stopped doing that years ago?” Another latch, another flair, another ‘click’.

Against the far corner, a small square of the floor lifted a scant centimeter and Seiichi immediately hustled over on his haunches to pry his fingers around the edge and ease it up, revealing a concrete-reinforced trench. Inoichi was instantly beside him, books pulled from inside his jacket and placed inside.

“She’s had a tough day.”

As one, both men glanced at each other before turning towards the panther sat in the doorway.

That’s a terribly generous statement from Hitoshi, Seiichi squinted. His own haul went into the safe and then the floor was being slid back, sealing seamlessly with another chakra signature. Inoichi helped this time, so the sealing configuration would know to respond if he ever came here alone. It was perhaps simple. But it was highly effective.

“What happened?”

Hitoshi blinked, seemingly unconcerned. Seiichi knew better; if Hitoshi really didn’t care, he wouldn’t have said anything.
“Ask her yourself.”

For all their partnership had heightened Seiichi’s own senses, Hitoshi was still the top predator in the house. He was also the dramatic one.

So, naturally, he had timed it perfectly when, a second later, they all heard the dull thump of stockinged feet on the landing. Hitoshi had probably heard the moment her breathing had changed.

Like a well-oiled machine, the two shinobi were a flurry of action. The lamp was suddenly switched on, Inoichi shifting to lean in front of it so the sudden light wouldn't shine incriminatingly through the open door, whilst Seiichi grabbed a random file - a glance revealed it was his tax paperwork from the April Quarter - in time for his daughter to appear in the corridor behind an unmoved Hitoshi.

“You’re back!” Blue eyes, almost black in the low light, blinked as the second figure registered. 
“Inoichi-oji?”

The blonde was nothing if not a professional, offering a quiet smile. “Good evening, Kiharu-chan.”

Those curious eyes flickered between them and Seiichi could almost see her brain whirling. She was so clever~ “Oji-san, I didn't know you were… coming after dinner?”

As one, they all glanced at the desk clock. 21:16.

Ah. “We were working late, I'm sorry if we woke you, Hime~”

Kiharu stepped closer, running a thoughtless hand from Hitoshi’s forehead and down the curve of his spine as she squeezed past. “You’ve come straight from the Office?” Oh no “- you never have to work that late… has something happened?”

Ah, fuck.

“Nothing,” the lie burned his tongue. “How about some tea?” And then, because Kiharu was still watching him with those eyes of hers, Seiichi slumped over to her with a puppish expression. “I'm parched~”
As intended, Kiharu's nose crinkled, even as she allowed him to guide her out and to kitchen. Whilst Seiichi ushered his kid into a chair, Inoichi started on the tea.

Sitting beside her, brushing a strand of thick hair behind her ear when it finally slipped from her thick sleep braid, was a simple treasure. Emotionally wrung out from the revelations of the day, the temptation to pull Kiharu into his lap and mercilessly cuddle her was nigh irresistible.

Actually.

“Waa-” Kiharu huffed when he looped his arms around her and basically dragged her across his knee. Bracing her back against his left shoulder, tugging until she let her forehead flop into the junction between his neck and clavicle-

She was small enough for this to still be effortless, not quite tall enough to feel gangly. But she still felt so grown up and Seiichi's throat grew thick when he abruptly remembered how grown up she really was.

“I'd say something about having a bad day, but you're like this all the time, Papa,” Kiharu huffed a laugh across his collarbones.

“You're so big, Hime,” he admitted quietly.

Inokumo had never seen Inoko-chan grow and laugh and flourish like Seiichi had seen Kiharu. He held her a little closer.

The day must've caught up with him.

Kiharu paused. Behind them, the water boiled and Inoichi started pulling cups from the cupboard.

“Yoshino-sama thinks I should buy a house.”

Seiichi glanced down at her but the angle only allowed for a glimpse of her forehead, the slope of her
nose and the fullness of her cheeks.

“Dappling in property now, Hime? Planning a corporate empire?”

A chortle. “Yes, duh.”

Sometimes, like now for incidence, it struck him how… little time he had had with his daughter. It felt like, as soon as she gave in to walking, Kiharu hadn't stood still. Ironically. Other children played in the streets whilst she was play fighting a panther and creating a massacre of their kitchen. And he’d been gone for such long periods that sometimes he'd walk in and realise her hair was so much longer, that she was taller, that she'd mention someone in passing that Seiichi didn't even know she knew.

He sniffed, blinking at the wetness gathering along his lower lashes.

Kiharu's head shifted, cheek pressing against the top of his shoulder so she could peer up at him. “Are you crying?”

In response, Seiichi could only cuddle her closer.

Small but strong hands slipped into his, only a little paler than his own, and squeezed gently. “Are you sure nothing's happened?”

She sounded so concerned, the Chuunin's heart broke a little at the prospect of lying. Maybe...the simplest truths, then. “I just miss you, sometimes.”

Her smaller frame froze for a second before huddling even closer, as if she wanted to slip right inside his jacket. He'd once had to carry Hitoshi, when he was but a cub, like that in a thunderstorm. “I'm right here.”

Inoichi silently placed the tea down in front of them, smiling through an understanding grimace. “I'll see you in the morning,” he mouthed, jerking his head towards the door and Seiichi, completely on the same wavelength of emotional exhaustion, simply nodded.
“Goodnight, Kiharu-chan,” the blonde's hand came briefly down on his niece's head and her reply was barely a whisper.

Inoichi slipped out of the house, no doubt set upon cuddling Ino-chan as soon as he returned home.

That night, his flat dark and cold but clean and everyone should be proud of him for that, Ensui slept like the dead.

Flak jacket cast aside, sandals clumsily toed off by the door, the Nara had only just given himself enough time to brush his teeth, slip out of his uniform and wash his face before collapsing, face first, onto his bed.

“Grufth,” he groaned, garbled, into the pillow. Thankfully, no-one answered back.

He was exhausted, bones melting into his futon mattress. The days, even more so recently, had been long. Questioning witnesses, filing reports and keeping an eye on other cases for similarities and possible interference…

Well. At least Ryuu was helping now.

But wasn’t that another bucketful of stress. Ryuu was as touchy as a Bijuu, spitting and chaotic about every damned thing, even shit that was his responsibility. Getting him to pull his weight took twice as long with the fights he'd always pitch…but then, he'd do the work anyway.

He was...troublesome.

Dark, bitchy eyes and an arrogant smirk-

Ensui’s last thought, before oblivion claimed him, was that he'd quite like to try breaking his nose again.
Sleep swept over his mind like a concussion, disorientating and fuzzy with limbs weighed to numbness into the mattress.

The morning sunlight, blazing through the curtains he'd been too lazy to close properly, was obnoxiously bright.

It was far, far too early for the Chuunin.

Ensui's day, already piss poor from the early rise, sunk to lower depths at the sight of a certain, cocky Uchiha waiting on the street corner.

Legs crossed at the ankle, black hair coiffed and smirk in place, Ryuu openly judged Ensui's own tired appearance with a slow, up-and-down drag of his eyes. He already smelled of smoke and Ensui wondered how long he'd been waiting.

Hopefully, for fucking ages.

(Hana-chan had - very surprisingly but, then again, not - given Ensui a new eyeliner the other week and the older boy had faithfully tried it this morning. A contrast to his usual olive tone, the liquid liner pen was cherry red, the same colour as the Inuzuka markings, and Ensui had had to promise the Heiress to teach her his makeup tricks in exchange for it. That she'd obviously picked the colour with intent was...precious. As it was, he'd traced the blood-red pen in a cat flick sharp enough to stab. It made his hazel eyes look greener than usual and, alongside his neat topknot and tea-burn reddened mouth, Ensui looked pretty damn hot.)

Ryuu stared for a long second before shoving a coffee cup into the younger man's hand with so much unnecessary force, the hot liquid managed to slosh through the sippy-opening and drip onto the Nara's skin.

Hissing, Ensui narrowed his eyes. “What the fuck is this?”

“We're not going into the office.” Ryuu straightened, unapologetic. That was apparently all he had to offer as, with nary a glance, he twisted and started walking away.
Ensui took another moment to contemplate the coffee, weighing the consequences of tossing it at his partner's retreating back and going back to bed.

*He'd bitch for weeks... nah. The instant gratification still wouldn't make it worth it.*

“Ay-ahhh…” Ensui caught up quickly, his legs a little longer despite their similar height. “I have a repo-”

“Already filed it.”

Half way through his first sample of the Definitely Suspicious Beverage, Ensui almost spat the mouthful out. (White, no sugar; just as he'd been taking it the past few weeks, his choices usually shifting semi-regularly.) “*What.*”

“Yeah,” even Ryuu sounded bemused at his own, uncharacteristic, thoughtfulness before, with a snap of his fingers, he held a palm out to the Nara. “For that, covering for you yesterday and that drink? That's two of my night shifts. Pay up.”

Ensui clicked his tongue. *Should've known better.* “You're a dick. I'm not doing your damned shifts.”

The coffee was snatched from his grasp before Ryuu, sidestepping Ensui's tired swipe, took a generous swig. “I'll be taking this back then. Urgh. *Milk.*”

“You drink tar but I suppose it matches your character.” Ensui sniped, sidestepping some kids - their walking having taken then into the higher traffic areas as they bickered - and bumping shoulders with his partner.

Ryuu's nostrils flared, mouth pinched white. He looked like an affronted bird or, maybe, a stuck-up lizard. “In that case,” he snarled, miffed. He almost walked into a sign before Ensui snagged a finger in his shirt and jerked him an inch into safety. “You're bland and far too weak-”

“Weak?” Ensui scoffed. “Wanna schedule a training session in the courtyard?”

Ryuu turned away, flicking his hair with the motion and sticking his nose up. Worse was the fact it
wasn't done ironically. “I don't have time to carry your broken ass between informants.”

The Nara made a wordless sound of comprehension, waving an expansive hand at the shitty neighbourhood around them before it was tucked back into his pocket. “Is that where we're going?”

“Yeah. Whilst you went off trying to savage your social life, I read the files you gave the DI. And the note you sent in the other night. Unreported crimes? It's pretty obvious who our first stop should be.”

Ensui rolled his eyes, eyeing how the Uchiha fished in his uniform pocket for a sheet to start rolling as they walked. Twenty minutes? That must be a new record. “Dealers?”

Batting his Uchiha-long lashes, his partner leaned over the Chuunin’s shoulder. His expression was not particularly friendly. “Pretty Clan boy doesn't know?”

“That's hypocritical.”

Ryuu bared his teeth. “Ignorance is no excuse.”

Around them, the neighbourhoods steadily became rougher, the quiet bustle of the streets replaced with a much more still, bated atmosphere. The concrete was dirty here, buildings falling into disrepair and patched up just enough to get the job done.

Eventually, however, Ryuu dawdled to a stop, kicking back to lean on a street corner and jerking his chin down for Ensui to join him.

Seeing the curious look on his face, Ryuu rolled his eyes, licking the edge of his cigarette before fishing for a light. “If we came later on, they may have mistaken us for customers. As it is, most people here will be too exhausted to see a couple of Officers poking around. Especially after the night they'd have had.” At the end he snickered, wicked, around his cigarette.

“You're taking us to a Whorehouse.” Hazel eyes glanced lazily up the street, noting the red lanterns, unlit, outside of various doors.
“Yukaku,” Ryuu finally gave up on the lighter, tossing it into the gutter and ignoring Ensui’s resulting frown. With a low utter, he lit the end himself with the teeniest flicker of chakra between clicked fingertips. Ryuu took a deep drag, something easing in the line of his shoulders, before continuing. “Call this district the Yukaku...Kami, you’re conspicuous. In fact, when we get there...don't speak.”

“B-”

“At all.”

Ensui slumped backwards, shoulders curving to brace his torso against the concrete wall behind them. “And leave you to handling everything so smoothly?”

Ryu flicked ash in his direction, which tellingly didn't come close to hitting, in retaliation. “Oh, I didn't realise you'd visited these parts before, Ensui-kun.”

“You've just admitted to being a regular yourself,” Ensui parried back, dry as dust.

Far from embarrassed, Ryuu merely took another drag, the lingering smoke settling like a mist over their immediate area. Ensui didn't like smokers, even if by now Ryuu had probably had him inhale a few cigarettes-worth second hand. If he told Ryuu to stop, he'd probably start breathing directly into his face.

There was a reason Akane-sama had started insisting on ‘cleaning’ his lungs almost every time they met.

Two hours later - which included (but wasn't limited to) one scuffle, three games of naughts and crosses (Ryu was a sore loser, hence the scuffle) and five cigarettes - Ryuu abruptly announced that it was time to knock.

Brushing dust off his ass, Ensui eyed the six red lanterns, unlit but dangling in particular doorways, he could see just from here. With great tact, the Nara didn't mock his partner about which one.

Which, it turned out, was the fifth one up the street, the little doorway painted a faded grey and with a mat for, ahem, guests to wipe their shoes.
Ryuu made another sign for Ensui to keep his trap shut before knocking politely once, twice, three times.

On the other side of the door, there was silence before the quiet, but drawing closer, shuffle of slippered feet.

The paint was badly faded in places, bubbled and peeling from the relentless sunshine in others.

The door cracked open a scant inch a moment later.

In the thin break between door and frame, Ensui eyed the older woman with veiled curiosity. She was advanced in years, closer to Yuri-san's age than Yoshino-oba-sama's. She looked tired, barely put together in a way that spoke of long nights and constant stress, and the dusty shadows of the corridor stretched her face gaunt.

And, by ‘barely put together’, Ensui meant that her makeup didn't quite cover the tired bruises under her eyes, her yukata a little askew and some hairs escaping her elaborate updo at the back. Positively undressed by the usual standards of these establishments.

She kept her eyes cast low respectfully, even as she begged them to return during opening hours. Stomach heavy with a sort of resigned sickness, Ensui wondered how many customers returned in the light of day to harass the women here.

“Not even-” Ensui leant in closer and curled his fingers around the door threateningly, “-for tea?”

She finally raised her eyes and Ensui felt his interest spike at the undercurrent of shrewd strength there.

“...Of course, honourable customer-san ...please, follow me.”

Ryuu didn't take off his shoes and, understanding the move even if he was sceptical, Ensui followed his suit.
The woman pursed her lips, almost imperceptibly, but led them further inside regardless.

The, er, house was set out like a normal home. Merely...repurposed.

And, strangely but not unsurprisingly, opulent. Silk cushions, polished floors that shone like mirrors, and delicately painted walls. Even the lingering mist of incense and smoke was still heavy on the air from the previous night's *antics*.

Something about the cloy of the air, the frazzled yet hushed atmosphere, has the Nara wondering if other... *indulgences* were provided or facilitated here.

Sex and drugs always seemed to go hand in hand somehow.

The woman led them through the main corridor, the pad of her feet the only disturbance and the quiet was eery. Finally, however, she puttered to a stop, resting a thin hand upon another painted screen, this one much darker, at the very back of the house.

“Madame,” she called, barely a breath.

“Come in, Retsuko-san.”

The woman - Retsuko - slid the door open less than two feet, slipping inside and pitching her voice low in an illusion of privacy.

Civilians found that comforting, to pretend.

“Madame-” Retsuko-san was murmuring. “Two gentlemen are here to see you. They're Shinobi but they knocked.”

The shuffling of paper against wood, fabric catching on skin as the 'Madame', presumably, waved her further inside.

Without another word, Retsuko-san stepped back and gestured for them to enter.
Shoulder barely brushing his, Ryuu entered first, Ensui close behind him.

Retsuko slid the door closed again, bowing, and then leaving back the way they had come.

The office - for surely what else could it be described as - was dark, filled with deep plum fabrics and dark mahogany woods. A long, tapered cigarette rested on a brass stand and a sheath of papers were carefully spread across the low desk. Behind the desk, knelt with a grace that belied her years, was the Madame.

She was garishly white, chalky from powder, and even the telling blots of charcoal at the parting of her thick hair couldn't conceal the grey completely.

She was as lovely as a rotten strawberry.

“Madame.” Ryuu dipped into a polite bow, Ensui imitating him half a beat behind.

“Shinobi.” She returned, teeth yellow against the plaster of her skin. “What brings you to my house? Has there been a crime?”

Ryuu didn't fidget, hands relaxed by his sides and expression deeply professional. It was rather peculiar. “Why don't you tell us, Madame?”

The cigarette was plucked from its stand. “Do sit, Officer-san... Officer-san.”

They sat. She didn't offer tea.

“Has there been a criminal?” She cut to the point. Houses like this, for all their reputation, were incredibly strict about providing services for criminals. A man, or indeed anyone, who could bring the weight of Konoha down on their heads would find no allies here. Even the most resentful of the Yukaku wouldn't risk it. They existed in a grey area already, not explicitly illegal but certainly not respected. “None of the girls have associations.”
And if they had, it wouldn't be the Officers they'd tip off. Anko, for all she was young, had already made a name for herself in these parts as ‘someone with whom they could do business’. She was one of the only Shinobi to gain begrudging respect from these women and would be their first port of contact. Yet another tension between T&I and the Station.

“It's about your girls, Madame.” She seemed to sit back, slightly. “Have any… disappeared? Not just from here, but the other houses too?”

“My girls come when they need to and they go when they must.”

Her face had hardened to little more than a Geisha mask.

In the back of his mind, Ensui wondered how this woman had come to be here. Madames did not usually have to dress up like this themselves, were often much more...matronly.

She was an enigma. Ensui knew he'd never solve the puzzle she presented.

“Have any left on less… autonomous terms?”

The Madame simply quirked her head, a show of polite enquiry. She was playing with them, a master.

Ryuu, for all his presence and composure, could only maintain his good behaviour so long. He was a biting man. “Have they gone missing without notice. We aren't here to cause trouble. We just need to know the breadth.”

She smiled.

“Good.” Ensui rather felt like a dog with it's head patted. “We've had no such occurrences, Officer-san.”

Like a struck match, Ensui leant forward with an unholy light in his dark eyes, ignoring the tightening of Ryuu's jaw. “And the other houses?”
“Perhaps you should ask them, Nara-san.”

That wasn't a ‘no’.

They couldn't go knocking on every door, anyone who was in The Know would undoubtedly get a heads-up. Officers sniffing around? Every man and his dog would disappear like smoke. And she knew something. If she didn't, she wouldn't have dared hint otherwise.

“But, Madame,” Ensui leaned even closer, eyes slipping half lidded. In the dim light, surrounded by rich reds, the scarlet of his makeup and the darkness of his eyes, sooty lashes cast low...Ensui looked like he belonged. “We're asking you.”

The sun was at that terrible, perfect angle in the sky. The light hit the pale, dusty roads in such a way that they somehow became too bright to gaze upon directly and, when looking away, still managed to have both Officers squinting uncomfortably.

The Madame had been taciturn, as slippery as an eel and just as likely to bite and bite deep. They'd talked to her for several hours, with no refreshments and no food.

Ryuu, an hour in, had developed a light tremble to his hands. By the second hour of their little visit, he started discreetly thrumming his fingers, out of sight of the Madame but noticeable to his astute partner.

Now? His hands were shaking as he fumbled with a roll, distracted to the extent that Ensui had grabbed his elbow, steering him through their fellow pedestrians.

Remembering his faulty lighter and not fancying watching the Uchiha loose a fireball by accident, Ensui wrapped his fingers around Ryuu's wrist and yanked the cigarette closer. “Let me.”

Ryuu let him. “You don't smoke.”

Ensui shrugged, snuffing the light by tucking his thumb into his fist, and watched as Ryuu took a long drag, like a diver surfacing for oxygen. “It's a neat trick.” His cousin smoked.
“I’m surprised you're allowed to be so… attached.” The Sarutobi men, the chronic smokers that they were, were also very careful about nursing too addictive of a habit. That Ryuu was so dependent was...concerning. Not merely because of the health effects.

“Huh,” Ryuu huffed, the taut line of his muscular shoulders unravelling like a wrung towel with every drag. “What's the point in it if it doesn't make me feel good?”

Belatedly releasing the other man's sleeve, Ensui raised both eyebrows incredulously. “Right. Because you looked so hot back there.”

The street opened up into the broader main streets, the Station visible at the end, and the duo were forced to walk closer together as the number of people out and about increased.

Twisting so Ensui could see his expression over his shoulder, Ryuu smiled lecherously. He looked vaguely evil. “At least you admit I'm hot-”

“Good afternoon, Ensui-san!”

Head rising at the cheerful call, eyes still rolling at Ryuu's typical antics, Ensui couldn't help the bemused quirk of his brow at the sight of Uchiha Kagen waiting by the Station steps.

The other Uchiha looked flushed, the apples of his cheeks tinted a bashful pink and a self-conscious smile hinting at straight, white teeth.

“Kagen-san,” Ensui had almost forgotten about their little run in. “…Hello.”

Ryuu shifted next to him, arms rising to fold in front of his chest and elbow bumping Ensui's. Well, who spit in his red bean paste, huh?

The older man - he looked around Ryuu's age and hadn't his partner said they were together at the academy? - strode down the steps, rubbing his palms nervously on the thighs of his uniform and smiling at Ensui.
Ensui allowed himself to smile back. Just a bit.

“Are you-” Kagen glanced at Ryuu and then back to Ensui, “-free for coffee?”

...

...well. Why not?

“...sure.”

“We still need to report, yo-” Ryuu started, turning to Ensui as if he was the friend you betrayed when picking teams during playtime.

“Two night shifts, the earlier deal?” It wasn't like Ensui wasn't gonna end up working them anyway. This way, he didn't have to put up with Ryuu's raincloud at one shoulder. “Done. Now, shoo.”

Baring his teeth in a wordless snarl, Ryuu disappeared inside, only staying long enough to shoot his Clansman a furious glare.

Said Clansman, having sidestepping Ryuu's forceful advance up the steps, gazed after Ensui's partner with obvious trepidation. Hmm. Maybe Shisui wasn't the only expressive Uchiha.

“Ignore him,” Ensui continued pleasantly, calling Kagen's attention back to himself, bracing a foot up two steps and watching in amusement as the quieter man's gaze dropped to the curve of his thigh. “As I'm sure you're aware, Ryuu is a dickhead.”

Ensui stepped back, an invitation that Kagen was slightly flustered to take, and the two started moving off down the street together. At Ensui's derisive comment, Kagen choked a little on his inhale. “How hasn't he killed you by now?”

Taking the lead towards the market district, Ensui shot him a smug smile, a little warm inside at how... easy... this felt. “He'd have to catch me first.”
(Kagen was chill, refreshingly so. He wasn't sarcastic or snarky, sure, but he was intelligent without being obnoxious and the whole thing hadn't been exhausting in the slightest.

They'd ended up in Nekki's, at Kagen's suggestion. Ensui, a little confused as to why the other man would want to place himself in such a prime spot to get roasted, had acquiesced with little more than a slow blink and, consequently, had born Genma and Raidou's ribbing - the assassin having wolf whistled upon their immediate entry with Raidou having the audacity to laugh - with admirable composure. What was even worse was that they'd had to order from the duo, the bakery conspicuously Kiharu-less with no Mikoto in sight...

The Tokubetsu had waved off his questions, because Ensui was certain Kiharu had said she was working today. Whilst it did mean one less smirk boring into his head, Ensui still didn't know whether to count that as a positive or a negative. On one hand, they'd dodged the Matriarch magnificently. On the other… Kiharu hadn't been there when Shisui had arrived, the hesitantly hopeful expression on his face crumbling when he wasn't met by the panther Summoner but by a vaguely guilty Raidou.

Dammit, Kiharu, Ensui had internally cursed. Even Genma piling the Jounin with all his favourites, on the house by order of said absent baker, wasn't enough to lift his friend's spirits.

Four drinks later, when they did leave, Kagen had asked if they could get dinner instead next time.

It had been easy with Kagen. No drama or pressure, despite the audience.

Lips quirked into a bemused smile, Ensui had found himself agreeing.)

…………………………………………………………………………………

One of the most obvious drawbacks of being a baker, of owning your own bakery, was no doubt the early starts.

And, with batter needing prepped and at least two hot cakes needed for the warm display, I forced my decrepit body from the warmth of my bed (and the security of Hitoshi's belly) and into the shower.
It was with great regret that, at the end of a blissfully hot shower, I turned the temperature to cold. “It's for your own good,” I chattered to myself, knowing that if I left the shower even the slightest bit drowsy, I'd collapse back into bed and then we'd be fucked.

The cloudless sky, a sure sign of a hot one, had me pulling a short-sleeved yukata up my arms and stepping into rose-pink leggings. Against my dark hair, which I pulled into a sopping wet French braid, the dove grey shift and my red sandals reminded me of a sunrise. ‘Red sky at night’, and all that.

Sparing a final glance at Hitoshi, who was slumped like an expensive skin throw over my bed, I dashed down the stairs.

Coffee… I needed coffee…

Usually, I liked to eat before hitting up the bakery. It made me feel more… in control, arriving to work ready to get immediately stuck in.

I glanced at the fridge, contemplated the rice cooker, and poked my nose into the bread bin before giving it up as a lost cause. Who in the actual heck was I kidding?

Shisui's quiet promise to come in for lunch was hanging over me.

It wasn't that deep, right? God, were the dramatic tendencies hereditary?

Grimacing slightly at the thought, I ended up snagging a peach from the bowl on the island and taking my coffee to go. As expected, closing the front door behind me and crossing the front garden, the morning was crisp with the promise of heat later. It was too early for most people, the streets still empty and houses still at peace.

The peach wasn't quite ripe yet, a little harder than I'd like, but it was all I had so eat it I did.

“Morning!” I offered a smile to the few early risers I met, names escaping my still groggy thoughts.

Nekki’s was perfectly clean when I unlocked the shutters and stepped through the door. Not that I
expected anything else from Mikoto; she would have been friends with Mari Kondo had it not been for that teeny little hiccup of different universes.

Still, I was washed with relief knowing I could get straight into the preparation, start cranking out the pastries in time for Eiko to arrive to set up the counter and tables.

Apron tied, bandana on, and hands washed, I quickly lost myself to the recipes.

Yesterday had been… an emotional rollercoaster. I'd woken myself up at stupid o'clock fretting over whether I should do to Shisui's appointment. I was the girl who'd put off the dentist until I got an ache; running scared got the better of me more thank I'd like to admit sometimes. Then, after pacing like a caged panther (shout-out to Hitoshi, who'd been severely unimpressed), I'd gone.

And we'd cried.

And then hugged.

And now Shisui was coming over.

_Ahhhhhhhhhhhh-

Realising I was handling the overnight-chilled pastry with about a bhjillion percent more force than necessary, I cut off the thought and grabbed my rolling pin.

I was big-ing this up in my head. Massively. I knew this, I did this all the damn time. But, after last night, I was trying to be _better._

Portioning up the pastry sheets for croissants, I took a slow breath.

Okay.

Okay, I'm good.
Don't waste time worrying over things, things you can't control, things you don't have to fear. I'd burned a wheelchair with Shisui, he wasn't going to come in with gnashing fangs and bite my head off.

The croissants and pain au chocolat went into the oven in no time at all as I finally settled into my groove, the motions all muscle memory after years of repetition. It only got tricky the more I thought about it; like over thinking a catch and getting smacked in the face mid-rounders match. Not fun, 0/10 wouldn't recommend.

By half eight, the one of my girls (despite all being my elders, the nickname had stuck) had arrived to finish setting up. Straightening from where I was wiping down the counters and doing the final washing up, I smiled warmly.

“Ohayo~”

Eiko smiled coolly (as in, she was super incredible, not that she was cold) and it took me a second to look past the turquoise layered on her full lips.

“Did you make that lipstick yourself?” I blurted, unable to tear my eyes away. Oh my god, was that gradiented to navy in the corners? “Take the white apron!” I interrupted her as she hung up her jacket.

One sculpted brow rose sharply.

“It will contrast better than red,” I reasoned, not at all embarrassed. I knew my fashion, okay.

Eiko looked back at the aprons hooked up nicely before, pouting in agreement, she plucked off the white one.

I smiled.

The morning was peaceful - of course, I didn't mean that in the sense that business was low but, rather, that I was able to complete everything to smoothly that, with every finished task, my confidence was bolstered - and that, more than anything, made me feel so much more myself.
It was when I was left to think, idle hands and idle minds, that my mentality tended to spiral out of my grasp.

By ten, the fresh morning pastries were gone and I'd been forced to turn away three separate enquiries for more. Eiko, looking as unflappable as usual despite the steadily increasing temperature, bent low enough to murmur, “it's a blessing to expand, no? Twice as many chances to satisfy their hunger~”

It took over ten minutes for the hot flush, burning across my cheeks, to abate. Fucking hell, how was Eiko so passively flirtatious, I was bloody thirteen with only my period as evidence of hormones at all.

Then again, I mused, ringing up another order as Eiko wiped down the tables, she had everyone eating from the palm of her hand. Even Hitoshi had admitted that Eiko was tolerable.

I figured he just liked her cold hands and moody poetry.

Then, when the server in question was taking her morning break in the form of an espresso by the window, I blinked at a familiar face.

“I-Iruka-kun!”

The older boy smiled bashfully, crinkling the scar across his nose. His cheeks looked a little darker, the tips of his lashes bleached golden and I guessed he must've had a lot of outdoor missions recently. “Morning, Kiharu-chan.”

Mood firmly uplifted, I planted my palms flat on the counter. “Well, shinobi-san? What'll it be?”

It was really too enjoyable to see Iruka cough awkwardly, scratching his neck where a dull flush was rising. What a bean. “Two Yondaime's, please…”

“How or the normal ones?” Wow, I really couldn't resist.
“Oh-err-norm-”

“First one to the counter, coughs up the bill, kid,” Genma interjected without warning, completely bypassing the queue and dragging a socially-aware Raidou with him by the arm hooked around his shoulder.

Which he promptly dropped as soon as he spotted my smile.

“How’s it hanging, brat?” The assassin asked, tucking a thumb under my chin just to be a dick. Jerking out of reach, I nodded back towards the door.

“Freeloaders - don’t interact~”

My eyes shifted to Raidou, expression softening even as I fished Iruka's two egg tarts from the cold display. “Raidou-nii, I trust you've been well since I last saw you?”

“No contagious diseases since the weekend, Kiharu-chan,” the older man returned good-naturedly.

“That’s a new record!” Chortling, I pulled a third tart from the tray, popping it onto a napkin and sliding it across to him. “A reward for a job well done.”

And then I slipped over to the till to ring Iruka up.

“Really?” Genma groused, following me down. Raidou was blushing… Bless. “What job?”

I counted out the change, blinking wide, guileless eyes. “Putting up with you, of course, Nee-chan?”

The deadpan look that comment earned was dry.

“You owe me a small fortune, you know,” I pointed out reasonably. Lifting a hand, I waved the next customer forward. “But … if you join the line like everyone else and pay, I might consider serving you.”
The Tokubetsu jerked a thumb at his partner, currently chewing on the final bite of his freebie. “You literally just gave him that, unprompted.”

I grinned, gummy and a little evil. “Eiko-san, can you do the teas?”

“Hai, sensei.”

I was too young to flip Nee-chan off when he bit his lip on a laugh at the honorific.

Eventually, the two older Shinobi did retreat to what I loosely considered their table, by the window and tucked into the (defendable) corner. Iruka, to my pleasant surprise - and his own, considering the bewildered expression he never managed to quite shift - stayed at the bar.

It was an hour later when I finally convinced the older teen to invest in a drink. The sun was glaring through the floor to ceiling windows in the shopfront, like being caught under a magnifying glass.

Pouring him a water - boo, boring! -, I kept one ear tuned into his rambling story about a farming mission last week.

And then a familiar face ducked inside.

My smile froze.

“Masaru-san…”

Iruka wasn’t an idiot, trailing to a stop in his story and casting a furtive glance at the newly arrived women.

She looked unwell, the faint dappling of bruises along her throat just dark enough to catch the attention of anyone looking close enough. Or a shinobi.
I fought the urge to compare the sight of her to a bucket of cold water. *You're in your space right now, Ki-chan. She can't make you talk about the case, especially not here.*

Over her shoulder, I finally registered Genma's watchful gaze.

His head tilted minutely, looking for all the world as though he was merely resting his head against the wall behind him.

I barely twitched a negative shake in return. It was fine. I wasn't going to make a scene. She didn't deserve that, she was just scared and looking for answers. Easier to pump a girl for information than a Station filled with Uchiha Officers. Even if Masaru was dating one.

Obviously, she'd decided I was telling some truths when I'd visited.

Abruptly, I wondered if she'd come in yesterday too. Mikoto-hime…

Clearing my throat and refocusing my eyes, I addressed her in my most serious tone. “Unless you're here as a customer, Masaru-san, now is… not the time.”

Her lips, already chapped and sore from nervously biting, pursed white. Iruka squirmed. I glanced at the waiting line. “This isn't going to wait - Kiharu, Dazai, right?” I dipped my head in confirmation. “I need to talk to you. Now.”

I blinked, dropping my eyes to her white fingers pressed against the counter edge.

No rest for the wicked.

“Give me two seconds.”

In a flash, I was dashing around the counter corner and making a break for the two brunettes in the corner, hands already fumbling behind me with the ties of my apron.

“Nee-chan, please, please, please-”
Genma's eyes narrowed, shrewd as the senbon tucked away behind his ear. “What?”

“- please, please can you run the counter - Eiko-san can do all the drinks and any fresh orders! Just the till and tables, I'm begging you-”

“Calm the fuck down, brat,” Genma leaned forward, arms folded and braced on the tiny circular table. It was small enough for Raidou's hand to rest along his forearm as they twisted towards me conspiratorily. “Are you in trouble?”

I... didn't honestly know. “No-” no reason not to be optimistic for once. New day, new me and all that. “-But it is an emergency.”

Genma glanced across to share a look with Raidou. “Coffee for a month-”

“Deal.”

A bundle of fabric was bustled into Raidou's arms. “Wear Aprons-” Scrambling fingers yanked the raspberry-pink bandana from my forehead, releasing wispy curls to tickle my temples and shoved the accessory at the assassin. “-No loose hair-”

Masaru-san, mirroring my urgency, was already on the doorstep and I headed straight toward her.

My hand caught the door before it could close behind me, seized by a sudden thought. But I couldn't not-

“Tell Shisui-kun there was an emergency, nothing else... all his favourites are unlimited on the house.”

The sound of the bell chiming behind me was lost in the bustle of the market. I didn't look back at their whiplashed expressions.

“Where to?”
Masaru jerked her head towards the other side of Konoha centre, where the hospital was.

“You said you have a friend who got away? Right?” Masaru wasn't a tall woman but the stretch of her strides were forcing me into an uncomfortable half-jog. I nodded quickly, eager to understand what was happening. “So it's just the three of us?”

Uncertainty wiggled like an earthworm to the forefront of my mind. “...yes.”

Clammy fingers latched onto my wrist, following the motion when I automatically tried to jerk myself free. At this stage we were running. “I saw him again- I know it was him, and he was looking at me and criminals clean up after themselves - that's what my girlfriend always says-”

The hospital loomed ahead of us as we staggered and stumbled, ungainly with our hands locked so tightly. It didn't help that I couldn't even being myself to look where I was going, eyes fixed on the naked panic on Masaru's face.

“We need to stick together. Now that I've seen him-”

All the fear, all the paranoia that Masaru's appearance had revived in my chest, suddenly solidified like an iron bullet in my gut.

Masaru's grip on my hand twisted, my stride lengthening, and suddenly I was the one pulling her along.

We burst through the doors like a house fire, completely skirting around reception and feigning deafness when the receptionists, one a familiar blonde, called out behind us.

The elevator, like some horrible cinematic cliche, was just about to close when I shoved my hand in the gap and yanked us both inside.

Masaru finally dropped my wrist. The skin was red like a so-called ‘Chinese rope burn’, contrasting against the metal walls as I braced myself and tried to breathe evenly.
“When... *exactly* ...did you see him?”

The young woman swallowed, audibly dry. “I was watering my plants in the allotment outside and he was just...standing there, on the street corner.”

I glanced up at her. Under the merciless hospital lights, we both looked garish. “Why didn't he just grab you then and there.”

Surely, these men weren't the type to fearmonger? That was far too risky. This hadn't been motivated by vendetta or personal emotions...it was so *businesslike*.

Visibly just as lost, she weakly shook her head. “My neighbour let her cat out.”

“Why didn't they come at night, do you think? If they know where you are.”

Her eyes shifted away and my brows creased almost imperceptibly. “Rikari has been staying over...since the attack…”

My mouth formed an ‘o’.

The elevator finally chimed but the ride, whilst brief, had been just long enough to quell the roaring initial adrenaline.

Saying that, as soon as the doors were open, Masaru was dashing off again, her hand around my bicep, and I found myself dragging her down the right halls until-

Gin’s room.

Inside, a dark head of hair was bent over a folder.

When I shoved the door open, yanking the both of us inside and slamming it closed again, Officer Rikari herself jerked to her feet.
“Uchiha-san,” my voice echoed breathlessly, “would you mind bodyguarding two more?”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: what do you mean I can't end every single scene and chapter with a cliffhanger?

On a side note, I'm a terrible parent because the first birthday of this fucking fic was in Feb and it's May....how not to parent, by Dumbass Torship: 1) Freely forget your child's birthday, the more of a milestone the better~

Hellooooooo~ it's been months. I'm so sorry about the wait but well...this stuff is for fun. And when it stops being fun, there's an issue there. Also, wow did my final few months of degree life kick my fucking ass. But my undergrad thesis is submitted, I'm a free goose, and, more importantly, Kiharu is ANGSTY. She's been suffering, they all have...occupational Hazard when you're in the last few chapters of an arc I'm afraid. Anyway, a massive thank you to everyone, old and new, who has read this dumbass fic and another special shout-out to those who have reviewed/commented :’3 I hope you enjoy this chapter and I love you all a lot.... Shout out again to discord crew too, my crazy babies (´∀`)♡

Note: Both Katlou303 and I discussed (I did the googling) what terms to use in regards to the prostitutes. I was pressed for time so don't think of this as historically accurate by any stretch of the imagination. Creative licence *flashes a Maccy’s coupon like police badge*. The “Madame” was decided because....Wiki failed me and it was very complicated. So...sorry!

*Shout out to Temper's auto-correct in discord haha
A nugget of dating advice from Ensui: Never commit to dinner or a movie for a first date. One, if it's fucking awful, you're stuck for a certain amount of time and can't just bounce. Also cinemas... you can't talk or get to know each other and lots of people, especially if you don't know them well, might try to cop a feel in the dark. For people just “hanging out sometime” as a first date, it's always better to have a purpose or destination in mind. That way you know how to dress appropriately and you also don't just end up walking aimlessly with the looming potential awkwardness. If you're great friends with the other person, a destination can make it feel less like hanging out with a buddy and if you don't know them well, it give you a sense of purpose. Sometimes people say “drinks first, then dinner”; one, this is obviously for those able to legally drink and those who actually can. Two... if you don't know them, Ensui and I wouldn't recommend getting drunk, or even tipsy, the first time. Coffee sounds dull but it's really not and you can do anything....milkshakes, Tea, ice cream now that summer is on it's way... and yeah, maybe they don't sound as seductive or whatever as meeting someone for dinner or a drink, but who gives a fuck?

Lots of readers have commented about liking Kiharu's perspectives on everyday stuff, so I thought I'd offer up a word on Ensui's date^ This is obviously not applicable to everyone but I couldn't resist haha
All in a Day's work...or, rather, eight or so hours

Chapter Summary

Or, alternatively, the chapter wherein shit gets real for like eighteen people and Noone remembers to communicate successfully

See this? This is what happens when you can't text someone.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"What is going on?" Rikari demanded, dark eyes flashing between the two of us, even as I wrung my arm free and I shifted to collapse into the chair right beside Gin's pillow. She looked to be a healthier colour than the last time I'd seen her, still pale but without that worrying chalkiness.

"Masaru-san," I waved a tired hand at the older woman, her back still pressed against the door with the well-known gleam of paranoia in her eyes, "saw the man again. Found me. Figured he might try something once we were spotted."

The Officer frowned, dark brows pulled low and puckering the skin around her eyes and forehead. "Did he see you?" she barked, rising to place a deliberately gentle palm on the other woman's elbow.

I mentally stalled, enough of a pause for Masaru to gather up her own response. "He followed me to the marketplace, where I met with Kiharu-san."

"And afterwards?"

Finally, Masaru stepped from the doorway, shuffling over to perch on the chair beside her lover. "Maybe? We..." here, despite her age and seeming maturity, the barest flush of shame coloured Masaru's cheeks and I felt my own heat up to match. "We ran here straight away out of concern that he would approach-

"Gin," I piped up.

Masaru nodded, chin jerking towards the sleeping blonde, before continuing.
Rikari, although I had expected nothing less, seemed particularly aggravated. "Have you noticed him before, Saru?" Masaru shook her head negative. "He may have simply been scouting out the situation but… by running to Dazai-chan…"

I grimaced, gripping Gin's hand to stop myself from wringing my fingers red. "He might suspect we're in the know."

Rikari nodded, draping an arm along the back of her girlfriend's chair. I wondered briefly how long they'd been dating before all this shit went down before realising I was in for it now. With multiple parties.

I paused, breathing deep and eyes half focused in thought. "Uchiha-san, can we stay here? For protection?"

"Your freak-out may have provoked them. Yes, you may."

*Fuck my life*, Uchiha's didn't hold back.

Masaru was looking even more ashamed, eyes glued to the strip lights despite how they must be burning her at least a little bit, so I decided *fuck it* and stuck my neck out a little more. "I'm glad you came to find me, Masaru-san," I nodded as surely as possible when both women glanced over. "What if he had been there to try again? Or he'd come to see me afterwards? He could have been any old customer and I'd never even realise."

This was, in actual fact, disturbingly true. Whilst at the shop, the sheer sensory overload made distinguishing anything a fucking nightmare and I never usually bothered. I only recognized certain people, mainly beloveds, on instinct alone. Like a scent version of a double take.

And who was to say that he *hadn't* been there to grab Masaru again after she'd escaped the last time? What with Rikari on shift here and my own personal dramas unfolding like the most depressing Soap Opera since Malinda's Husband, what's-his-face, in *Ghost Whisperer* died and then possessed that dying firefighter. That was a whole bunch of yikes. Or what-

Anyway.
Rikari was right. We may have freaked the guys behind this out, whether they attack us directly or go underground for a while, we probably fucked up.

However.

I wasn't going to apologise for our collective breakdown because we were *valid*. Masaru had decked her attacker and escaped, I'd decked *Gin*'s attacker and we'd both escaped. All three of us were on the Shit List for fucking sure. And whilst I didn't think we'd be nabbed in broad daylight-

Hitoshi and I had almost been knocked off in this very same hospital before lunchtime. Daylight didn't mean safety much anymore.

*Sorry Shisui*, I mentally apologised.

Rikari's lips were looking particularly white, pinched like she'd bitten into a lemon expecting an apple. "I'll inform the Station."


After Rikari had ducked out of the window, flagging down a patrolling Officer with a few flicks of her fingers and then, work done, resituating herself beside Masaru, I turned my attention from the couple to the girl beside me.

Behind her eyelids, the impression of her irises flickered wildly. I wondered what Gin was dreaming of so actively. Probably making boys cry or living the life of a celebrity seamstress in the Capitol.

Without her claw like nails, which had been carefully filed down by Hoshiko-senpai after the blonde had snapped a few in the scuffle, Gin's fingers looked so very strange. Short and *stumpy*.

Ten minutes later the door opened to reveal, not Ensui, but his boss.

Detective Osamu.
He was as tall as I remembered, however, hair pulled into a neat little ponytail that flicked cutely at
his nape and glasses sliding low on his aggravatingly perfect nose. He was also, for the first time
since I'd met him, wearing a flak jacket and I tried not to freak out at the implications that he was
ready for a fight if necessary.

I was only allowed one breakdown a day. It was mine and Tou-san's new policy.

Nevermind, surely an accelerated heart rate was good for my circulation.

"Masaru-san, Dazai-san," he greeted, Uchiha-dark eyes flicking across the ceiling and taking in,
what I guessed, were all the escape routes. His restless gaze paused longest on his Officer.
"Anything?"

Rikari's white lips flattened into a hard line. "Nothing, sir."

Osamu-san nodded, a slow loll of his neck as though he had already expected as much. "There isn't
anyone hanging around outside of here who matches the description. Better keep together for the
time being, however."

I narrowed my gaze. "Detective?"

Dark eyes, so blue they were almost black, flashed over. A brow quirked and I took it as a sign to
continue. "Have there been anymore missing girls?"

"Dazai-san, I cannot discuss an ongoing investigation. I understand that you are both presently
involved and well-aware, however-"

Wincing slightly at the rudeness, I cut across the older man anyway. "I'm sorry, Detective, but with
two girls lost and three witnesses, I don't believe for a second that the guys behind this aren't
panicking. They are working at a loss right now." 

"You've been talking to Sergeant Nara, haven't you?" His eyes narrowed shrewdly and I was
abruptly taken aback by the change. He'd always had the vague vibe of a paperpusher, a future
politician perhaps, and to see the equivalent of the glint of a blade in his demeanor was...unsettling. I
gripped Gin's hand tighter, feeling the flutter of her pulse against my fingers.
I wasn't done though. "I've been drawing my own conclusions, Detective-san, but if Ensui had a similar idea then surely it's more likely the truth?"

He stared at me for a long moment. "What do you think is going on, Dazai-san?"

"Some kind of job," I answered promptly. "Smuggling or something. It makes sense seeing as Gin's attack and Masaru-san's were well spaced without being too random and by different men. They were approached in the same way so they probably worked for the same cause or person. People, especially girls, go missing all the time."

The last part was said bitterly, the truth of it twisting in my mouth.

"Hitoshi - my Tou-san's partner-" I elaborated just in case the panthers infamy wasn't quite what I suspected it was "- scented my clothes after my nose was broken. Seeing as I couldn't get a trace, he tried. But it rained," here, I couldn't swallow the angry huff that puffed out my chest. Fucking weather. "And-"

Gin's hand in mine twisted and, with a shockingly sudden viciousness, her blunted nails bit into my palm.

Hair sent flying as I whipped around to stare, I tried to jerk my hand free, a shriek bubbling in my throat.

Gin's pale eyes snapped open and I threw myself from my chair to bounce against the nearest wall.

"Gin!?"

The blonde in question struggled upright, pupils barely a pinprick and her breathing dangerously quick. She scrambled against her regulation hospital pillows with limbs clumsy and still half asleep, but the terror in her eyes lodged my heart in my throat.

"Gin-san-" The Detective immediately held his palm up out, not making any move to approach, tried to gather control of the situation. Masaru had echoed my own shriek at the sudden awakening of a supposedly comatose girl and hunkered down in her own chair behind Rikari. "Gin-san, please-"
"THAT FUCKING BASTARD!"

I pressed the entire length of my spine flat to the cold mint green walls and sucked in a breath.

"Gin-san-"

But Gin wasn't having it, carding her hands through her own hair like a demon possessed, her expression twisted into something both gut wrenchingly lost and scarily furious. "HOW COULD-"

The door slammed open and Ensui's healer schoolmate - because of course - burst in, taking in the situation in a heartbeat. A senior member of staff was hot on her heels.

"I'LL KILL HIM!"

Peace talks were evidently useless so-

I steeled my jelly weak spine and moved back towards the bed, ignoring the nurses frantically gesturing for something to calm Gin down. "Kill who?"

Pale blue-green eyes met mine and a slither of sanity returned. The anger, however, increased twofold.

And by the time Gin's answer had registered, I was halfway out the door.

"That fucking Blacksmith!"

"Is wasn't him, Gin!" I screamed straight back at her, flinging the door open but waiting just a bit longer. I hadn't recognised the man, so why was she saying-?
"I told her, I said it was weird -"

And then I was off, ducking around the healers who paid no attention to me with a patient freshly awake and wracked with distress. Neither of the Officers came after me either.

My sandals slapped on the lino, a cruel mockery of all the other times I'd raced through this damned hospital, both at night and day, both leaving and arriving. There was a reason the shinobi avoided hospitals after all. It was not a place of good memory.

_That fucking Blacksmith-

_That fucking Blacksmith-

_That fucking Blacksmith-

Gin had always hated Hoshiko-senpai's boyfriend. I'd always thought it was some kind of jealousy, although I didn't think the two apprentices were a great match either, and the older boy had always been...nice. Nice like most teenage guys were at least, in that absentmindedly way of strangers coupled with a teens disinterest with kids younger than them.

He'd never given me any bad vibes though.

There was a good chance that Gin had been out of it. The purpling crescent marks where her nails had bitten into my hand were evidence enough that she hadn't quite registered me as a non threat, although that also could have been because the last time she'd been properly awake a man-

Well.

Despite the fact that, not half an hour ago, I'd been racing to the potential safety of Gin's hospital patrol, I was flat out sprinting by the time I hit the streets now. Hitoshi's runs had kept me _reasonably_ healthy and, even as my lungs heaved and the copper taste of blood tainted the back of my throat, I was able to keep going.

Thankfully, I wasn't going far.
"OJI-SAN!" I threw myself at the doors, staggering inside and ignoring the furious glare of the receptionist. I prayed that my voice would even carry in a place like this.

"Dazai-"

My hands skidded across the desk, sweaty palms leaving streaks, as I skidded to a thumping stop against the edge of the wooden top. "Inoichi-oji. I need him. Emergency."

Her teeth bared but, thank the fucking fates, she pressed the under-desk buzzer even as I bore my own teeth at her.

Bracing my arms, I allowed my head to drop down.

My eyes, however, remained wide open and I felt near feverish with thought.

*Why would Hoshiko's boyfriend be involved? It wasn't him who grabbed her, so why was Gin-?*

*He had grey eyes, pale like a cloudy day, and-*

*Hitoshi followed his trail for two whole blocks before it cut off, but surely the tracks-*

The tracks.

Oh, my fucking-

I wanted to slap myself, a proper head-aching slap, as if a blow to the head could double my brain cells as opposed to destroying them.

I wish I was smarter, playing detective with information I wasn't supposed to know and a million crime dramas under my belt had in no way-
"Kiharu-chan!" The far door opened and the tall figure of my uncle appeared, closing the distance and coming around the reception desk with long strides. "What's happened? Are you alright?"

I sucked in a deep breath through my nose, picking out the lingering scent of dust and grief. He must've been lingering over Inokumo's files again.

When Inoichi's warm palms situated themselves bracketing my shoulders, I let him crowd me back towards his office. "My nose, Inoichi-oji. He broke my nose."

Calloused fingers, made soft by the hand cream Sora placed around their house, danced over said feature and Inoichi's voice, soothing without his professionalism, was tainted by bewilderment. "Your nose is fine, Kiharu-chan…"

I pressed my cheek into his middle a little more.

This was too fucking much, too much drama and too many revelations. I had whiplash for fucking sure.

"The guy who tried to grab Gin,"

"Ah." My Uncle sighed in comprehension.

"How did he know to break my nose?"

A pause.

"Are you sure it wasn't a random hit? I thought he lashed out in panic?"

Eyes closed firmly, I scanned my memory to make absolutely sure.

"I-I didn't see ," I gulped, remembering his expression when the searching torches had found us in
the dark alleyway. "He'd been yanking on Gin and when I pulled back, her head hit the wall and she went limp and-"

"Shhh, Shhh…" one hand shifted to cup the back of my skull, like I’d seen the blonde do to a napping Ino a hundred times. "Take it easy, Kiharu-chan. That's it, breathe easy." Feeling every inch the over-wrought child, I followed his gentle instructions as much as I could. "Now," Inoichi started, once some of the tension had fled my body. "Memory cannot hurt us, Kiharu-chan."

I severely doubted that.

"Try and focus, okay?"

I vaguely registered that my uncle was sitting down, probably in his office chair, as I was tugged onto a firm knee.

The alley way was so fucking black, even my own eyes couldn't-

Purpled shadows shifting, dark like my nose and eyes in the hospital after he'd-

His grip had been so strong, like Steel clamps. I'd thought, tugging desperately, that he'd break her arms for sure. Surely her bones would snap, surely he was stopping the blood from-

Her head hit the wall and his grip shifted, one arm like a band across her ribs and the other-

Despite my struggles, the quarters were close and the hit wasn't hard.

And his fist landed smack bang on target.

There had been recognition in those pale grey eyes. He'd known exactly who he was punching.

........................................................................................................................................................................
It was Seiichi’s turn to take over the files. Inoichi had taken the most annotated - the potentially most significant - map with him but, lifting up the safety deposit box, it was the Chuunin’s turn to do his own digging before his noon shift at the Tower.

He'd been at it for a grand total of three hours before Hitoshi, slumped against the door like a particularly unhappy draft-stop, finally decided to speak up.

Seiichi had been playing the long waiting game since last night's drama for the taciturn carnivore to finally give over and say what had his tail in a knot.

"Are you really going to sit there all day?" The slow, bored drawl interrupted the scuffling of paper. "I think this is the most reading you've done in months. Truly... remarkable."

The sarcasm lacked it's usual biting relish. Notable, considering how Hitoshi usually savoured every opportunity to mock the humans surrounding him.

"Is this your delicate way of asking to help, Hitoshi?" The summoner spoke up lightly.

White fangs flashed in a sneer.

"What would you rather I do instead, then?"

The panther sniffed. "Bring me lunch."

Ah. This was about Kiharu.

"Didn't Ki-chan leave you a haunch defrosting in the garden?" She usually dragged it out first thing on a feeding day, so she could jump in the shower straight afterwards without worrying about forgetting and then having to put up with a pissed off pussycat. Hitoshi, without a "kill" available, tended to demand a human food equivalent.

An adult portion of ribs was expensive enough without the panther demanding a dozen or so
"She said so but she would've left her head behind if it wasn't attached this morning." He sniffed again with great dignity.

Finally looking up from the nonsense notebook before him, Seiichi stared in disbelief. "And you can't...check?"

His partner didn't even blink, not even a whisker twitching. "It's her responsibility, so we should go and ask her." When the brunette didn't immediately clamour to agree, the cat tacked on: "I won't have her neglecting her role."

Seiichi decide to bite. "Okay, spit it out."

Emerald narrowed. "I beg your pardon."

"The thing." He elaborated. "The thing. That's, you know-" he dropped his pen to wave a hand about in the vague direction of his daughter's bedroom, "-bugging you. Is it about Shisui-kun? Because I've already had words with both him and Mikoto-sama, and Genma also said he'd-"

"The kidnapper. The kidnapper, Seiichi-sama."

With deliberate calm, Seiichi smoothed a palm down the open spine of the notebook before him. "Oh?"

The faint click of deadly claws on laminate flooring and the panther paced closer. "She's at the end of her tether, Seiichi-sama. She wakes as though she hasn't slept at all."

Catching the knowing look in his Summoner's eye, Hitoshi hastened to add "if she suffered from insomnia, she would keep me up, the noisy brat."

The brief amusement faded however. Seiichi buried his face in his palms. "What would you suggest?"
"You catch him and I eat him." Hitoshi replied blandly.

*Kami,* he wished they could. "It's not our investigation."

Hitoshi's expression visibly soured. "That's not stopping the cub."

Slowly, the Chuunin's eyes slipped shut. "Oh fuck, tell me she's not-"

"Indeed."

"And the gift basket?"

"Used it as an in to meet someone. A witness, I gather."

"*Fuck.*"

A heavy weight eased onto his knee, hot as a furnace through his regulation trousers. "What would you have me do, Seiichi-sama?"

An obedient Hitoshi was...sobering.

"Watch her?"

A puff of warm air against his in-seam. "Anything new, I meant."

Fatherhood was much more stressful when you threw a genius Baker, a panther and ninjas into the mix. Seiichi eased himself back in his office armchair, running soothing fingers over the pages before him for some kind of grounding.
"I couldn't hire a bodyguard, could I?"

"Decent but insulting. To both myself and her pride."

"Ah," Seiichi agreed. "She's so cute when she's affronted."

The head in his lap pressed down harder in reprimand. "Only when at someone else," the panther refuted with a grumble.

His finger hit a ridge in the page and, lost in thought, the Chuunin traced his finger over it for the sake of repetitive motion.

"Perhaps you could lend yourself to Ensui-kun," Seiichi mused.

Pink nostrils flared. "What are you doing?"

Seiichi stopped fidgeting, blinking slow at the other. "Uh, what?"

But the cat wasn't paying much attention, snuffling around the edge of his desk and inhaling, like the time Kiharu had hid a surprise sandwich for him in his desk and forgotten about it until Hitoshi had smelled something rotting. "Hitoshi?"

"What is…" a shoulder shoved incessantly at his knees for access so, still mute with bemusement, Seiichi pushed back from the desk and let his hands drop into his lap.

Hands which were promptly being snuffled by a certain velvet muzzle.

"Toshi?" Seiichi almost smiled, letting the panther sniff along his fingers like he hadn't since he was a cub.

"Resin."
The nose in question nudged the fingers of his right, dominant hand. "You have resin on your fingers."

The Chuunin blinked. "I'll go...wash?"

The panther's glance was withering.

"It's new."

Oh. Hazel eyes snapped up to the notebook. Oh.

And there.

A raised lump in the paper, something bubbled under the surface enough to seep through and transfer scent to a warm, rubbing fingertip and Seiichi checked the page even closer.

It wasn't one page but two glued together.

"Another page," he breathed. The resin would've held better than glue, less vicious and likely to lump.

Inokumo... you paranoid bastard.

"Hitoshi, come."

Long strides ate up the distance, notebook held in both hands and firmly gripping the incriminating secret page, as Seiichi entered the kitchen and clicked on the kettle (full, of course - "You can't leave a kettle empty, Tou-san! Do you know they can explode if you click it on empty by accident!?"").

It wasn't an elegant operation by any stretch of the imagination but both man and cat were kept to rapt attention as the page was held over the kettles steady stream of steam, once, twice, a third time.
Every time, the resin weakened, the corner Seiichi was focusing on slowly loosening to peel back gently, gently.

The kettle had to be refilled a little before, after over an hour of making sure they pages weren't saturated, that Kiharu's beloved kettle didn't overheat, to slowly peel them apart-

And the hidden pages were revealed.

For a second, Seiichi didn't understand what he was looking at. These notes, unlike all the others besides the maps, weren't written in ink pen but in a soft, faded pencil.

Three inns, two of which on the borders of Fire Country, with the owners names and details.

A few merchants, some unknowns.

And then a small heading labeled 'Kono'.

Konoha. Surely, surely, it was for Konoha.

And underneath? Two names.

Soko.

Jun.

They didn't ring any immediate bells so Seiichi tentatively crossed them off his mental list of shinobi. He didn't recognise them from the office paperwork or the family names.

He pulled his notebook from his upper vest pocket and scrawled everything down, throwing in a few poor illustrations in replacement of certain words as usual in case it was later nabbed. Not particularly hard but still leaving room for false interpretation.
"Hitoshi," Seiichi slipped a sheet of Kiharu's kitchen plastic wrap between the still slightly sticky pages before snapping the book closed and running back to his office, shoving everything back into the cubby before sealing it up. "Go to Ensui-kun. Tell him you'll be his nose and eyes, he's a smart enough kid to not say no. I'm going to see Inoichi."

"And the cub?"

Quickly washing any evidence of resin from his hands in the downstairs washroom, Seiichi spared his summon the briefest glance. "It's lunchtime. Genma-san will be with her. Raidou-san too, I'd imagine."

Pupil-less turquoise bore into my own eyes. "You're certain?"

I nodded, a quick, jerky movement. "It was...calculated. Right on the bridge of my nose, not to the side or to my eyes or anything. And there was a pause…"

-Gin's head hit the wall with a sickening 'smack' and I could barely breathe-

"-and then he decked me."

I bit my lip, the poor flesh already chapped from being gnawed useless. "What are the chances a random guy knows I have a good sense of smell?"

Inoichi's reply was very carefully phrased. "That would be… Unlikely… however, Kiharu-chan, a broken nose is a popular tactic for anyone to throw off an opponent. The chances that this man did it expressly to deaden your ability to trace him…"

"I know," I admitted. "But I had the thought about Hitoshi's trail going dead in the rain. He's followed leads in the rain before."

"Not always," Inoichi pointed out.
"Not always," I agreed again. "But that's not why I ran over here."

The knee supporting my weight shifted slightly so that my uncle could peer at my expression with greater ease. The unsettling thoughts I could feel bubbling up again, like some kind of toxic potion, must've shown on my face. I couldn't even tell what I was broadcasting anymore.

Was an easy day of lighthearted baking too much to ask for? I felt like poor Bilbo Baggins, for fuck's sake.

"I was at Nekki's today," I started. "Mikoto-hime has the day off you see so it was just me and one of the girls. And then the lunch rush came and Masaru-san arrived."

A faint line creased the Yamanaka's forehead. "She's the first victim to get away. She never saw the guys face but she compared…notes, I guess you could say… with me and they were two different guys. But she saw him in the street and she knew it was him and she thought he might be there to…you know." I shrugged a little, feeling queasy at the thought. "Finish the job. So she came to Nekki's."

This time, Inoichi frowned properly. "She led him to you? Did you inform the police? Surely you have officers on premise during lunch, Kiharu-chan?"

Oh.

Oh, god, we hadn't even-

"No," I squeaked, sounding a bit like a mouse that had been trod on, my shoulders up around my ears. "We were just suddenly scared about Gin so we ran to the hospital and when we were there, she woke up!"

Without breaking stride in the narrative, I showed him the red marks on my hand, which he silently cradled between his own palms. "She was so mad, I thought she was having a fit and then she started screaming about how she was going to kill him and-

Inoichi's hand squeezed tight, his expression demanding. "Kill who?"
"The Blacksmith! Hoshiko-senpai’s boyfriend is a Blacksmith’s apprentice, but the man who attacked her wasn’t either of them—"

And then I was interrupted.

"Kiharu-chan," Inoichi’s tone had gone very quiet. "Would you please go to the Police Station and find Ensui-kun, and then stay with him?"

My mouth flapped open for a moment. "W-what?"

"In fact, could you please summon Hitoshi-san to take you there?"

I sat back, forcing a calmness through my body and swallowing against my dry throat. For the first time, I clearly registered the papers so uncharacteristically strewn across my uncle’s desk, the faint but today-fresh scent of both my father and our panther.

I set my jaw. "Why can’t I-"

"Kiharu."

My teeth ached a little from the clench as I stood up, knotting my fingers through the stupid fucking signs and slamming a hand on my uncle’s stupid fucking floor.

Hitoshi didn’t come.

FuFu did.

A small boulder of fuzz flopped on plate-sized paws, ungainly in the cute way I was both not in the mood for and powerless against.

"Mwrol?"
I cast a glance over my shoulder, still pissed to be out of the loop *I fucking provided*, to gesture to the baby current slipping over to me. "Either I've gotten worse, FuFu *really* wanted to play, or Hitoshi redirected me."

I knew he'd been here. That was my nice way of leaving an opening for my uncle to elaborate.

Which he proceeded to *not* do. "I suppose a dog-sized kitten is better than nothing. Does she know the difference between friends and the rest?"

Naturally, strangers were given no benefit of the doubt.

"Pretty much," I admitted, letting her sandpaper tongue investigate my proffered hands. Better the hands than the face. Or the *hair*. "She knows to follow our own reactions. It's how cubs know to hide behind mama in the forest."

"Good."

He was too soft to tell me to shift it.

"Right, baby," I straightened from my squat, the tiger-mix cub brushing my hip with her head with the most aggravatingly expression of adoration. It was way too cute, I was supposed to be *angry*. "Let's go."

I had yet to take my baby girl out around Konoha and an escort against kidnappers wasn't the first venture I'd had in mind-

It was a distraction, I'll give it that.

Fuji, for all her oversized...ness... was still a baby and a baby cat at that. She was at least the size of a German Shepard, foofy to the extent of almost comedy and so inquisitive that I basically wanted to
lie on the floor and *pass out* within the first thirty feet.

I had no *leash.*

She had no *collar.*

The streets were *full.*

So?

I ended up stooped, both hands twisting my torso aside, to grip the special flap of fur at her nape with tightly clenched fists in an attempt to keep my grip against her truly impressive strength.

Unfortunately this flap also had the psychological effect of making her as limp as overcooked udon.

So, there I was, a small girl lugging a huge *sack* of kitten through the main streets of Konoha.

I'd have probably been weak with, and inevitably collapsed from, laughter if it was at any other time.

As it was, my eyes weren't on the street ahead of me nor the curious gazes that followed my progress, but on the ninjas on the rooftops, eyes straining for a familiar ponytail, either blonde or dark. But nothing.

I managed a single street before I gave up.

For the record, despite the hard packed earth of the streets, the occasional cobblestones, and the many people, Fuji had expressed, neither vocally nor through body language, nothing but the mellow chastation of a cub in mama's maws.

"Okay, baby," I finally staggered to a stop, eyes dropping from the afternoon skies (crikey but it must be past four by now) straight down to the cub at my heels. "Take Two."
How I managed to get a *fucking heavy* cub to piggyback me-

Well. It took two unwitting pedestrians, roped in with kitten eyes (one set real, one set as good as), to give Fuji a...paw up.

Her chin snuffling through my hair, which I had already mentally waved goodbye to, and a paw pressed bruisingly heavy on each collarbone, I hooked my elbows under the crook of her hind legs and, with a bounce, set off again.

You're probably wondering why I had even gone to see Inoichi-oji in the first place. Why not Ensui straight away or my grandmother or Mikoto-hime?

It was because I needed to get my uncle involved. There was *something* going on. The way the attacks were spaced out, the way Gin started on about Hoshiko-senpai's *boyfriend of all things*? I knew the police handled the civilian crimes.

Ensui had been looking into the possibility of prostitutes making up a greater percentage of the hits than the civilian ones. In fact-

Not counting Masaru and Gin, that was four girls in two months disappeared.

I know one of them, an academy student from merchant parents, had actually been labeled as a *runaway*. But the way Ensui had noted how her case had lacked motivation…

What if...they weren't just taking *anyone*?

What did the girls have in common. Gin wasn't a shinobi, neither was Masaru.

They were all… civilian-born.

Every last one was Clanless.

But why had they been targeted? Why *those* women? If it was anyone on the streets at the wrong
time, why were no boys being taken? Rapists or traffickers usually didn't care too much.

That was why I had needed to speak to Inoichi. Ensui had even said the reason enough.

“I thought it was another Officer taking the sabotage a little further but...the pages had been amended.”

Ensui had been sent in to survey the inner workings of the Station and the fact that he'd found what they had feared?

If they weren't taking just anyone, there had to be a profile the bad guys were following. Ensui still wasn't any closer to finding the leak/editor so, in the wake of Gin's little comment-

I'd decided to go over the Police's heads.

Something about the way Inoichi-oji had reacted, really everything he'd done as soon as the words had left my mouth, told me that Gin's words had been big.

I tried to wrack my brain about Hoshiko's boyfriend and.

Well.

I didn't know much. Fuck but I didn't even think I remembered his name.

Hoshiko had been… blushy, when he first came onto the scene. He was a blacksmith's apprentice which meant, I could easily gather, than he was a bit of a popular one for his age. After all, he was sure to get fantastic biceps from all the work, a good income in a shinobi village too, so I could imagine a lot of lingering eyes on the boy.

Hoshiko, in contrast, was quiet. She didn't like to spend much time in the marketplace, although she was able to visit it for supplies easily enough, because attention always had made her curl up into herself. The wooing of the Smithy's apprentice - for fuck's sake, let's just call him Mo - the wooing of Mo had been both a boost to her self esteem and a bit embarrassing.
Gin had been sour from 'hello'.

Okay, that had been a lie. When Hoshiko had first been asked out, she was like a lioness on the hunt, catty and demanding of every single detail.

And then they'd kept going out. And Gin's mood had gotten worse and worse and worse.

Hoshiko tended to go on casual dates with him, if I remembered correctly. Lots of talking. They'd walk places - kind of like now - and have picnics under trees. All that gentle wholesome shit.

I wondered… what kind of things Hoshiko-senpai had talked about to him.

I mentally paused.

Had she talked about Gin to him? I wasn't sure, when that kind of conversation came around in the back room of Yuri-oba's shop, I tended to zone out!

Then again, she really must have. Gin was her best friend and had plenty going on in her own life, between her brother's marriage and her increasing desire to move out and find her own place-

"Can't believe she actually asked him! As if I would take that boy's advice-"

Oh.

Hoshiko had spoken to Mo about Gin recently.

She'd asked her boyfriend if she'd known anywhere that Gin could rent in the neighbourhood and he'd tried to recommend a few places-

He'd been there after the attack, in the waiting room with us. If he was involved, he'd come in with us to see her -
I needed to get to the Station.

The other girls were probably there and if they weren't, then someone could take me to Mikoto or, better yet, Ensui.

Another two streets later, spine sticky with sweat and arms shaking hard, I staggered to a stop.

Hoshiko-senpai was walking in the street with her boyfriend. He was as nice looking as I remembered, pretty long hair and broad in the shoulder from all the anvil work and lifting.

My eyes flickered from the couple, meandering hand in hand, to the roof of the Station just visible in the distance.

*Bugger, fucking hell, shit -*

I may not have become a ninja.

But by fucking Kami, if I wasn't an idiot.

.................................................................

Genma was having… an ordeal.

He'd had plenty of *ordeals* before. In fact, he'd probably go so far as to use that term as a job description.

'Role: Handles various ordeals.'

That was assuming his entire file, or at least 90%, wasn't blacked out though. Or that a job like his needed a CV, let alone an applicant description file.
Genma’s... *day job*... was a bodyguard with perks.

The perks being. Well. Classified.

The number one perk, classified just as much as Genma himself was, was his partner.

In ANBU, in the Guards, wherever, Genma had been *spoiled* by the presence of his best friend. So much so that his left side occasionally, sometimes, on the rare occurrence Raidou wasn’t around, felt a little chilly.

Not that anything short of a Mind Walking session would ever have him admit it.

Complacency was the biggest danger in a job like his, though. Getting comfortable.

But, in the long gap between the more vicious hits he was called in for, between the shorter gaps for regular ANBU missions, it was hard not to develop...a certain degree of comfort.

Granted, Genma knew perhaps more than most that *in-village* was in no way synonymous with *out-of-trouble*.

Top of that Criminal List, in Genma's mind at least, being one Dazai Kiharu.

Genma actually remembered his first meeting with the young brunette very well. And that wasn't for lack of trying.

… the guys hadn't stopped calling him '-chan' for nearly two fucking months.

But Yondaime-sama had been a bit of a *fan* of the kid, a Baker still missing an adult tooth of all things. Scratched up knees and carefully brushed hair, she was… interesting.

And, dammit to hell, he was *fond of her*. 
She had spunk, he'd give her that. Her and that huge panther and he'd been relieved to see her make it through the years alright.

So what if he was a bit of a regular.

Okay, so she had a nickname for him. And he hadn't tried to crush the habit too hard. And she was so fucking embarrassing with Raidou, he was still trying to weed out what asshole in the barracks had set her up to that-

But Genma was an assassin and a coldblooded professional.

Don't ask him why he was flipping pancakes, and not for the first time. Just ...don't.

"You're old Genin teammate would be proud of your enthusiasm, eh?" Raidou smiled, inordinately pleased with himself for being a bad cook and having to sadly handle drinks orders instead.

Genma cast him the stink eye. "Don't even go there, you know he'll somehow hear-"

Another crooked smile, this time aimed at the lid he was pressing over a cup of takeaway tea. "From all the way at the border?"

The Tokubetsu rolled his eyes, smiling wanly at the kid eagerly reaching for their pancakes. He reminded him of a certain trio of misfits a few years back. Jeez.

An image of Gai, poised in a head stand or something equally... him... hearing Genma's comments on the wind before racing back to announce something to do with his youthfulness ...

Rinsing the ice-cream scoop, Genma snorted and jabbed an elbow into the other man's ribs. "Don't doubt it."

Raidou passed over the tea, accepting the money which he then dropped into the till. They both waited until the door had jangled shut behind the family before Raidou turned back to him.
"So you said that woman was a Police Officer?" The scarred man's tone was dubious. "She didn't look like an Uchiha. And she wasn't… trained."

"She's definitely been at the Station, I wager. Maybe she's involved with one of them. Seemed awfully touchy and why else would she need to borrow the kid like that?"

Grabbing a damp flannel, Raidou wiped the spotless countertop.

Leaning a hip against the side, Genma didn't bother with the curl of bemused warmth nestled somewhere beneath his sternum at the other man's fussing. "Shouldn't one of us go check on her?"

Genma cast an eye to the couple by the far corner on their cute little date. "We'll drop a hint to lover boy later, yeah?"

His partner shot him a vaguely incredulous look. "Really?"

"Hey! What?"

Raidou poked him again, unimpressed and one eye on the Chuunin in question. "The guy's on a date, a first one too. Why don't you just hail down an Officer? They usually loiter outside.-"

The ring of the door saved Genma from any more pinching.

"Oh!" Raidou blinked, looking a little guilty at the familiar face. "Shisui-kun, hello.."

In the corner, Ensui did a double take over his date's shoulder before hunching down lower. When his gaze met Genma's, the older man couldn't quite smother his smirk.

"'Sup, kid," The Tokubetsu interjected when his partner made it obvious he didn't have the heart to tell the Jounin immediately. "Kiharu-chan had an emergency swing by - literally - but she did say lunch was on her."
Genma wasn't a heartless man and watching the kid visibly shrivel at the news definitely twinged something disturbingly close to that particularly vital organ.

"Oh."

Raidou, for all his professionalism and by-the-book mentality, was even less of a heartless shinobi tool than his partner and immediately started making up the biggest box for the inevitable freebies.

They'd seen enough of Kiharu today to know the Softie had made all of her best friend's favourites. And they knew Shisui enough to know he'd love anything Kiharu had been involved with, let alone her own recipes.

The young Jounin took that as a sign to slip into the nearest counter stool, arms folding to brace his weight.

God, the kids had made him soft-

"Cheer up, kid," Genma kept his eyes on Raidou's scarred hands as they carefully tried to maneuver another tartlet into the leftover space. "She looked gutted to go."

In his perceptual vision, the Tokubetsu watched as that nugget made the Uchiha's puppy-beaten head jerk upright again. "Where did she go?"

The two stand-ins paused before brown eyes met brown.

Well? Genma asked.

He's a good choice, Raidou pointed out.

"Some woman came in here a little over an hour ago and begged her to come with her." Genma shrugged, his casual tone at odds with how he carefully watched the emotions flicker across Shisui's face. The kid was right, he was expressive for an Uchiha. "The kid tried to get her to leave but something she said convinced her and they left. Kiharu definitely owes me a tab, though, I'd wager."
By the end of it, Raidou was sending Genma a look for neglecting his own correspondence with Kiharu. Much more interestingly, however, was the steady flush on Shisui’s cheeks. 

The assassin made a mental note to watch this one in the future.

"She just left with her?"

Raidou almost said something but stopped before he could give anything away. Sharing a wavelength was a useful thing.

"'Course," Genma shrugged.

"Right," Shisui agreed. "Right. " Or not, then.

"I'll just- right."

And then he was hopping off his stool and leaving .

"Uchiha-kun, your lunch-" Raidou blinked at his empty hands. There was a crumpled note on one palm in replacement, more than the current display was worth. Well then.

The bell sounded a good few seconds after Shisui had zipped off.

" Well then." Genma vocalised, reaching for a senbon to gnaw. "That was memorable."

"Are you sure that was a good idea?" Raidou groused, piercing his searching hand with another look before glancing pointedly at the " No weapons!~" sticker that Kiharu had slapped - she had actually slapped it on, mid shift, with her eyes boring into his own, the cheeky brat - to the front of the till machine. When Genma feigned blindness, he actually reached over to halt him. "We shouldn't have let her go off in the first place," Raidou continued, forever conscientious .
Shaking off the warm grip, grumbling a little without true heat, Genma snagged a cocktail stick instead. "I did ask her. She's a Chuunin's age now, she knows better than to do something too stupid."

*Really?* Raidou blinked, hand still suspended by the Tokubetsu's hip.

In place of a reply, Genma popped the sharp end between his teeth.

Ensui had been staring into his coffee - a nice change of pace from staring blankly at his, *cough* Ryuu's *cough* report - when the asshole in question came back from his smoke.

Ensui had actually lost count on how many Ryuu'd taken so far. He was certainly away more than he was present. Still, he was *pretty* sure the other man had only smoked heavier in the past two months or so. He'd have chalked it up to stress if he didn't know better.

...

Hm.

"- *oi!*" Speak of the demon and he won't shut up. Something was tossed at the Nara's head and, without looking up, Ensui tilted just *so* that the missile would sail harmlessly past.

"Was the date *that* shit?" His asshole *partner* snarled, face twisted like the excess smoke had cloyed on his tongue. Ensui didn't bother looking over. Ryuu seemed to take that as a weeping confirmation. "Ha! I could've told you that, in fact I fucking did-

"Shut up or I'll fuck up your report on purpose."

Out of the corner of Ensui's vision, he could see the way Ryuu's thighs hitched themselves on the edge of his desk, fabric taunt and ankles crossed. Great, that was Ryuu's bitch pose.
Well.

Bitchier.

"Touchy~"

Thankfully, whilst Ryuu had been on his X number smoke break, he'd missed a certain someone's arrival.

"Remove your disgusting aroma immediately, human. I wouldn't even eat your reeking corpse."

Ryuu shot up like he'd touched a live wire, landing behind his own desk with a hand on his weapons and the pissiest expression Ensui had seen since, oh, this morning?

"Who fucking said-"

The shadow that wasn't a shadow, which had taken it upon itself to express it's displeasure by slowly crushing Ensui's legs below the knee, raised its head so two viciously green eyes were visible over the lip of the desk.

"Bitch."

Ensui slowly tipped his head back to stare at the ceiling for a while instead.

His coffee date with Kagen had been...nice.

It had been a long time since anything in his life had been so uncomplicatedly nice. It was a weird feeling. But, he tentatively decided, not a bad one.

It was a shame Hitoshi had, true to form, appeared in a piss enough mood to ironically piss over his parade.
He'd been looking for him for ages, he'd declared.

Not too hard then, considering he'd been in Nekki's, Ensui had replied. Which was when he'd received the three scratches across his bicep.

Seiichi-san had told his panther to aid with the investigation, said Summon had then continued.

Too late for that, considering the outing that morning, Ensui had quipped back.

He'd almost had an ankle bloodied for that one.

Deciding that discretion really was the better part of valour, the Nara had then allowed himself to be shepherded away from the direction of his flat and back to the Station.

At this rate, it wasn't even overtime, it was a lifestyle.

"Could you two," Ensui mused at the ceiling fan, "shut up?"

Predictably, he was ignored. Overlooking the increased pressure on his abused limbs of course.

The late afternoon sunlight really was fucking depressing, though. Having been up at the ass crack of dawn for the world's most ridiculous stake out before an interview with the Madame, a first date over lunch, and back to the ol' desk before four.

Great.

Nevermind the fact that, snarling hissyfits aside, he had been staring down at the two transcripts of their interview for a while now, waiting for Osamu-senpai to get back from the call, Ryuu hadn't specified what for, he'd disappeared on a few hours ago.

Had he followed another lead? Were they supposed to just sit tight and wait for him?
Hazel eyes flicked to the clock of the far wall. 16:15.

Dammit, he needed to talk to the boss.

Ryuu hadn't even been able to debrief, having barely stepping into the man's office before the Detective Inspector had rushed out past him, a post it clenched in one pale fist.

The Madame from this morning had been… helpful.

In many ways, she had been helpful in what she hadn't said more than what she had deigned to say.

Or rather, the girls gone missing had been of their own accord, with notice handed, and often...pregnant. Such things, the Madame had taken a slow drag of her own cigarette, were tragic for a prostitute's career.

She ran a business, not a nursery, and any girl who found herself with an occupied womb was told in no uncertain terms to move on.

There hadn't been any abductions that she'd been aware of.

Fuck. Another trail dead.

Ensui's eyes glanced up at the clock again, could imagine the aggravatingly slow tick of the hands (imagine only, the Station bustle drowning such a small chime out so very easily). Where the fuck was senpai?

"Hitoshi, why aren't you out there?" Ensui interrupted the hissing match to jerk his chin in the direction of the main doors and, consequently, the world outside. "I don't think Seiichi-san meant for you to be shackled to my desk with me."

The panther glanced over briefly before his own eyes slipped back shut. "I was told to help with you."
"Your chakra flickered a while ago," the Nara accused.

"The cub attempted a Summoning."

Ensui blinked. And then blinked again, before saying slowly; "and...you didn't think to, I don't know, go to her? What if she needed you?"

A huge paw came down heavily above his knee, claws like needles just pricking the skin through his trousers. "Don't try and lecture me, brat. Do you think I would neglect her so?"

Ensui leaned back in his chair a little, trying not to think about how close those insanely sharp claws were to his junk. "Then why?"

The claws slowly retracted. "She didn't summon out of desperation. She was aggravated. And I don't fancy being called in to clear out bad customers."

_Oh great_. Ensui leaned forward, bracing his hands on his hips so that Ryuu, who had been watching the free entertainment with the eager expression Ensui knew meant he wanted to see him get mauled, couldn't read his lips.

"You haven't been with her all day, have you?"

Green eyes opened.

"I am, primarily, Seiichi-sama's."

The irked tone wasn't promising but, at this rate, Ensui was willing to risk another swipe for some Kami-damned _clarification_. "No, listen, Kiharu's not been at the shop all day."

A frown puckered the plush fur of Hitoshi's forehead. "It's her day on shift." The pressure on his feet increased. "She's the only one in today."

Ensui pressed his lips together with a helpless gesture of 'what can you do?' "I was there over lunch
and it was only one of the waitresses with Genma and Raidou covering her. They didn't say where she'd gone off to but when Shisui came in around two-ish, something they said had him packing pretty quick."

The panther, obviously unnerved, started kneading his front paws into the top of Ensui's shin. "Hitoshi?"

"Who did she leave with?"

Unsettling, that he didn't know.

Hitoshi was just as unimpressed and the Chuunin found himself scrambling out of his chair, a mouth full of very very sharp fangs in his face. "You don't know?"

"Genma-san and Raidou-san didn't know! How was I supposed to know?"

In hindsight, it was… beyond stupid. Most people could be trusted to go about their business and not get into the most unbelievable scraps.

Most people were sane. Kiharu was neither 'most people' nor capable of acting like such.

They couldn't just babysit her though.

"Well, you rejected her summoning."

At that, the panther suddenly rose, heading straight for the door. A little bewildered, something the Nara hated on a genetic level, Ensui followed half a step behind. "I did, but someone answered."

Som-

"She summoned that thing?!"
A warning growl snarled up the panther's throat and Ensui put just a little more space between them as they loped down the steps onto the street. Right. He was it's dad. Right.

With two great bounds, the panther took to the rooftops and Ensui, thrusting chakra into his legs, followed a second later. "Where are we going?"

But today was one of those days.

"Ensui!"

His name echoed from the building opposite and, turning to see, Ensui stared at the head of dark curls as the figure quickly leapt over the street to join Chuunin and panther. "Shisui, what the fuck?"

"I can't find Ki-chan!" The younger boy forgoed pleasantries, face twisted with concern. Oh, for -

Ensui settled a bracing hand on his friend's shoulder, squeezing for a moment before dropping his grip to get moving again. Hitoshi wasn't going to wait for much longer, his tail already lashing impatiently from where he was poised the next building over. "Listen, I'm sure you can talk to her later-"

But Shisui wasn't letting Ensui go, snatching his hand out of the air as the older boy dropped his hold and wrapping his fingers around Ensui's wrist with all the unmoving stubbornness of a handcuff. "No, wait, listen- I asked around the street in the market square because no-one actually knew who Kiharu-chan was going with. They ran all the way to the hospital! But I asked your girlfriend at reception-"

"-oh, fucking hell-"

"-and Kiharu had left again , not half an hour later! Running! Kiharu- running!"

"Listen, Shisui-"

"But guess where the woman took her? To that girl's room, the blonde - Gin - she broke her nose over."
Ensui stopping tugging on his arm, breaking into a run and dragging the Jounin with him instead. "I know who that was."

Shisui's grip squeezed. "Who?" he demanded, taking the leap without a thought and then following obediently as Hitoshi immediately set off again.

"Masaru-san, the first escaped victim."

Shisui was more than a little confused, out of the loop on a lot of shit, but Ensui didn't pay his demands any mind.

*Think, Nara. Think!*

What else was he good for if his brain refused to cooperate.

Fifteen tampered files.

Five women.

Three witnesses.

There was little chance any women from the Red Light District had been taken too, but Ensui wasn't ruling anything out just yet.

Kiharu had run off with Masaru-san to Gin's room. Why? The last time he'd seen the two together, Masaru looked like she'd rather never see her face again. But *she* had approached *her*.

Only fear would do something like that. Something had definitely happened to her to chase them all to group together.

Was that the call Osamu-senpai had received earlier? That would...make sense.
He must've been called around half an hour after Kiharu had left the bakery, seeing as Ryu had arrived inside the Station in time to see him leave and Ensui had arrived at Nekki's just after Kiharu had left. Yes, yes, that fit.

Kiharu had then tried to summon Hitoshi out of frustration.

Hmm.

"How's Itachi-kun?"

Without even looking at him, Ensui sensed the way Shisui jerked at that particular line of inquiry. "Fine."

"Right. Sure. Fine." But Ensui let it go. Now ready wasn't the time anyway.

Hitoshi had been steadily leading them across town... toward the Hospital. Even if Kiharu wasn't there anymore, the reason she was AWOL definitely was.

A black blur slammed into the roof tiles beside the Nara, a gloved hand lashing out to punch Ensui's upper arm so hard it threatened to go numb.

"Would you stop that !?" Ryu spat, not even acknowledging Shisui's own low oath at the sight of this particular clansman. "If you have a lead, I'm-" he jerked a thumb at his own chest "-coming with you. We split credit on cases, and I'm not letting you fucking throw me under the bus for your precious Senpai!"

"Could we please focus?" Shisui whined, speeding up to leave the two Officers behind him and running in sync with Hitoshi's fast strides.

"Wow," Ensui parried back. "Great to know that an Officer of the Law is only looking for his own advancement, especially in cases such as these."
Ryuu's face was like marble. Grouchy marble. "You're an idiot if you think we're all angels of goodwill." They ducked around a trio of chimney pots, bracing their feet along the low-running wall before they were all leaping the distance, finally, onto the hospital roof. "Let me guess, you always dreamed of protecting the streets of your home?"

Nah, I'm just a plant.

"Well, your cynicism is irrelevant right now. Hitoshi-" Ensui turned to address the panther. "What now?"

God, how had he ended up looking to a cat for instruction.

Seiichi avoided the first trickles of what could become the lunchtime crowd by, as most shinobi did, taking to the roofs. The duo was able to slip into the flow of shinobi traffic and reached the T&I offices within minutes.

Inoichi, as expected, was pouring over his brother's map when Seiichi rapped a knuckle on his door before poking a head inside.

"Seiichi, what brings you here?" The Yamanaka greeted him, sitting up straight. "I thought you were going to be at the mission's desk by now?"

"I was," The Dazai admitted, slipping inside and closing the door as soon as Hitoshi was passed him. "But I found something."

At that, the Yamanaka rose, extended a hand to accept the slip of paper that Seiichi wordlessly extended to him. His fingers might have shaken had he been anyone else. "Where was it?" he whispered.

"Two pages were glued together," Seiichi answered, grim. "Do you...recognise them?"

"Here, there, and pure ..."
The brunette blinked. "I took it to mean Konoha, and then two names."

Inoichi looked down again. "Hm." The note page Seiichi had copied from Inokumo's book was tucked into his own chest pocket. "We have files here that lists everyone registered within Konoha. Birth certificate registers, death, as well as immigration."

"How long will that take?"

Inokumo glanced at the clock. 11:20.

"Let me get you a seat."

16:45

"Surely, this isn't smart?" I eyed the poker, gaze flicking between the dulled blackened metal and Hoshiko's uncharacteristically stern expression.

On my back, Fuji-chan started nibbling on my ears again.
A/N- it's been ageeeees~

Which is…Nothing to be proud of, admittedly. However my coursework is done and I'm a free bird and it's taken ages for me to feel able to start writing again. Thank you to everyone who commented, reviewed, liked, followed/faved, kudos-ed, etc etc this whole time, they really made me not want to just…. Walk away from the fic. It's hard to come back to, especially when I had to look up small details and try and remember what my shit notes had planned but I think I've covered the corners. However, if I've fucked up, please do let me know. Unless it's a massive mistake, I won't be editing on FFnet because I absolutely loathe the format there with editing and replacing uploaded docs ughhhhhhh

Anyway, this chapter is also a little shorter than the past few because it just came to a natural ending I guess. This arc ends in the next two chapters also and I need to try and maintain this writing momentum to soldier on through. The minute details are murder if I take another break and forget most of them...again…

So please wait for the finale of this arc patiently! Thank you again for reading x

So there we are! Hope you liked it, please comment/follow/fav/kudos. Thanks for reading! (///o///) x

Works inspired by this one: 
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